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Ross Fogg 9 April 2015

“It Never Was America to Me”: American Literature During the Great Depression

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Abstract

"It Never Was America to Me": American Literature During the Great Depression

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This Master's thesis examines the ways in which literature focuses on subjects pertinent to the study of the Great Depression like affirmations and disillusionment with the government's response to widespread unemployment; destitute living conditions; loss of faith in public institutions; the concentration of power surrounding the Depression as well as concurrent class divisions; decreased valuation of the individual; portrayals and representations of race; and how the Great Depression and its literature inform current understandings of the Great Recession. The specific literature that this thesis examines includes John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath, In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men,* and *Cannery Row*. It likewise examines James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; Dale Maharidge's and Michael Williamson's *And Their Children After Them*; Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*; Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*; Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*; poetry by Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Simic; Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*; and David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*. There are also many sources of historical data, literary theory and criticism ranging from original reviews of the literature presented and present-day analysis.

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1. Introduction: Locating Great Depression Literature 1

Chapter 2. National Identity, Deterioration of Public Institutions, and the Legacy of *The Grapes of Wrath* 8

Chapter 3. Genre, Documentation, and Systemic Poverty in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 33

Chapter 4. The "We" Trope and Voicing the Voiceless: *12 Million Black Voices* and *To Have and Have Not* 54

Chapter 5. Great Depression Politics: Competing Ideologies in *In Dubious Battle* and Concentration of Power in *All the King's Men* 73

Chapter 6. Depression-era Poetics of William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes 100

Chapter 7. Complementary Great Depression Narratives in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* 114

Chapter 8. Conclusion: The Great Depression and the Great Recession 128

Works Cited 142

1.

Introduction: Locating Great Depression Literature

> *Each age, it is found, much write its own books; or*
> *rather, each generation for the next succeeding.*
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, 31 August 1837

With the possible exception of the 1850s, which witnessed the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden*, and the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, characterized as the American Renaissance by F. O. Matthiessen in 1941, the 1930s is perhaps the greatest, most productive decade of American literature in its history and it seems of little coincidence that these literary decades both coincided with the two most difficult events in American history: the Civil War and the Great Depression. In 1930, Sinclair Lewis was the first American awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature since its inception in 1901 and Eugene O'Neill followed in 1936 as did Pearl S. Buck two years later. Future Nobel Prize-winning novelists like William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck each published some of their most revered works in this time period. The Great Depression, along with the Second World War, has proven a worthy setting for literature, film, and popular culture in the following decades and retains significant relevance in the public's collective memory and imagination today. Interestingly, many major American authors of the latter half of the 20th century were born in this decade, including Toni Morrison (1931); John Updike (1932); Philip Roth (1933); Cormac McCarthy (1933); Don DeLillo (1936); and Thomas Pynchon (1937) whose novels have dominated American literary discourse from the early 1960s well into the 2000s. The Depression has arguably informed much of the literature of the succeeding decades as Toni Morrison's first three novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, for example, each feature settings during the Depression.

This long literary decade of 1929-40 is particularly unique, though somewhat problematic, as it often characterized as belonging to the interwar period. While important to avoid generalizations, the literature of the 1930s, as a whole, is markedly different from the High Modernism of the preceding decade as a direct result of the stock market crash of October 1929, though it cannot be sufficiently understood without such context. Literature of the Great Depression, in the context of interwar literature, departs from that of the 1920s, which heralded the stream-of-consciousness technique and "art for art's sake" and instead, involves itself in more realist depictions of the working class. In his 1931 essay, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," F. Scott Fitzgerald documents the preceding era whose name he coined and writes from the vantage point of knowing not only that this era is over, but with retrospection and nostalgia for what seems like has long since passed. Fitzgerald, who also wrote of this shift in his 1931 short story "Babylon Revisited" and 1934 novel, *Tender is the Night*, defines the Jazz Age: "The ten-year period that, as if reluctant to die outmoded in its bed, leaped to a spectacular death in October, 1929, began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919" (459). Fitzgerald's reflection that “Now once more the belt is tight and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth” (464) similarly resembles the dramatic shift in American letters around the turn of the decade.

Although the earlier Modernist aesthetic of the 1920s is generally held in higher esteem in the present day both by scholars and the general reading public, Peter Conn argues in *The American 1930s: A Literary History*, that the literature and scholarship of the 1930s has greater intellectual diversity and intensity than that of the 1920s. Conn also argues that “onlookers of all persuasions also welcomed the end of what they considered an era of triviality and excess,” while also citing Edmund Wilson’s belief that the intellectual life of the period was “not depressing but stimulating” (9). The long decade of 1929-40, despite its resistance of simple categorization, largely accounts for the span of the Great Depression beginning with the crash of Black Friday in October 1929 and ending with the Roosevelt administration’s increased deficit spending and industrial productivity surrounding the United States’ entrance in the Second World War that directly and rapidly reduced mass unemployment.

In terms of history and economics, the Great Depression has received exhaustive analysis and research, but there is an inherent tragedy in that this period has been largely ignored within the context of literary scholarship in favor of examining other literary periods and canons. There is an important balance of fact and fiction in the study of Great Depression literature. To understand the Depression, historical data like unemployment figures, wealth distribution, and how these figures changed during the time period are necessary. This data directly relates to the subjects and themes of Depression literature, while giving a more full, empirical perspective of the time period where literature cannot.

Unlike historical analysis or biographical case studies, however, literature offers various personal perspectives of the average person while showing a broad, shared exploration of what life was like in the Depression. The understanding of this rich, diverse period is often insufficiently limited to John Steinbeck's seminal novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. While Steinbeck's novels and other Depression-era writing like James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are heralded among the most important American books of the 20th century, they appear disparate rather than form a finite canonical location. Similarly, works like Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* and much of Langston Hughes's and William Carlos Williams's writing has largely been overlooked within the broader context of their work and novels like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* are generally identified with other literary concentrations.

The literature of the Great Depression focuses on myriad themes like affirmations and disillusionment with the government's response to widespread unemployment; destitute living conditions; the concentration of power as well as class divisions surrounding the stock market crash of 1929; loss of faith in religion and other public institutions; and a strong disparity between the reality of economic destitution and the ideal of the United States as a place for economic opportunity and social mobility. This project aims to show both macro-level accounts and experiences on individual levels unique to literature. It also attempts to highlight the shared fears and frustrations of unemployment as well as the disillusionment with social institutions during the Great Depression.

Racial representation also accounts for a major recurrence, both implicitly and explicitly, within Great Depression literature and it provides a context to study the Depression in the present day. As the 1930s predates the Civil Rights movement as well as Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, which integrated the United States Armed Forces, racial oppression is institutionalized, not only in the Jim Crow South as seen in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, but also in other rural areas like northern California in John Steinbeck's fiction as well as Northern cities as seen in *12 Million Black Voices*. Other texts, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, largely exclude Mexican and Filipino immigrants who comprised a significant part of the labor population in its northern California setting, as does *All the King's Men* toward African Americans in the South. Such exclusion reflects not only authors' attitudes toward minority groups, but also the white general public's homogenized reading preferences and lack of concern with non-white literary representation.

For any form of literature to be considered a Great Depression text, I divert somewhat from the long decade of 1929-40 and posit that it must be written during or after 1929 and before the end of the 1940s. Literature that meets this qualification examines many of the previously mentioned themes and is in conversation with the Depression as topical event rather than retrospectively. While a novel like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, takes place during the Depression, it is excluded from this definition of Great Depression literature: its publication in 1960 is too far removed from the time period and its primary themes relate more heavily to the Civil Rights Movement than the Great Depression. Similarly, with this loose definition of Great Depression literature, it must feature not necessarily working-class life, but a thematic account of the Depression's impact on public life as a central part of the text. While a novel like William Faulkner's *Light in August* portrays dehumanized industry through the opening scenes in a mill, this depiction of life during the Depression is only a subtext. These qualifications are important not only because works written in this period better and more directly reflect the Great Depression, but they are the primary texts that empathized with the afflicted, shaped social discourse, and have had the most lasting impact.

This project aims to question why there has not been substantial research and criticism of literature engaged with the Great Depression and what it would look like to read and write about these texts collectively and in conversation with one another. For this reason, this project aims to examine major texts of the Depression rather than seeking to uncover the period's more obscure or forgotten works of literature. This project intentionally draws from a variety of genres including works of non-fiction like James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* in addition to novels and poetry. It also aim to present texts that are usually appropriated by a single area of study, like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* as Southern literature or Langston Hughes's poetry as part of the Harlem Renaissance, as part of a different collective, which share the same time period and certain themes. This project was also born from a question of how literature of the Great Depression can inform an understanding of the Great Recession today with regard to human suffering and perseverance as well as political and social representation. The Great Depression also relates closely to the current political and economic atmosphere of our time during the Great Recession and in many ways, the current recession has been a playing-out of the Depression on a smaller level. Many of the broader themes of Depression-era literature have resurfaced: in recent years, there has been a similar level of frustration with the political process and public institutions, uncertainty and fear for one's future, and most perhaps strikingly, a drastic separation of classes. For this reason, the literature of the Depression bears more relevance now than at any point since the works were written.

2.

National Identity, Deterioration of Public Institutions, and the Legacy of *The Grapes of Wrath*

Well the highway is alive tonight
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light
Searchin' for the ghost of Tom Joad
—Bruce Springsteen, 1995

The Grapes of Wrath is undoubtedly the quintessential work of literature that arose from the Great Depression and along with Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph, *Migrant Mother*, it is the primary artistic representation of working-class hardship during this time period. This novel had an enormous impact immediately upon its publication. One 1939 review claimed: "With his latest novel, Mr. Steinbeck at once joins the company of Hawthorne, Melville...and easily leaps to the forefront of all his contemporaries. The book has all the earmarks of something momentous, monumental, and memorable" (Angoff 34). Stanley Kunitz, who would later become U.S. poet laureate, also wrote that year: "A book is published by one of our best novelists. It is greeted enthusiastically by critics as one of the most important books of our time. The American people like the book so much that it becomes one of the fastest-selling titles in American publishing history" (Kunitz, 35). *The Grapes of Wrath* was an enormous critical and commercial as it was the best-selling book of 1939 and was awarded the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Much of the enduring admiration for *The Grapes of Wrath* is due to its appeal to the alienated common person in the context of the Great Depression. In many regards, Steinbeck asks what it means to be American as noted in a letter to his editor, Joseph Henry Jackson: "I thought that if we had a national character and national genius, these people, who were beginning to be called Okies, were it. With all the odds against them, their goodness and strength survived" (Britch, Lewis, 104). Steinbeck incorporates much of an archetypal American experience within the text of *The Grapes of Wrath*: searching for work and economic opportunity in an unfamiliar land, examining the potential for self-governance, and aiming toward a personal freedom. As Carroll Britch and Cliff Lewis write with regard to the national implication in the novel: "Their will to move may have been born of necessity, but their movement is sustained by the down-to-earth hopes of better days that have often seen Americans through prosperity" (98). *The Grapes of Wrath* witnesses a serious deterioration of faith in public institutions as Steinbeck explores broader themes of national identity within the context of the time period in which all of these beliefs were heavily questioned. The result is one of the most consequential and comprehensive examinations of American life in all of its literature.

The Dust Bowl was a focal point for the widespread suffering and economic devastation during the Depression and the migration from this region of the United States, with which the characters have a strong connection, toward the unfamiliar territory of California, is central to the plot in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In his essay, "The Background to the Composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*," Jackson J. Benson provides a wealth of historical and biographical context for Steinbeck's most celebrated novel. Contrary to the narrative surrounding the inspiration behind *The Grapes of Wrath*, Benson notes that Steinbeck never travelled from Oklahoma to California with a migrant family, but instead embarked on "four trips to the Central Valley, and on one occasion drove on from Bakersfield over the Tehachapi Mountains through the Mojave to the state line near Needles" (56) in which he witnessed the effects of the Dust Bowl firsthand. Steinbeck opens the novel with a description of the land based upon his experience on these travels: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth" (1) and further shows the totality of the arid landscape: "They knew it would take a long time fort the dust to settle out of the air…An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees" (3). The deterioration and lifelessness of the land reflects the physical toll the Depression has taken on the characters, signifying a connection between their identity and the land. Steinbeck illustrates the forces that ends the Joads' way of life and source of work, driving them, and countless other families, to travel to California and foreshadows the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Dust Bowl extended approximately four hundred miles from North to South and three hundred miles from east to west, encompassing southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, western Kansas, and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma (Gale Group) and is generally described as lasting from 1930 until 1940. The causes of the Dust Bowl include soils subject to wind erosion, drought that killed the soil-holding vegetation, incessant wind, and technological improvements that facilitated the rapid breaking of the native sod. The result was a large part of the affected region saw a 15 percent to 25 percent decrease in precipitation and some years only had less than half of the normal annual precipitation, which is equivalent of missing three entire years of expected precipitation in one decade. (National Weather Service). Benson further shows the complexity of the relationship between the land and those who live and worked on it during the Dust Bowl:

> Starting in the early 1930s, over half a million fled the Okie states during the Depression, and of these, about 300,000 ended up in California. Most of these were semiliterate, unskilled workers—farmers and sharecroppers and their families who either had either been dusted off primitive, subsistence farms or, outside the region of blowing dust, had been forced to leave by harsh economic conditions. When they came to California, which already had a surplus of farm labor, they found that there was no place for them to go. The land was all taken, and even when available, farm labor paid so poorly that a whole family working from sunrise to sunset earned hardly enough to eat that day (54).

Benson effectively characterizes the dilemma of both the disillusionment of migrant workers, like the Joads, once they reached California as well as the greater broken promise of the American political and economic system and the national belief of work as a means to achieve economic and personal freedom.

As poor farmers and people who lived in rural areas were those most affected by the change in weather conditions, *The Grapes of Wrath* immediately addresses the stark class division during the Depression, which constitutes one of the most significant recurrences in the novel. Though Steinbeck is not overtly political and writes for a general audience, the third-person omniscient narration in *The Grapes of Wrath* immerses itself in the frustrations shared by its characters as the author inserts his social commentary throughout the novel. The reader sees little in the way of wealthy individuals in the course of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which reveals their separation from the working class, a lack of humanity in those who profited at the expense of the poor, and to a degree, the effort Steinbeck takes not to demonize people based solely on social status. Steinbeck later characterizes the wealthy from a distance in the narration through symbolism rather than as people:

> In their lapels the insignia of lodges and service clubs, places where they can go and, by a weight of numbers of little worried men, reassure themselves that business is noble and not the curious ritualized thievery they know it is; that business men are intelligent in spite of the principles of sounds business; that their lives are rich instead of thin tiresome routines they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid any more (155).

The landowners, as a class, are completely aware of their impact, but rely upon tired cultural narratives of self-determinism for comfort and to justify their actions. The upper class is an abstraction and enters the novel primarily to tell farmers they are not welcome on their land. This irony is far from overlooked in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the narration includes: “And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it…” (232). Steinbeck further shows the distance from the owners as he writes from the perspective of the tenant farmers and characterizes the owners as intruders claiming land to which they have no connection:

> The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers, and sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests. The tenants, from their sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields (31).

Part of this division facilitates a separation between the land and the people who profit from it, which completely opposes the relationship between the farmers and the land: the owners view it as a commodity, but to the farmers, it represents their collective identity and the only way of life they know. Steinbeck punctuates this notion when the Joads prepare to leave Oklahoma for California, Granpa Joad rather dies than departs his home, signaling not only his unshakeable connection with the land, but also an inability to reconcile with imminent social change.

The protagonist, Tom Joad, and his extended family with whom he travels spend little effort showing frustration or anger toward the landowners: rather than continuing such self-interest, they are more focused with providing for one another as a group. When they do speak of the wealthy, it is in response to how they mistreat the workers rather than in envy of their comfort or blaming them for creating the conditions of the Great Depression. Despite this benign temperament, the Joads and families who also search for work are received with scorn. When they arrive in California, a passerby informs them: “Well, Okie use’ ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you’re a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you’re scum. Don’t mean nothing itself, it’s the way they say it” (206). Steinbeck relies heavily upon a rural dialect in the collective speech of the laborers to reflect their lack of education and low social status. Not only do they lose their land and home, but because of this displacement, they feel immense shame and helplessness in their newly ascribed identity. Migrant workers are thoroughly dehumanized by the law enforcement and the upper class, which reduce them in terms of a group and see them strictly as a social and financial burden. Although the workers think chiefly about their needs and those of their families, there is much doubt, however, that such class divisions are sustainable and this is a universal view among the migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Where Steinbeck describes the wealthy through narration and material symbolism, he uses characters both to illustrate the frustration of looking for decent wages and the belief that the inherent class division cannot last, effectively giving humanity to the characters and their struggle. One of the more striking examples of a character questioning the class division of the Depression, occurs when the Joads encounter a tire salesman who says in passing: “There ain’t room enough for you an’ me, for your kind an’ my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat. Whyn’t you go back where you came from?” (120). This view succinctly represents the collective frustration and disillusionment of the average worker. There is an inherent belief in nearly all of the migrant workers that the American promise of the middle class and upward mobility is a relic of the past and has no place in the bleak future they envision. The predominating view is that the heavily skewed wealth distribution and disastrous unemployment would remain indefinitely, and for good reason as income inequality reached its highest point of the 20th century in 1927, just before the stock market crash (Saez). Tom Joad likewise expresses his helplessness at being among the have-nots: “I know it ain’t their fault. Ever’ person I talked to is on the move for a damn good reason. But what's the country comin' to? That's what I want to know. What's it comin' to? Fella can't make a livin' no more. Folks can't make a livin' farmin'" (127) Not only do the farmers feel hopeless in their search for jobs, they severely question their self-worth, as they believe their skills, way of life, and role in society are rapidly becoming obsolete. The narratives of hard work and economic security with which they have been raised and have trusted, undergo significant erosion and appear irreparable. Despite both a literal economic crisis and an existential questioning of the self, the Joads remain resilient. Characteristic of the tough Tom Joad who never backs down from a fight, he says to Ma, the wise guiding light of the Joad family: "They comes a time when a man gets mad…They're a-tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl like a whipped bitch. They tryin' to break us. Why, Jesus Christ, Ma, they comes a time when the on'y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin' a sock at a cop. They're workin' on our decency" (278-9). From this stark separation of classes, however, also comes the ability for the Joads they grow together and find strength in one another and they use this strength to confront their greatest source of anger, law enforcement, which appears consistently throughout the novel.

Secondary to disillusionment with national narratives and a declining way of life during the Depression, another major theme in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a loss of faith in government and other public institutions. There is no mention of New Deal programs in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The workers do not see anything in the way of programs like the Works Progress Administration or the Civilian Conservation Corps, which signifies an argument that whatever relief came about during the Depression, did not reach those who needed it most. The biggest source of frustration that the Joads experience, however, is law enforcement. The distrust toward the police begins in the opening pages of the novel in which Tom Joad has been released from prison for killing a man in self-defense and it steadily increases during the novel. Police officers closely mirror the owners of the large farms who tell the Joads and other workers that they are unwelcome, have no opportunity for work, and are in violation of the law, which represents the primary hypocrisy in the novel's social context. Steinbeck writes of many families that seek work, but law enforcement consistently denies them such an opportunity and resents them because of their lack of economic worth. Likewise, these families search for work and are willing to settle for less-than-desired conditions because they believe in the American narrative that if they work hard, they will have an adequate standard of living. The result, however, is a thorough unraveling of this belief. Tom characterizes this contradiction and distrust toward law enforcement: "He tol' me up there the deputies got to take guys in. Sheriff gets seventy-five cents a day for each prisoner, an' he feeds 'em for a quarter. If he ain't got prisoners, he don't make no profit" (271). In a large sense, there is a suspension of enforcing the law as it was once known and the essence of democracy has been demolished: the prevailing view among the tenant workers is that the government is more interested in putting its resources and attention toward incarceration and removing the perceived problem of migrant workers than in investing in a solution of providing employment or offering economic relief. They are part of a self-defeating civil society and the workers are those who suffer the most because of it.

Where the Joads maintain an enormous level of distrust toward law enforcement in *The Grapes of Wrath*, their faith in government is restored, to a degree, when they reach a government camp. It is unclear where the funding for the camp comes from, most likely federal government, but Steinbeck includes it in *The Grapes of Wrath* to show the potential for government to provide relief and avert, to a degree, some of the suffering of the Depression. The camp serves to provide relief and most of all, a renewed sense of humanity for migrant workers. Tom's sister Ruthie describes the camp:

> Over by Weedpatch. Got nice toilets an' baths, an' you kin wash clothes in a tub, an' they's water right handy, good drinkin' water; an' night the folks plays music an' Sat'dy night they give a dance. Oh, and you never seen anything so nice. Got a place for kids to play, an' them toilets with paper. Pull down a little jigger an' the water comes right in the toilet, an' the fella runs the camp is so polite, comes a-visitin' an' talk an' ain't high an' mighty I wisht we could go live there again (254).

The government camp provides amenities that the workers have not had access to since leaving their homes and would not have found elsewhere while looking for work. One can assume that based upon the poverty of the migrants that it could have been the first instance in which they had access to what would, in the present day, be considered basic to one's standard of living in the developed world. In addition to providing a sense of humanity to the workers in the form of an adequate standard of living, the government camp gives those who live there a greater sense of value as a person as it is the most significant instance of community among the workers. Each member of the camp greets newcomers warmly and people commonly offer to share food, tell others about potential work, and look after one another's children. Social events are planned and people enjoy the company of others around campfires, but the greatest unifying part of the camp is the Central Committee.

The Central Committee is the governing body of the camp, comprised of one member from each of the five units of the camp and despite the decline of faith in government and other public institutions, it represents the American ideal of the potential for self-government to allow equal participation in public affairs and to work for the collective benefit of the people. When the Joads enter the government camp, they view its democratic process as novel, which signifies the brokenness and exclusionary elements of politics during the 1930s. When a watchman tells the Joads about the Central Committee, he says with regard to its members that "you can vote 'em out jus' as quick as you vote 'em in" (287) effectively removing the potential for the elected members to exercise the tyranny the police enjoy or the lack of concern the workers feel the federal government has toward them. The watchman also addresses the respite of the government camp in that police officers need a warrant to enter it. The government camp represents a sort of paradox with regard to the ambivalent view of government the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* espouse: on one hand, it acts as a refuge from the police targeting the workers and it also provides them with services that other government programs have lacked. It is important to note, however, that despite the compassion and the higher standing of living the Joads receive at the camp, they are unable to work and earn money there. They find food but cannot earn enough money to get ahead. *The Grapes of Wrath* notes that the need for work is paramount to human existence as Steinbeck writes earlier in the novel: "The last clear definite function of a man—muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need—this is man (150). While Steinbeck uses gender to separate tenant farming and housework, he views work as a universal source for human progress and self-worth. Only through fulfilling the desire for employment are sustainable economic stability and pride in oneself possible. Steinbeck shows not only the potential for self-government to create positive change for the average person, but also embraces the idea that the government has a crucial role in both ensuring the economic well-being of its citizens and providing an opportunity for them to find work: government must also do what it can to help those in need regain their faith in it.

Despite the Joads having a tendency not to overreact to the dire prospects for work and instead maintaining their faith in their ability to provide for themselves, electing to travel onward instead of threatening the power structure of landowners and law enforcement, the workers reach a tipping point in which they choose no longer to tolerate the systematic denial of fair wages. This further erosion of trust in public institutions, disenfranchisement of poor workers, and the undermining of democracy open a broader theme in *The Grapes of Wrath* of revolting against tyranny. Steinbeck does, however, view the public institution, whether formal or informal, of the union as favorable and beneficial. There is an evident romanticizing of the power of oppressed people using numbers to their advantage in threatening their oppressors. Steinbeck cogently illustrates this pattern: “And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed” (238). Not only do the powerful actively seek to profit from the mistreatment of workers, but they also infringe upon the rights of assembly and association as they accuse those who exercise their rights as being Communists echoing Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*, published three years earlier. This sort of accusation paired with the denial of a fair wage, the inability to find work, the exclusion of the worker from participating in civil society signifies nothing short of a crisis of democracy. While the characters have already experienced dehumanization from law enforcement, the detriments of class divisions, their remaining and most human right of assembling in community is heavily damaged. The potential for democracy is still not abandoned, but the workers reach the conclusion that it cannot exist in their current setting and economic condition. Tom laments toward the conclusion of the novel:

> I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't out people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan' (419).

Steinbeck contends that there needs to be a fundamental shift in political power in order for democracy to continue in the United States. Neither Tom Joad nor any of the workers find much appeal in Communism or an overthrow of the political system, but there is an evident belief that the essence of democracy, the ability for citizens to actively participate in civil society, demands an increase of rights, wealth, and role in civil society for the worker. They are unsure, however, of how this should be accomplished. Steinbeck likewise does not provide a solution to this problem, but hints instead at an imminent reestablishment of the social, political, and economic order later on in the conclusion of the novel.

Another major public institution that the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* call into question is organized religion and Steinbeck maintains an ambivalent position with regard to it as both a source of disappointment and deception as well as one for hope and as a useful system of belief during one of the greatest periods of hardship in American history. At first glance, it appears that the novel takes an unmistakably unfavorable of religion as Tom, while leaving jail, encounters the major character, Reverend Jim Casy, who is Tom's former minister and personifies a loss of faith in religion common amongst the workers. This sort of disillusionment toward religion closely mirrors the lack of trust in government: both are systems established with the purpose of helping and empowering people, especially in hardship, but have wholly failed to do so during the Depression. Rather than acting as a source of inspiration or healing for the Joad family when he embarks upon travelling with them, Casy's loss of faith has profound implications for others.

Casy's loss of faith and the concurrent views he adopts represent the larger group of people whom he encounters in the novel. He first explains his loss of faith is largely due to his guilt for promiscuity when he was a minister. He expresses regret to Tom when he speaks of the women with whom he slept, and to a degree, equates his former behavior with his current state. This duality can be read as reflecting a common view of decreased morality—that the Great Depression was the result of decadence in the preceding decade and that it was both deserved and inevitable. In *The American 1930s: A Literary History*, Peter Conn argues with regard to individuals moralizing the effects of the Depression: "a commitment to self-reliance survived among countless men and women who continued to believe in the efficacy of initiative and hard work and considered poverty a proof of moral turpitude" (4). There are much stronger considerations of religion that Steinbeck offers, however, as Casy reveals that for much of his time in the ministry, he did not fully believe what he was preaching. He tells Tom: "An' sometimes I love 'em to bust, an' I want to make 'em happy, so I been preachin' somepin I thought would make 'em happy"

(23). Casy not only no longer believes in religion, but suggests that it is another belief system, like American cultural narratives promising the potential for upward mobility, that have betrayed the Joads and other migrant workers. There is, however, a systematic shift away from the Christian doctrine and toward a loosened interpretation of religion. Casy primarily, as do many of the other characters in the novel, views religion less in terms of salvation, but still finds value in its ability to strengthen relationships and help people empathize with one another. He develops a fundamental change in belief as he says to Tom: " 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of' " (24). Casy leans toward a type of humanism, which celebrates the power of the individual and the ability for compassion and this, rather than a more traditional sense of religion, is the spiritual belief that the Joads most rely upon throughout the novel.

Despite most of the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* embracing a very relaxed interpretation of religion, especially for rural Americans in the 1930s, Steinbeck formidably uses Christian themes in this novel. The first of which is the migration from Oklahoma to California. While it can be read as symbolic of the American narrative of many people travelling westward in search of a better economic future, it likewise reflects the Old Testament. As Ray Lisca notes: "the twelve Joads are the twelve tribes of Judea; they suffer oppression in Oklahoma (Egypt) under the banks (Pharaohs); undertake an exodus; and arrive in California (Canaan, the land of milk and honey)" (92). Although they Joads find that California is far from being a promised land, this religious parallel is undeniable. Steinbeck's use of the extended Joad family travelling with the

Wilsons and encountering several others from Oklahoma, a land where there are long familial ties, particularly in the case of Granpa Joad, certainly reinforces this sort of reading.

Steinbeck's religious symbolism reaches a climax with Jim Casy's transformation from a former minister who has profound doubt in religion into that of a Christ-figure. Lisca notes this gradual process, which begins early in the novel as Casy undermines church doctrine in favor of his own interpretation of morality and spirituality:

> Beginning with his initials, J. C.; his rebellion against the old religion; his time of meditation in the wilderness; his announcement of the new religion; his taking on his head the sins of others; to his persecution and death crying out, 'You don' know what you're doin''; Jim Casy is clearly a modern Christ figure (92).

This fulfillment of the Christ-figure role occurs when the Joads leave the government camp for an opportunity to work. Tom encounters Casy who, earlier in the novel, symbolically sacrifices himself to protect Tom when he was involved in a fight and spends time in prison. Casy directly alludes to the parallel between himself and Christ: "Jail house is a kinda funny place. Here's me, been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out somepin" (381). Casy recognizes this and implicitly predicts his imminent death. He immediately and selflessly involves himself in a conflict when the Joads and other workers are offered an unlivable wage. Casy protests:

> We come to work there. They says it's gonna be fi' cents. They was a hell of a lot of us. We got there an' they says they're payin' two an' a half cents. A fella can't even eat on that, an' if he got kids—So we says we won't take it. So they druv us

> off. An’ all the cops in the worl’ come down on us. Now they’re payin’ you five
>
> When they bust this here strike—ya think they’ll pay five? (383).

Not only does Casy protest the established religious order, but he also challenges the combined powers of law enforcement and landowners in a way that not even Tom Joad, for all his aggression and disillusionment, or any other character in *The Grapes of Wrath* can match. It is also worth nothing that Casy espouses sort of Christ-oriented view with regard to wages and unequal wealth, championing the poor and warning the wealthy of consequences for their greed: he is as much an exemplar of Christianity as he is of activism, putting the interests of the group well above his own. When Casy challenges this power, he, like Christ, is accused of being an agitator and is killed. Steinbeck uses Casy’s interpretation of religion to show that the devastation of the Great Depression will end and that a more hopeful economic and social era will come. In the closing pages of the novel, Tom recalls scripture Casy had earlier mentioned: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif’ up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth for he hath not another to help him up” (418). Though the source of this passage is not specifically mentioned, it comes from the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, which explicitly combines religious faith with that of a promising future. Both Casy and Tom recognize the power of solidarity and are rewarded.

Where the novel opens with a portrait of a landscape devastated by drought and a nearly uninhabitable climate, it closes with rainfall, literally ending the source of the Joad family’s struggle of an inability to farm and symbolically signaling a new age. Steinbeck writes of the rain’s arrival in a triumphant, lyrical style:

> And at first the dry earth sucked the moisture down and blackened. For two days the earth drank the rain, until the earth was full. Then puddles formed, and in the low places little lakes formed in the fields. The muddy lakes rose higher, and the steady rain whipped the shining water. At last the mountains were full and the hillsides spilled into the streams, built them into freshets, and sent them roaring down the canyons into the valleys (432).

While the farmers could see the rain as a nuisance, considering their lack of stable shelter, they unanimously and immediately see it as a long-awaited source of relief, rebirth, and hope for the future. Despite the series of migration, disappointment and frustration, throughout the novel much of its immediate appeal, one can assume, is due to the ultimately promising conclusion *The Grapes of Wrath* takes with regard to the suffering of the Great Depression.

Despite its enduring legacy and prominence in the American literary canon, in many ways, *The Grapes of Wrath* has not aged well because of its racial characterizations during Great Depression-era America: it omits the entirety of an ethnic worker's experience during the Depression, while arguably elevating the white worker as a symbol of American resilience with exclusive ownership of "Americanness." As American racial and ethnic demographics continue to become more diverse in the 21st century, this unfavorable light will undoubtedly increase. Charles Cunningham's essay "Rethinking the Politics of *The Grapes of Wrath*" examines the large presence and subsequent mistreatment of Mexicans and Filipinos in the early 20th century and aims to reappropriate their backgrounds into the national narrative of the Depression-era working class, particularly in northern California. Cunningham argues:

> The ethnic makeup of the migrant workforce changed over the years, but the groups involved usually had in common that they were minorities not considered citizens of the United States—or at least *proper* citizens. As 'aliens,' they were thus particularly vulnerable to exploitation…By the 1920s, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were the majority, with a significant Filipino minority.

Steinbeck has committed a significant error with this omission in *The Grapes of Wrath* and not only withholds the experience of Mexican- and Filipino-Americans, but also fails to provide an accurate view of working life in this era. Cunningham implicitly notes that this omission cannot be accidental, particularly in an ethnically diverse population like California during the early 20th century.

Cunningham is far from the only critic to point out this inaccuracy. Jeff Allred notes Ma Joad's populist "We" speech in John Ford's 1940 film adaptation of Steinbeck's novel, which also pervades throughout the text. Allred writes:

> This trope has not aged well, critically speaking, primarily because it assumes that which it should trouble: the existence of a broad unity, 'we, the people,' which, as contemporary critics affirm, is an overdetermined entity, internally divided by other categories, such as race, sexuality, and class. As in the case of the Joads, invocations of 'the people' in Depression-era culture generally conforms to a racial profile: that of rural whites with tattered clothes and empty bellies whose mouths are nonetheless filled with rough eloquence (133-4).

This use of "We" is an important trope in Great Depression literature that—at times, intentionally, though also unintentionally—removes people of color in both narrative roles and in agency and is central to Richard Wright's Depression-era text, *12 Million*

Black Voices. Peter Conn cites historian Eric Foner's argument that Americans "'have always looked to history for a sense of national cohesiveness' especially in times of crisis, when cohesiveness is under siege" attempting to explain this racialized trope (6). Not only were there large numbers of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in California at the time, but they were systematically recipients of the lowest wages among rural workers and suffered discrimination.

There were several factors that contributed to the movement of Mexican laborers in the early to mid-20th century. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1917 allowed legal admittance of temporary agricultural labor (Craig 7) and by the 1920s, at least three quarters of California's 200,000 farm workers were Mexican or Mexican-American and there were 45,000 Filipinos in California, while men outnumbered women by a twenty-to-one ratio (Horowitz). While these figures do reflect economic opportunity as well as a surge of emigration from Mexico during its Civil War from 1910 to 1920, much of the Mexican and Filipino presence during this time period is rooted in misguided immigration policy regarding Mexico and foreign policy in the Philippines, and laborers were among the most affected.

California's Indigent Act, passed in 1933, made it a crime to bring so-called indigent persons into the state. Such laws were broad in implementation, clearly aimed at limiting economic prospects for immigrants, particularly of color, and as a result, only the most low-skill, low-wage jobs were available until 1941, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Edwards v. California* that states had no right to restrict interstate migration (Gregory). To discourage poor laborers from crossing state lines, many states maintained tough vagrancy laws also aimed at white working-class characters seen in *The Grapes of Wrath* as well as *In Dubious Battle*. Not only was there obviously a large presence of minority workers, but with economic hardship, claims of minority workers taking jobs from white workers, and overtly racist attitudes among white workers, there was a large effort aimed at deportation and paying Mexican and Filipino workers less than their white counterparts. Cunningham recalls: “a sentiment rose in the state to deport Mexican and Filipino workers. Anti-immigrant racism was mobilized as a false palliative for unemployment, and as a result, about one third of the Mexican and Filipino populations of the U.S. were deported or repatriated between 1931 and 1934.” Richard B. Craig similarly notes this white resentment: “Local residents were supposedly piqued initially and subsequently frustrated to despair by the refusal of management to hire them in deference to Mexican nationals” (31). While Steinbeck frequently notes the scorn natives aimed toward white migrant workers once arriving to work in California, this is only one part of an attitude fervently opposed to the population influx. Similar legal discriminatory efforts occurred with Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Between 1929 and 1935, at the beginning of the Great Depression, the federal government played a direct role in deporting 82,000 Mexicans and by the end of the decade, more than half of the nearly 500,000 people who moved to Mexico were actually U.S. citizens (Horowitz).

While government on both the state and federal levels was quick to limit immigration and enact widespread deportation to benefit white American workers during the Depression, these governments reversed deportation policies during the Second World War in which a shortage of workers and need for increased industrial production quickly developed with GI’s leaving their jobs to fight. The most notable such program of this time period was the Bracero program, which lasted from 1942 until 1964, and having witnessed 4.5 million participants, it has been called one of the largest U.S. contract-labor systems in United States history. The Bracero Program guaranteed payment of at least the prevailing wage by natives for performing a given task; employment for three-fourths of the contract period; adequate and sanitary free housing; occupational insurance at employer's expense; and free transportation back to Mexico once the contract period was completed, though these provisions were often overlooked (Craig 5). In practice, the program lasted significantly longer than expected as Mexican laborers provided cheap labor. Increased mechanization in the 1960s and decrease in demand for manual laborers reduced 10 million farmers in 1949 to 5.6 million in 1965 and are largely seen as responsible for ending the Bracero program (10). Despite criticisms of the Bracero Program, Craig nonetheless characterizes its efficacy: "even the critics of the agreement, be they Mexican or American, readily admitted to its success as an instrument of diplomacy" (48) while acknowledging that Mexican workers generally "acquired through experience a substantial amount of agricultural technique" (49).

Foreign policy directly influenced domestic labor not only with regard to Mexico, but also the Philippines. Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934, which established the Philippines as a commonwealth, set up a ten-year transition to full independence, reclassified all Filipinos living in the United States as "aliens," and when the Philippines was fully independent, limited immigration to the U.S. to 50 Filipino arrivals per year. Much in the manner that immigration policy in the 1930s regarding Mexico was aimed at reducing immigration and providing more jobs for primarily white American citizens, the same exclusion applied to Filipino-Americans whose native country had come under U.S. rule in previous decades during the Spanish-American War.

Congress also passed the Filipino Repatriation Act of 1935, which as a result of a jobs shortage and surplus of workers, called upon the U.S. government to pressure Filipinos to return to the Philippines (Johansen). This law, however, was deemed unconstitutional in 1940 and succeeded in deporting only around 2,200 Filipinos from the United States.

In "Rethinking the Politics of *The Grapes of Wrath,*" Cunningham brings attention to Steinbeck's singular focus on white workers, going as far as to label Steinbeck's novel as racist with the rationale that Steinbeck has effectively succeeded in "mythologizing the Okies as quintessential American pioneers—an ideological convention that resonated with the implicit white supremacism of Jeffersonian agrarianism and of manifest destiny." This assessment is problematic for many reasons. While Cunningham raises important arguments that are essential for a responsible reading of working-class narratives in this time, his accusation of racism is an unfair devaluation of working-class literature that earnestly aims to give a voice to the voiceless. Cunningham's essay also disregards Steinbeck's portrayal of minority characters in his other works of fiction published both before and after *The Grapes of Wrath*. As I later address, Steinbeck characterizes Lee Chong, a Chinese immigrant in *Cannery Row*, as an integral part of the community who is the proprietor of the general store and gives credit to his white neighbors in need whenever he can. Steinbeck also resists a naïve understanding of race relations during the Great Depression. Lee Chong, while simultaneously respected among the citizens of Cannery Row and portrayed favorably by Steinbeck, remains a sort of outsider. This quality is not by narrative omission or because Chong is a one-dimensional character, but is rather an intentional portrayal of racial exclusion. He has limited dialogue and does not share much of the same camaraderie that white characters have with one another. Rather than silencing Chong, this characterization shows benefits of an integrated community along with the need for greater racial inclusion in difficult social and economic times.

Steinbeck's portrayal of Crooks, the only black character in *Of Mice and Men* similarly counters Cunningham's assertions of white supremacy in *The Grapes of Wrath*. While his token minority status is certainly problematic, Crooks is far more of an outsider than Chong within social interactions among workers at the ranch, though Steinbeck likewise shows nuance and a responsible racial understanding by writing him as an admirable character with which the reader can easily empathize. Though not to other characters, Crooks has a certain social prominence for readers as he has more experience at the ranch than most, if not all of the other workers. With this seniority also comes wisdom, which the reader sees when Crooks understands the futility of the belief that workers at the ranch can eventually save their earnings, purchase their own land, and live independently. With his experience of receiving racial prejudice, Crooks understands that cultural narratives, not only of racial equality, but also of social mobility are highly misleading to laborers during the Great Depression.

Cunningham also ignores the controversy Steinbeck received for publishing this working-class novel in 1939. As Jackson J. Benson argues in *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*:

> Few novelists have been the recipient of so much personally directed hatred, and of all novelists, he was probably the least able to shrug his shoulders and let the venom run off his back. A variety of epithets were applied to him, describing his

> character, motives, and ancestry, but the most common were ‘liar’ and ‘communist’ (418).

By any objective biographical or critical account, the characterization of Steinbeck or his fiction as racist does not hold true. Cunningham has the benefit of retrospection that does not account for what large audiences were interested in reading before the Civil Rights movement in which white readers would collectively show little interest in or sympathy for working-class narratives featuring people of color. This is not to excuse or justify Steinbeck’s calculated whitewashing of working life in northern California during the Great Depression, but this context reveals a writer interested in reaching a wide audience, humanizing a large class of people who had suffered dire economic conditions and an undeserved level of personal scorn, and perhaps letting his narrative choices reflect the public’s interest. While this omission of Mexican and Filipino experience takes away from the legacy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, it does not invalidate it and such a perception is a disservice to working-class and Great Depression literature.

3.

Genre, Documentation, and Systemic Poverty in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country.
—President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 16 June 1933

Greed, once a pejorative, has become the national credo.
—Dale Maharidge, 1989

In July 1936, James Agee, a New York City journalist who would posthumously become a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and photographer Walker Evans, of a wealthy Chicago family, began an assignment for *Fortune* magazine to write around ten thousand words (Allred 93) that would serve as a "record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers" (Agee, Evans *ix*). Agee and Evans observed three families for two months: the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families, all of whom were given pseudonyms. In its account of these families, their working and living conditions, and their attitudes about living in rural Alabama as sharecroppers in the 1930s, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* helps its readers gain a concrete, factual understanding of life and poverty during the Depression. While the three families far from represent the totality of Depression-era poverty and working conditions, especially as the original *Fortune* assignment specifically excluded discussion of African-American tenant farmers, Agee's and Evans's portrait aligns with sociologist, C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* as he posits a framework: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (3). Mills examines the relationship between public issues as "matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life" (8) and private biography, which "contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history" (6). Agee and Evans channel Mills' understanding articulated eighteen years after the publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* recognizing their project as a portrait of the social, economic, and political times.

Classifying this book merely as non-fiction does not capture its essence as it largely resists genre: while *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* does not heavily involve statistics of tenant farming or a detailed history of the families, Agee presents them not as characters, but elevates them as a collective embodiment of Depression-era poverty and the ability for human beings to persevere under dehumanizing social and economic conditions. Walker Evans's photography certainly does not clarify this beautiful complication of mixing language with a high aesthetic and subjects of work and poverty. In many ways, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* contains more honesty than many works of Depression fiction and combines the most valuable parts of fiction and non-fiction writing. Agee is unafraid to remove many narrative niceties as he not only dedicates several chapters of extreme detail to each of the tenant families' homes, clothing, and hygiene, but he also philosophizes about universal truths of humanity. Switching between a style that reflects his immediate role as a reporter and that which shows his mastery of poetic language, Agee not only confronts his readers with people living in the most inhumane conditions in a desolate era, but also adds humanity to people whose lives are defined by an unjust economic system that is designed to, and contingent upon, keeping them in severe poverty. With the understanding of the biographies of the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families within the great public issue of the Great Depression, James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* presents an invaluable study of systemic poverty during 1930s.

Unlike many works of Great Depression literature, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* exists more as a historical document than as a then-contemporary account and it has a unique, continuing legacy. Jeff Allred notes: "The article never materialized mostly because of Agee's unwillingness to conform to any known norms of journalism, but the project emerged four years later as the 471 pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" (93) though remained in obscurity until it was republished in 1960. The result, however, is a place secured as "the only documentary project of the Depression-era U.S. to have found a secure perch in the canons of American and modernist studies and has been read" (96). Peter Conn similarly places *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* along with other important works from the 1930s like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Johnny Got His Gun*, and *Call It Sleep*, which initially went out of print and were rediscovered decades later under similar social circumstances to the '30s (18). In 1982 as the economic and political climate included the Reagan revolution, stubbornly high unemployment, widespread farm foreclosures and factory layoffs, and began a decades-long economic stratification and cultural ethos that would come to be known as the New Gilded Age, Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson decided to begin several trips over a three-year period retracing Agee's and Evans's travels in Alabama, the longest of which being in July and August of 1986. Born from a curiosity of what would have happened to the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* had they been real people, Maharidge and Williamson met and interviewed most of the 128 descendants of the twenty-two original members (*xix*) from the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families who are the subject of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. And Their Children After Them*, which was awarded the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction, supplements and enhances Agee's and Evans's account of the tenant farming system in the Deep South and helps its readers understand the roots and perpetuation of poverty over several decades. Maharidge writes: "It is about a group of men and women who long ago told us something about America that we, as a society, do not readily want to face, and who today have something else to tell us about ourselves" (*xxiii*). While most current readers do not have direct experience with the Great Depression, *And Their Children After Them* removes barriers of history and some abstraction and detachment from an obsolete farming system and living conditions that no longer exist in the developed world with its focus on uncomfortable subject of American poverty that persists decades later.

In addition to examining contemporary poverty, Maharidge reports on the origins and structure of the tenant farming system between the post-Civil War South into the 1950s and '60s with figures and clarity to which Agee and Evans were not privy in the 1930s. Maharidge writes that in 1936, there were "nine million sharecroppers in the South; "virtually all of them lived under the most brutal conditions, often not too much better than slaves" (*xvi*). The large-scale production of cotton in the South was dependent upon exploiting extremely cheap labor and though the South's cotton industry added one billion dollars of wealth annually to the world economy (*xvi*), Maharidge notes that many landowners privately conceded that if not for this exploitation, cotton production in the South would otherwise not be economically viable (59). Maharidge is also more informative about the structure of the tenant farming system, signifying the relative unfamiliarity that many people in the present day, particularly outside the South, have with the former institution of tenant farming, and is intentional about distinguishing between "tenant farming" and "sharecropping." Although there were farmers who, in an arrangement similar to present-day farm leasing, paid an owner "straight rent for the use of the land and kept the entire crop," it was relatively uncommon. Those who were tenant farmers farmed on what were called "thirds" or "fourths," meaning that the family would give the landlord one-third or fourth of the crop and "had to provide their own mules and farm implements, as well as their labor" and from "the remaining share of the crop, they'd owe the landowner for most of the cost of seed and fertilizer plus interest." Sharecroppers were, as Maharidge writes, the "lowest kind of tenant farmer" and "didn't own their own mules or tools. All they had to offer was their backs…In return, the sharecroppers had to give over a much greater proportion of the crop than tenants did," which included half their crop, the cost of fertilizer, and an average of 40 percent interest" (15).

In the tenant farming system in which few people owned land or farming equipment and landowners thoroughly exploited the labor of an enormous group of workers, Marxist economic theory hardly seems a stretch to explain this widespread social and economic injustice in myriad ways. Agee even writes that he is "a Communist by sympathy and conviction" (220) while in her essay, "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," Jeanne Follansbee Quinn characterizes Agee's politics and writing style in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as "an alternative politics and a pragmatist aesthetic, which places the book outside the two poles of 'liberal' and 'Marxist.' In fact, Agee criticized both liberal and Marxist politics for what he saw as misguided and dangerous commitments to identity." As Marx and Engels famously write at the beginning of their polemical, *The Communist Manifesto*: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (4) and there is a direct application to tenant farming. Agee frequently compares to the tenant farmers as pawns in a larger system of exploited labor, economic dependence on agriculture, and lack of education, who are, in varying degrees, ignorant of their mistreatment, which as Maharidge and Williamson show, will continue into the 1980s. Not only does tenant farming show a strong structural resemblance to the archaic feudal system, but Agee frequently compares this type of work to slavery in the American South, while Maharidge writes that it was "devised by plantation owners after Emancipation at the end of the Civil War" (*xvi*). It is important to note that the farmers obviously were not literally owned, but many were condemned to this servitude for life as a result of poor economic conditions, as well as insufficient educational opportunity, and would be fortunate to break even with the landowner after harvest. Marx also explores this antagonism in *Capital* and argues that while slavery and tenant farming are similar in structure, that tenant farming is rooted in coercion of economic circumstance rather than force. Tenant farming:

> differs from the slave or plantation economy in that the slave works with conditions or production that do not belong to him, and does not work independently. Relations of personal dependence are therefore necessary, in other words personal unfreedom, to whatever degree, and being chained to the land as its accessory—bondage in the true sense (927).

With this basic understanding of the foundations of the tenant farming system, we are better able to see the ways in which class struggles create the economic structure in Agee's time. The dehumanizing system which treats famers an expendable commodities also requires several variables, like depriving work relief and adequate education, that ensure its continuance and the oppression of the tenant farmer.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels write: "Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (4). Though Agee does not interview any landowners and Maharidge likewise gives little emphasis to this class of people, Marx's simplified class distinction represents a rather direct parallel with tenant farming in which there is little in the way of a middle class. While the landowners benefitted from preventing tenants from raising crops of their own, not allowing their children to attend school, or earning profits from their labor, tenant farmers reciprocated little of this antagonistic behavior and generally viewed their mistreatment passively. From Maharidge's distinction between sharecroppers and regular tenant farmers, sharecroppers neatly fit into *The Communist Manifesto*'s definition of wage laborers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital (8). Marx further characterizes the hostility between the landowners and the farmers in *Capital*, showing the commonality between tenant farming and bondage:

> It is clear, too, that in all forms where the actual worker himself remains the 'possessor' of the means of production and the conditions of labor needed for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must appear at the same time as a direct relationship of domination and servitude, and the direct producer therefore as an unfree person (926).

Continuing Marx's characterization of this class antagonism, he argues that this division of classes is able to exist because of the extreme volume and economic dependence upon a given commodity, which easily translates to cotton production in the 1930s South and high numbers of uneducated, low-skilled workers. This distribution of landowners and farmers according to Marx, "presupposes that the overwhelming majority of the population is agricultural and that isolated labour predominates over social; wealth and the development of reproduction, therefore, both in its material and its intellectual aspects, is ruled out under these circumstances, and with this also the conditions for a rational agriculture" (949). The tenant farming system preceded the farming industrialization that revolutionized Southern agriculture in the 1940s and '50s and would, as Maharidge details in *And Their Children After Them*, eventually displace the nine million tenant farmers and lead to the advent of commercial farms. Until the collapse of the tenant farming system and declining cotton production in the South in the coming decades, however, small-scale landownership was common and depended upon this large pool of cheap, unskilled labor.

The explicit class division seen in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in many ways is a defining cultural characteristic of rural Alabama. None of the tenant farmers earnestly questions their oppression and it becomes a common reality of life in the region. Marxist theory also argues that landowners who control the means of production naturally aim to establish their dominance over the workers in law and then by establishing local cultural norms, and as Agee shows us, this applies directly to rural Alabama. Marx writes in *Capital*, with regard to social norms: “Even ignoring any other factors, this happens automatically as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing situation, the relationship underlying it, assumes a regular and ordered form in the course of time” (929). C. Wright Mills similarly warns in *The Sociological Imagination*: “Examining carefully much American history of the last few decades, we have to realize that whatever history is or ought to be it easily becomes also a ponderous re-making of national and class myths” (83). The cultural norms have the effect of both preventing farmers from recognizing the extent of their brutal mistreatment, aside from an everyday awareness of their inability to attain economic mobility, as well as their mistreatment by those who are neither tenant farmers nor landowners. Agee records similar attitudes that the local people show toward the three families as they receive scorn simply for being poor and are perceived as lazy despite performing exhaustive manual labor several hours a day. An unnamed person tells Agee: “None of these people has any sense, not any initiative. If they did, they wouldn’t be farming on shares” while another states: “Give them money and all they’ll do with it is throw it away” (71). Peter Conn also recognizes the importance of this recurrence and writes: “Agee sustains a pitiless dialogue between past and present: the families of *Famous Men* are the people who have been betrayed by the values and arrangements handed down by the past of their region" (36).

Dale Maharidge shows us how these cultural misunderstandings have persisted into the 1980s and after. He records T. Hudson Margraves, who inherited the land that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* refers to as Hobe's Hill, where the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families lived, who describes the common perception of rural poverty as follows: "Alabama is different. You had—you still have—dirt-poor people, but they think they have it made. You got a lot of simple-type, good-natured folks who just don't understand a lot of things. they're happy. They got their family, they got a roof overhead, they can put food on the table" (217). While most pronounced in places like rural Alabama, these cultural narratives are not limited to assumptions that the poor are lazy, but are also rooted in rugged individualism and social Darwinism, which have thrived during both the time of Maharidge and Williamson's travels in the 1980s and during the Great Recession in the 21st century.

Agee succinctly shows alienation of the farmers and the degree to which tenant farming controls the lives of those shackled to it. Human life is degraded to the ability to provide labor for the family and children are expected to help farm at a very young age. Having additional children to help with farm labor is the only means of production many tenant families have, though caring for them conversely represents a significant burden. The cycle and labor pool of tenant farming perpetuated itself as those who were born into the system would more often than not remain tied to it for life until its demise in the 1950s and '60s. The structure of tenant families closely mirrors that described in *The Communist Manifesto* as Marx and Engels write: "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (6). Agee echoes Marx's understanding of familial relations as an economic tool and argues with regard to the life of a tenant farmer: "for he is made for work, for a misuser, not his own even illusive master nor even mere slave of his parents or a healthful state, but of misuse without which he shall not live at all: and it is in obedience to these pressures that the marriage was made and that he was conceived" (91). This familial relation implicitly perpetuates poverty, replenishes the pool of uneducated low-skill manual laborers, and supplements the power of the landowners, helping ensure the continuation of the tenant farming system for roughly a century since its inception after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

One of the most significant results of having many children to provide long hours of strenuous labor is a severely deficient education. Agee, a graduate of Philips Exeter Academy and Harvard College, devotes a chapter to education and writes extensively about the demands of tenant farming which keep children away from school and an already insufficient educational system. Few children who work as tenant farmers are able to attend school for more than a few years and Maharidge notes child labor laws in Alabama, which allowed this servitude by exempting "agriculture or domestic service" (30) much like government programs of the 1930s, which precluded tenant farmers from receiving relief because they were already employed. This legal support for educational neglect further illustrates the Marxist idea of laws legitimizing the institution in cultural norms and it represents another defining commonality with slavery and laws prohibiting literacy among slaves, largely preventing escape from the system. The blatant lack of sufficient education among tenant families likewise reiterates both the degree to which cotton production would not be economically viable if workers were paid a living wage and the state's heavy overdependence upon cotton production as one of few economic resources in an impoverished region. Agee notes levels of education among the adults as well:

> Mrs. Ricketts can neither read nor write. She went to school one day in her life and her mother got sick and she never went back…George Gudger can spell and read and write his own name; beyond that he is helpless. He got as far as second grade. By that time there was work for him and he was slow minded anyway (268).

For those fortunate enough to receive a basic education, they are more likely than not victim to extremely poor attendance because of the demands of work. Agee strongly argues that it is another force that limits children subjected to it by encouraging subordination rather than intellectual curiosity. Agee writes: "'Education' as it stands is tied in with every bondage I can conceive of, and is the chief cause of these bondages, including acceptance and respect, which are the worst bondages of all" (272). The immediate demands of survival outweigh more long-term goals of education and it is easy to see why there is so little importance placed upon it, especially when considering that farming is the only way of life these families know: it is the assumed occupation for each generation, there are no other sources of work for these families mentioned in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the labor that it requires deprives workers of the time to contemplate life outside tenant farming and rural Alabama, and of course, tenant farming all but prohibits social mobility. Tenant farmers, Agee argues, are "about as poorly equipped for self-education as human beings can be" and that education is "all but entirely irrelevant to the pressures and needs which involve almost every instant of a tenant's conscious living" (260). While generally espousing beliefs that human beings are born with limitless possibility, due to the conditions in which the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods children are raised Agee predicts that most of them will receive little education and continue tenant farming and the indebtedness, hardship, and hopelessness associated with it.

The tenant farming system as described in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* diverts from Marxist principles as outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* with regard to overcoming the alienation of the workers: there is no destruction of the tools of production and there is no union of the proletariat, let alone any sort of uprising. Maharidge and Williamson document the decline of the tenant farming system beginning in the 1940s, and in contrast to Marx and Engels's writing, improved modes of production helped eliminate, to a degree, the exploitation of tenant farmers rather than having increased it. Maharidge writes:

> In 1936, the total U.S. production of about fourteen million bales of cotton was almost entirely raised by hand and mule on forty-three million acres. By 1960, the same amount of cotton was being sent to market each year. But because of machines and improved cultivation, it was grown on just seventeen and a half million acres. Fewer people were needed. One million farms had vanished since 1940, representing a loss of a majority of the nine million cotton tenants (97).

The result, however, is a pool of workers in low-wage, low-skill jobs similar to tenant farmers decades earlier.

While *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a book that cannot be neatly classified by any genre, Jeff Allred characterizes it as documentary project and this is as good of a description as any, especially when considering Agee's personal narratives of the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families and the thorough detailing of their houses, clothing, and general living conditions. At times, this account is tedious and seems self-reflexively so. Jeanne Follansbee Quinn writes: "Nothing escapes Agee's notice; nothing is deemed too small or too trivial for inclusion. Agee even catalogues items used up or missing: unwound, half-used thread; the amount of salve remaining in a jar; the number of gaps in the teeth of a celluloid comb." Agee's purpose is to show the reader as much of the mundaneness and overlooked dilapidation as possible in a manner that would not be possible in traditional fiction. Keeping in mind that his initial audience was to be readers of *Fortune* magazine, Agee knows the reader's separation to what he is witnessing in Alabama, writing, "by general it would be said that everyone live in homes equivalent to the homes of those a full category worse off in the economic-social scale in the north" (181) and this is why he does not hesitate to devote so much of the book to descriptions of the tenant family's living conditions. Agee appeals to multiple senses, including information that most readers would not consider when imagining the poverty of these families. In his portrait of the Gudger house, Agee writes: "It has the odor or odors which are classical in every thoroughly poor white southern country house…combines into one that they are all and always present in balance, not at all heavy, yet so searching that all fabrics of bedding and clothes are saturated with them (135-6). He also shows that the houses are not merely of poor quality, but for current readers in the developed world, are unfit for habitation:

> There is no ceiling to either of the front rooms, and the shingles were laid so unskillfully, and are now so multitudinously leaky, that it would be a matter not of repairing but of complete relaying to make a solid roof. Between the beams at the eaves, along the whole front of the house, and the top of the wall on which the means rest, there are open gaps (134).

Quinn argues that even in his most damning critiques of tenant life that Agee still espouses a humanistic vision of these families and their livelihood:

> For Agee and Evans, work defines and encompasses the sharecropper's entire existence from his birth to his death. Agee captures that experience by describing its manifestations on the croppers and on their possessions. In representing their work through their objects, Agee reorients the documentary narrative away from consumption and toward work and, ironically, makes dehumanizing labor the vehicle for humanizing the cropper.

While these chapters are perhaps what make *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* most elusive to genre, they also show Agee's commitment to capturing the living conditions for the reader and understanding the lives of these tenant farmers for himself in spite of his economic privilege.

While the tenant farming system sees families like the Gudgers, Rickettses, and Woodses strictly as resources for their economic benefit, James Agee has a unique relationship to these families that refuses sentimentality while affirming their worth as people; shows hesitance not to exploit their poverty while, at times, describing it with harsh language; and aims both for journalistic objectivity as well as a detailed, personal account of the tenant families. Paula Rabinowitz writes in "Voyeurism and Class

Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" with respect to Agee's and the readers' relations to the tenant farmers: "No matter what its political intentions, the documentary narrative invariably returns to the middle class, enlisting the reader in a process of self-recognition. We read ourselves into the people." Lionel Trilling argues more simply in a 1942 review: "It poses this question: How may we—'we' being the relatively fortunate middle class that reads books and experiences emotions—how may we feel about the—and the word itself proclaims the difficulty—underprivileged?" (99). Agee struggles with what genre his project should be considered, and though there are many moments of stylistic brilliance, he aims not to create a particular aesthetic, but rather to put forward an account stripped-down of niceties. Its primary goal, like any work of serious fiction, is arguably to communicate the spirit and potential for human beings. Agee writes in the Preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell (*xi*) and later implores his readers: "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art" (12). Agee does show a restrained fondness for George Gudger, electing to live with his family for the two-month period and by writing a "disproportionate number of pages devoted to descriptions [of] the Gudgers' home and family members" (Allred 102). Agee uses Gudger as a metaphor throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to illustrate his humanistic beliefs and the goals of the book:

> George Gudger is a human being, a man, not like any other human being so much as he is like himself…He is in those terms living, right now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of the world in which also, quite as irrelevant to

> imagination, you and I are living. Granted that beside that fact is a small thing, and granted also that it is essentially and finally a hopeless one, to try merely to reproduce and communicate his living as nearly exactly as possible, nevertheless I can think of no worthier and many worse subjects of attempt (206).

Maharidge writes that after leaving Alabama in 1936, Agee kept correspondence with the families for a few years, sent them Christmas presents, and visited the Gudgers and Rickettses again in 1937 (83-4). Agee makes little note of Walker Evans's interaction with the families in his text, though Maharidge addresses the contempt with which Evans viewed them. While interviewing Margaret Ricketts, who was twenty years old when Agee and Evans reported on her family in 1936: "Evans didn't talk with them. He didn't even talk down to them. He talked at them, as if they were objects" and Maharidge similarly notes: "In interviews he gave in the 1960s and 1970s, Evans seldom referred to any of the people he had photographed in 1936 as people, but always as 'rich material'" (39).

Dale Maharidge also notes Agee's fondness of the Gudger family and as Agee captures George in his book, Maharidge makes a similar narrative choice by framing *And Their Children After Them* around George's daughter, Maggie Louise, who was ten years old in 1936 and with whom Agee felt a strong connection, believing she would be able to escape the tenant farming system and accomplish far more than what was expected of her. Maharidge writes:

> Maggie Louise was full of expectations. Her grades were among the best in her school. Her parents supported her. It seemed the possibilities for her were as vast

> as the sky…She'd speak warmly of Agee. He had confirmed for her that the world was bigger than Alabama cotton (*iii*).

Maharidge and Williamson frame *And Their Children After Them* around Maggie Louise Gudger in a somewhat cinematic style as the book's short opening chapter tells her story immediately before the title page. Maharidge writes that in her early twenties, Maggie Louise was still picking cotton in Alabama and that "Each passing year mocked the dreams she had dreamed with Agee, reducing her a little each year" (*iv*). Eventually, Maharidge also writes, Maggie Louise committed suicide by ingesting rat poison on 21 February 1971. Maharidge's biography of Maggie Louise within the larger context of technological advancement that ended the South's mass production of cotton and the tenant farming system communicates the difficulty for the descendants of the tenant families to advance beyond the poverty they inherited. She also serves as a personification of poverty and the diminished potential for upward mobility in the closing decades of 20th century America.

According to Maharidge's findings, George Gudger's descendants in the years following the Great Depression fared much better economically than him and enjoyed a higher quality of life, though many remained in poverty. By the 1950s, Maggie Louise and her family were one of the few families left in the corner of the cotton lands and the only white family in that area (80) and at the time when Maharidge and Williamson were in Alabama in 1986, there were no inhabitants at Hobe's Hill where the Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families each lived in the 1930s (258). While Maggie Louise lived in a public housing project before committing suicide, her daughter Debbie obtained a high school equivalency degree, attended a two-year business school, and made the decision to prioritize education after being given a copy of Agee's book (149). Emma Woods directly benefitted from the War on Poverty through Alabama's state rehabilitation office, which was deigned to help "a few tenant farmers" and to avoid aggravation of her asthma, the office found her a job in a nursing home with medical care. While she was able to escape the poverty she inherited, Maharidge writes: "She was one of the few tenant farmers to get any kind of assistance in freeing herself from the bondage of cotton" (115).

Michael Williamson's photography that precedes the text of *And Their Children After Them* similarly shows the social and economic stagnation in the fifty-year period when placed alongside Walker Evans's original photographs over the same people and places with little discernable physical change. Maharidge writes: "It can easily be argued that Third World poverty has a harder edge to it than anything found in the United States, and this is surely true. Yet it is also true that in America the word 'poverty' labels losers, that to be poor and to accept your poverty is to exhibit not stoicism but a sense of defeat" (143). While the tenant farming system has not been in existence for decades, there are many rural areas, particularly in the Deep South and Appalachia, which retain this systemic poverty. In June 2014, *The New York Times* tracked economic opportunity in a feature titled "Where are The Hardest Places to Live in the U.S.?" ranking each of the 3,135 counties in the United States. Clay County, Kentucky ranks last: the median income ($22,296) is roughly at the poverty level and the percentage of its citizens with a bachelor's degree (7.4%) is astoundingly lower than the number of its citizens who, at the time of publication, are on disability (11.7%) or unemployed (12.7%). A simultaneously published feature in *The New York Times Magazine* that examines the seemingly unshakeable poverty in this region found that it was partially due to a former dependence on coal, while noting that in the first quarter of 2014 only 54 people were employed in coal mining in Clay County. Conversely, in 1980, roughly 2.5 million tons of coal were mined, opposed to just over 38,000 tons in 2014 at the time of publication (Lowrey). In many ways, eastern Kentucky's large unskilled labor force and inability to replace the once-dominant industry resembles cotton production in Alabama until the mid-twentieth century and it is easy to understand how these regions have been unable to raise their quality of life.

That James Agee's and Walker Evans's project in 1930s Alabama could be retraced and reinvestigated fifty years later and remain relevant in the 21st century, shows not only the quality of their project, but also the lasting importance of examining persisting poverty in the poorest regions of the United States like rural Alabama where the descendants of Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods families live. It also shows the prevailing conservative political rhetoric of the New Gilded Age seen in *And Their Children After Them*, which thrives among white, rural voters in these impoverished regions. The large social and electoral success of conservative politics with this demographic depends on established cultural narratives like rugged individualism; denies the potential for the federal government to reduce poverty and promote lasting economic growth; has effectively silenced former champions of the middle and working-class Americans like public unions; and has co-opted populist rhetoric to appeal to socially conservative voters, while pitting their economic interests against them and instead championing the economic interests of wealthy Americans in both rhetoric and policy. Despite the systemic, continued poverty in many regions of the country, *Let Us Now*

Praise Famous Men and its successor, *And Their Children After Them* each show the inherent ability for each human being to achieve a remarkable potential and the Great Recession, while intensifying income inequality in the United States, in recent years has also begun to ignite a growing emphasis on reducing poverty and providing economic mobility to those in poverty in the 21st century.

4.

The "We" Trope and Voicing the Voiceless: *12 Million Black Voices* and *To Have and Have Not*

> *These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power for plans like those of 1917 that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.*
>
> —President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7 April 1932

> *In any case, as far as the future is concerned, when one writes, as critic or as author, all necks are on the line.*
>
> —Toni Morrison, 7 October 1988

As its title borrows a line from Langston Hughes's "Let America be America Again," this project aims to voice the voiceless during the Great Depression and while texts like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* focus singularly on the white working class, Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* presents a narrative of African-American history and experience from the slave trade into the time of its publication in 1941. *12 Million Black Voices*, however, does not simply document African-American poverty during the Depression, but provides an underrepresented account that reads like an oral history combining empirical statistics with a personal, almost atemporal tone. Wright self-consciously inverts the "We" trope seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and as I discuss later in this chapter, Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, by referring almost exclusively to African Americans, past and present, with the third-person plural tense. Wright also specifically addresses the reader with the second person singular, "you," signifying an intended, and almost exclusively, white audience. We see this appropriation of author, subject, and audience in the first sentence of the text: "Each day when *you* see *us* black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, *you* usually take *us* for granted and think *you* know *us*, but *our* history is far stranger than *you* suspect, and *we* are not what *we* seem" [my emphases] (10). With regard to the "We" trope, Jeff Allred argues about *12 Million Black Voices*: "Likewise, and more radically, it figures readers as pupils, insisting on their blinkered relationship to blackness and demanding that they recognize African Americans as a collectivity on the national and international stage" (134). Wright's text voices the diverse experience of African Americans in the early 20th century with regard to age, profession, class, and location. Though he recognizes a black middle class, he argues that "those few Negroes who have lifted themselves, through personal strength, talent, or luck, above the lives of the fellow blacks" (xx) are rare exceptions, too few in number, and can reach only as high as the middle class. Despite being written by one of the most significant American writers of the 20th century, however, Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* has lacked the voice of his other works like *Native Son*, whose massive success in 1940 prompted Viking Press to solicit what became *12 Million Black Voices* the following year (Bradley xvi), or his autobiographical *Black Boy*.

12 Million Black Voices also uses photography to supplement its text including photographs from Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, who like Richard Wright, also worked in the Works Progress Administration. Wright is in conversation with New Deal programs and their influence among African Americans, while also dealing with heavily institutionalized racism before the Civil Rights Movement that often deprived black Americans of such relief. As Wright describes in *12 Million Black Voices*, again invoking a subversion of the white "We" trope: "We hear that the government want to help us, but we are too far down at the bottom of the ditch for the fingers of government to reach us" (48). Wright raises issues similar to those in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* like tenant farmers being unable to receive certain benefits, despite their extreme poverty, because they were technically employed. David Bradley writes with regard to African Americans and New Deal programs:

> Theoretically, the relief was granted equally. In fact, it was created in the racist image of American society. Under the National Industrial Recovery Act, for example, cost-of-living standards were established which discriminated against groups in which blacks were most likely to be found, and in such industries as steel, laundry and tobacco, black workers lower minimum wages than whites (xii-xiii).

Bradley also writes, praising the efficacy of certain elements of the New Deal: "The segregated Civilian Conservation Corps put 200,000 black teenagers to work, and gave them a basic education and black supervisors as role models," while also praising the Works Progress Administration for constructing "black hospitals, college buildings and playgrounds" (xiii). While navigating the federal government's racialized response to the

Depression, Wright's tone remains optimistic throughout the text, celebrating the perseverance of the people whose experience he has chronicled and that gradual progress will continue.

12 Million Black Voices is divided into four parts: "Our Strange Birth" provides a narrative of the African slave trade; the aptly–titled "Inheritors of Slavery," focuses on tenant farming in the South; "Death on City Pavements" details the Great Migration and voices systemic discrimination against urban African Americans in Northern cities; and the shorter part, "Men in the Making" looks toward the coming decades, anticipating better opportunity for African Americans. "Inheritors of Slavery" is the longest section, and in many instances, reflects the findings of James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. While both texts were published in 1941, Agee's and Evans's final product was five years in the making and is a much longer, more detailed project than Wright's and has been more widely read and has received more scholarly attention. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s almost singular focus on white tenant farmers has also, presumably helped give it initial precedence over Wright's text despite Wright's greater literary stature. *12 Million Black Voices* gives a voice to the millions of black tenant farmers, who constituted a majority of tenant farmers in the 1930s South, and were omitted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Keeping in mind that Agee and Evans were prohibited from documenting African Americans in their original reporting for the *Fortune* article, Dale Maharidge writes with regard to this drastic racial exclusion:

> When the *Fortune* magazine editors sent James Agee to do his story on tenantry, they always made clear that they didn't want it to include blacks; blacks had always been poor and were expected always to be poor. Their poverty was seen as

> a dog-bites-man story. Besides, poverty is unpleasant. Indeed, few editors wanted to publish stories about white sharecroppers (70).

Wright refuses the perceived inevitability of African-American poverty that Maharidge recalls of the 1930s, looking instead to the future with optimism. While one could argue that their ultimate publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* did not have the same explicit constraints as the initial *Fortune* article, one must remember that Agee and Evans concluded their research in August 1936 and that the omission reflects the publishers more than Agee and Evans themselves. Agee's writing indeed shows empathy and reverence toward black tenant farmers he encounters as well as strong guilt for the social mores dictating his white privilege and black subservience in a deeply racist society. In a chapter titled, "Near a Church," Agee and Evans photograph a church building and are discovered by a 'young negro couple," which prompts the reporters to feel "in spite of our knowledge of our own meaning, ashamed and insecure in our wish to break into and possess their church" (Agee, Evans 36). In "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," Paula Rabinowitz writes in reference to this and another brief exchange with black tenant farmers:

> In each case, Agee tries to dislodge the meaning and power of his class and race and gender, desperately trying to communicate through looks and slight gestures that he is not like the white southern male landowners who represent power and authority for the poor white and black tenants; however, he shows these attempts at camaraderie as futile and even as destructive and dangerous for each group of people.

Despite Agee’s and Evans’s intentions, however, their omission provides an interesting context for Wright to voice a collective African-American experience. Jeff Allred notes George Natanson’s argument that Wright’s “conceit of the African American multitude as a ‘we’ narratable by himself places Wright in a position analogous to white oppressors (139). Wright far from appropriates his voice as an exclusive account, though he does write with personal authority and experience as noted by the similarities between his biography and the issues he traces in *12 Million Black Voices* as I later discuss. While important to recognize it in its own merits and not as a supplementary text, *12 Million Black Voices* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* mirror each other in technique and genre as they incorporate reporting, lyricism, and include photographs. This hybrid genre documents and personalizes the living conditions of, in Wright’s case, poor African Americans for, at the time of publication, his presumably white audience. Wright’s text, however, intersperses its photographs throughout the text in a manner that converses with and reflects Wright’s narrative more closely than Evans’s uncaptioned photos do with Agee’s writing. While Walker Evans’s photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are largely portraits of tenant farmers, their living conditions, and innocuous shots of downtown areas in rural Alabama, the photography in *12 Million Black Voices* shows black tenant farmers planting and harvesting cotton by hands and with mules; features a haunting photograph of a lynching; and a farm house in flames with black families watching nearby. The photography removes abstraction and helps familiarize the experience of African Americans in the South for white readers.

In his account of tenant farming in the South, Wright refers to the overrepresentation of African Americans in a system contingent upon keeping its workers in extreme poverty: “More than one-half of us black folk in the United States are tillers of soil and three-fourths of those of us who till the soil are sharecroppers and day laborers” (31). Wright also echoes both Marx and Agee as he notes the tenant farming agreement as a “new kind of bondage” (36) and “Inheritors of Slavery” further reveals the parallel between slavery and tenant farming in the Jim Crow South. *12 Million Black Voices* notes the total political and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans, as some own small shops, implicitly in segregated areas with predominately-black customers, but none own modes of production or industrial capital. In helping voicing an African-American collective “We,” Wright looks not only at social problems, but also offers basic prescriptions that would alleviate this marginalization—primarily greater potential for black inclusion in civil society. Wright writes: “And we cannot fight back; we have no arms; we cannot vote; and the law is white. there are no black policemen, black justices of the peace, black judges, black juries, black jailers, black mayors, or black men anywhere in the government of the South” (43). While Wright addresses many similar issues as Agee—the necessity to have large families to provide labor and inferior funding for segregated schools—Wright describes racial tension and hostility between landowners and laborers. While there is a rare possibility for white farmers to finish a season having earned money, it is removed from transactions between white landowners and black tenant farmers. Black tenant farmers also receive significant animosity from poor whites who are “eager to form mobs” (43) while lynching is not infrequent. It is often in relation to economic circumstance, with fearful, antagonistic poor whites as the perpetrators, which further delegitimizes the sympathetic white, everyman “We” trope seen in the literature of the Great Depression.

In his section titled, “Death on City Pavements,” Wright moves beyond the South’s rural poverty to Northern cities in a manner that is in conversation with the Great Migration preceding the Great Depression in search of better economic opportunity, more political enfranchisement, and less violent racism. *12 Million Black Voices* further subverts the “We” trope, which is generally focused on the pastoral, in its shift to urban areas. As eco-critic Lawrence Buell writes in *The Environmental Imagination*:

> Nature has long been reckoned a crucial ingredient of the American national ego. Ever since an American literary canon began to crystallize, American literature has been considered preoccupied with country and wilderness as setting, theme, and value in contradistinction to society and the urban, notwithstanding the sociological facts of urbanization and industrialization (33).

There is not significant focus of nature or land as a setting in *12 Million Black Voices* and Wright exchanges the reverence for the tenant farmers’ living conditions and persistent work ethic for greater personal identification with urban African Americans who typically have jobs in cities working, for example, in kitchens or as housekeepers. Wright celebrates the collective African-American travel North and a greater possibility for entry into the middle class, noting that Harlem’s black population doubled between 1900 and 1920 and posits: “Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city” (93). The movement northward also reflects Wright’s personal migration. Jennifer Jensen Wallach notes in *Richard Wright: From Black Boy to World Citizen*, Wright’s leaving his Natchez, Mississippi home for Memphis in 1925 and for Chicago two years later: “His flight from the South—for he self-consciously saw himself as nothing short of a refugee—was but a tiny tremor in an ongoing seismic population shift”

(34). Wallach also notes Wright's brief involvement with the Communist Party USA and that he published poems in proletarian publications like *Left Front* and *New Masses* (50) while in Chicago before leaving for New York in 1937 (59). While Wright experienced greater intellectual freedom, less racial intimidation, and less segregation of public spaces than he did in the South, Wallach's biography notes that Chicago nonetheless "was characterized by rigid residential segregation" (40) and life for African Americans in New York was largely the same: "High unemployment, lack of educational opportunity, exorbitant prices for food and other basic necessities, and police brutality were characteristics of life in Harlem" (62). This somewhat improved, though still highly marginalized status of African Americans predominates Wright's discussion of urban experience in "Death on City Pavements."

Wright invokes colloquial speech to describe "Lords of the Land" and "Bosses of the Buildings" who own modes of production and control an enormous pool of unskilled, low-wage laborers. Wright characterizes systemic racial oppression: "The Bosses of the Buildings feed upon the Lords of the Land, and the Lords of the Land feed upon the 5,000,000 landless poor whites and upon us, throwing to the poor whites the scant solace of filching from us 4,000,000 landless blacks what the poor whites themselves are cheated of in this elaborate game" (35). Wright more specifically describes the urban housing arrangement euphemistically known as a "kitchenette" in which white "Bosses of the Buildings," who benefit financially from housing segregation, charge black tenants higher rent for smaller apartments despite white tenants systematically receiving higher wages (104). As Jeff Allred notes that Wright is writing largely to a white audience, in "Death on City Pavements," his readership is further separated from everyday black life in American cities: white readers might have an general understanding of working conditions for African-American laborers in the South, but are insulated from the housing discrimination in Northern cities due to segregation. Pairing Wallach's biography of Wright with his own writing in *12 Millions Black Voices* also shows the racial disparity in the job market. Wallach writes that African Americans were "lured northward by job made suddenly available by the onset of World War I (34), while Wright notes only years later that this economic opportunity was short-lived and reserved primarily for white workers:

> During the years following the First World War a depression grips the nation and the poor white workers, frantic and embittered, begin to push us out of our jobs. We can be waiters no longer, for the Bosses of the Buildings, to appease the unrest of the white workers, grant them the honor of serving tables in many hotels and cafés (122).

In the concluding section, "Men in the Making," Wright uses gendered language both to lament the wasted potential of millions of black Americans in a racially oppressive, self-defeating society, but also signals a possibility for this group to transcend poverty when allowed representation in public institutions and in economic ownership, and implicitly, invoking the "We," that this inclusion, rather than continued discrimination, is inevitable.

While one does not generally think of race as a prominent thematic issue in Ernest Hemingway's fiction, *To Have and To Have Not* features a significant number of characters of color that are oppressed during the Great Depression, but also implicitly remain in the periphery of Hemingway's narrative. Hemingway also explores ways in which his white protagonist, Harry Morgan, who has suffered financially as a result of the

Depression, can use his racial position of power to control and even profit from other who are poorer and more oppressed than he is due to racial disenfranchisement. In many ways, *To Have and Have Not* is represented within Ernest Hemingway's body of work similar to other writing involving the Great Depression within the larger context of early 20th century literature: at best, its importance is secondary to the Modernist aesthetic and war fiction. *To Have and Have Not*, perhaps better known as the 1944 film of the same name starring Humphrey Bogart and written for the screen by William Faulkner, also represents a secondary status within Hemingway's fiction in subject matter and as one of his few novels to take place in the United States. As Harry Morgan navigates the route from Key West to Cuba by ship, *To Have and Have Not* confronts themes of a devaluation of life and the relative nature of morality with regard to economic circumstance, though echoing the white, everyman "We" trope. The novel's negative treatment of race, however, adds to both of these themes and implores the reader to examine its datedness as a work of Great Depression literature. For this reason, I have included Toni Morrison's discussion of Hemingway's novel in her book of criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* at length, which I posit is necessary for a responsible reading of *To Have and Have Not*. In spite of its problematic racial attitudes and portrayals, relative obscurity, and datedness as a literary text, *To Have and Have Not* has the merits of being an important novel and remains relevant in the context of studying the 1930s.

To Have and Have Not begins by presenting the reader with the Great Depression's devastation to its protagonist and his family and shortly after, it opens into the familiar contradiction in the study of Depression-era literature: Harry Morgan must earn money by smuggling people and goods in and out of the country at the risk of being arrested by a government that cannot provide a favorable economic climate or guarantee its promises of shared prosperity and economic opportunity. Morgan succinctly characterizes this double bind: “What’s worse trouble you going to get in than you’re in now? What the hell worse trouble is there than starving?” (98). Morgan has exhausted all of his options and when confronted with this choice, he engages in it begrudgingly and out of desperation. In fact, the real motivator for Morgan is not specifically self-interest, but providing for his family, whom the reader sees little of during the novel. The basic need for Morgan and his wife and children to eat, figures prominently throughout the novel and remains the only motivation for him to continue sailing from Key West to Cuba. Morgan does not earn large amounts of money in his illegal shipping of immigrants and goods either: he simply earns what he needs literally to stay alive. While Morgan feels trapped by societal forces with regard to making money illegally and the need to make ends meet for his family, he also feels enormous pressure from multiple angles in his illegal shipping: Morgan shows enormous distrust toward Mr. Sing, who persuades him to transport Asian immigrants and is frequently at risk of being caught by U.S. government authorities with the consequence of a ten-year prison sentence. He also must remain mindful of a group of Cubans who do not hesitate to kill those whom they cannot trust. While some readers could view Morgan as an immoral figure for deliberately and egregiously breaking the law, Hemingway presents him as acting similarly to many other characters in Depression literature: doing something unfavorable because it is financially imperative and the best option possible for survival.

Like in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the general view that *To Have and Have Not* takes toward government is that it is more preoccupied with punishing those who break the law out of necessity than improving the economic climate or helping people find work and relief. It is an entity to avoid rather than a source of help or trustworthiness. The reader sees the extent to the government's targeting of Morgan when Captain Willie tells him: "I got a guy here on board some kind of stool from Washington. More important than the president, he says. He wants to pinch you. He thinks you're a bootlegger" (83). *To Have and Have Not* views the government's response to the Great Depression as counterproductive as it is aggressively aims to use its funds to prosecute people like Morgan, while its efforts to end the crisis are impotent. This response reaffirms the perception that the economic and political system in place insulated those with wealth and power and punished the average citizen. Morgan characterizes this view of government familiar to Depression-era literature:

> Look at me. I used to make thirty-five dollars a day right through the season taking people out fishing. Now I get shot and lose an arm, and my boat, running a lousy load of liquor that's worth hardly as much as my boat. But let me tell you, my kids ain't going to have their bellies hurt and I ain't going to dig sewers for the government for less money than will feed them. I can't dig now anyway. I don't know who made the laws but I know there ain't no law that you got to go hungry (96).

While Morgan's actions are illegal, Hemingway adds a perspective that is sympathetic to the average person willing to risk his well-being and sense of morality in order to survive.

Hemingway's novel also shows dehumanization of the individual during the Great Depression, which occurs on several accounts. In a more figurative sense, the reduction of human life occurs as the novel overwhelmingly takes the view that during the Depression, the value of certain goods exceeded that of people. Morgan's boat represents his capital as well as seemingly his only value as a person as he says at the beginning of the novel: "I make my living with the boat. If I lose her, I lose my living" (4). There is no separation between his worth as a person and what he owns: both Morgan and the other characters of the novel determine his value entirely upon economic output. As is the case with his capital, the value of Morgan's product also outweighs the importance of his life. Wesley, the only black character in the novel given a name, asks: "Ain't a man's life worth more than a load of liquor?" to which Morgan answers "No. They take the liquor and the boat and you go to jail" (69). In this context, Wesley's and Morgan's questioning of the value of human life refers to the American authorities, but this type of thinking applies to any context of the novel. The government, businessmen, people working on the black market, and ordinary workers like Morgan each recognize the universality of the decreased value of the individual.

This devaluation of the individual continues more literally as Morgan and Mr. Sing treat the Asian immigrants as a commodity in terms of their dehumanizing mode of transportation from which Morgan and Sing will profit. Because of their race and extremely low social status, they are entirely dispensable and there is a complete lack of concern if any of them are to die while travelling to Florida. The reader sees such dehumanization through Morgan's racist language when he gives the instruction as the immigrants arrive on his boat:

> One Chink is going to bring those twelve out. He's going to give me some money at the start. When they're all on board, he's going to give me some more money. When you see him start to hand me money the second time you put her ahead and hook her up and head her out to sea. Don't you pay any attention to what happens (47).

This represents a large hypocrisy for Morgan. He recognizes that the economic conditions have diminished the inherent value of the individual as he is a victim of the Depression, but reminiscent of poor whites in *12 Million Black Voices* who are violent toward and take the jobs of African Americans, his relative sense of racial power in this setting allows him unequivocally to become an oppressor. The desperation for money and food promotes opportunism and the widespread continuation of oppressing other people. In this respect, the forces that reduce Morgan's sense of worth also cause him to perpetuate this mistreatment. Those involved in the illegal shipping of immigrant and goods recognize both their lessened place in society and that they are powerless to change it.

Due to the illegal nature of the action in *To Have and Have Not*, it is easy to understand that Harry Morgan would get shot and lose his arm, which represents a very literal and corporeal deterioration as well as a type of castration. As someone whose profession involves manual labor, it removes Morgan's agency, much of his ability to work, and a sense of masculinity while instead, giving him and his peers a defeatist approach toward trying to survive the Depression. This violence as a result of economic conditions happens elsewhere in the novel. Where there is murder in *All the King's Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Of Mice and Men* its motivation is generally personal and specific to another character. In *To Have and Have Not*, violence and murder are systematic and done in haste. Although Morgan gets shot in the arm, he is not innocent of the violence in this novel as he kills Mr. Sing with the relativistic motivation to "keep from killing twelve other Chinks" (55). Hemingway makes the efficacy of this murder quite ambiguous and it seems little more than another instance of needless violence. It is also one of the more significant instances in which Hemingway blurs the virtue of an arguably upright character and forces the reader ponder the relativity of morality inherent in an economic and social climate like the Great Depression. Through this novel, the reader sees that the Great Depression has reduced human life to subjectivity and this violence punctuates the paradigm of the oppressed becoming the oppressor. It also reflects a sort of everyman figure's fear, uncertainty, and willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to keep himself alive.

This not uncommon type of racial characterization and removal of voice necessitate *12 Million Black Voices*' place in the study of Great Depression literature and in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison reflects on Hemingway's use of race in *To Have and Have Not*, pushing back against Morgan's intended status as a sympathetic everyman. She writes: "My interest in Ernest Hemingway becomes heightened when I consider how much apart his work is from African-Americans" (69). There are, of course, African-American, Asian, and Cuban characters in the novel, but their roles are largely periphery: few are given names or the ability to communicate in a substantive manner and they are presented largely in negative stereotypes. There is excessive and consistent use of racial epithets for African-American and Asian characters in this novel, which present-day readers find appalling and the racism in *To Have and Have Not* also represents its most significant form of dehumanization. Morrison's primary concern with regard to race in the novel is its treatment of African-American characters and the use of the term "nigger." She argues that if Harry Morgan, rather than the narrator, were to address Wesley with the word "nigger," he would no longer be a character with which the reader could sympathize. Morrison further notes that it is only after Morgan apologizes to Wesley, and Wesley acknowledges and accepts an inferior status, that Morgan can, and freely does, refer to him with this epithet. She also argues that the word, for Hemingway "occupies a territory between man and animal and thus withholds specificity even while marking it" (71). The same dehumanization can be said of Asian characters as Morgan frequently says the term "chink" and describes Mr. Sing as "the smoothest-looking thing" he had ever seen (30). Whether intentionally used to reflect racial attitudes of the time or not, the racism in *To Have and Have Not* marks a parallel to Steinbeck's use of animal metaphors in *Of Mice and Men* to convey a removal of humanity from the characters.

As the racism in *To Have and Have Not* signifies its most notable form of dehumanization, Hemingway's treatment of race from the perspective of a reader in the 21st century is likewise the most significant deterrent from Harry Morgan's status as a generally sympathetic character in the novel. The obvious difference between this significant moral compromise, opposed to Morgan's other moral ambiguities, however, is that the Great Depression did not play a role in Morgan's racism as it did in his use of violence, and violation of the law. It is not a quality that can be dismissed, and for many readers, it is not forgivable. Such instances of racism further reveal why *To Have and Have Not* exists at the periphery of Hemingway's work as well as Great Depression literature and in many ways, it makes the novel extremely dated nearly eighty years after its initial publication. Morrison does not argue, however, that this invalidates it as important literature. Rather, she offers sarcastic, though somewhat genuine praise for Hemingway's "compellingly" writing "about what it was to be a white male American" (90). Toni Morrison also acknowledges Morgan's laudable qualities in that he represents "the classic American hero: a solitary man battling a government that would limit his freedom and individuality" (70). The aim of *Playing in the Dark* is not to target any particular author's treatment of race, but to serve as a reminder that "readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes" (91). This presents difficulty in reading *To Have and Have Not*: while on one hand its racism cannot be overlooked, it maintains value through its unintentional portrayal of the ways in which people of color were particularly treated and dehumanized during this time period.

While there are serious considerations to be made with regard to Harry Morgan's treatment of his fellow men and the means by which he survives the Depression. Hemingway implores the reader to question the validity of actively breaking the law, promoting a culture of lawlessness in order to survive, and exhibiting a significant level of racism. While not specifically posited, by omission, the reader comes away from this novel wondering the degree to which these vices perpetuate themselves and appear to make their continuation seem more necessary. While perhaps more subtle in its social or political commentary than other Depression novels, Morgan represents the uncertainty of the time period and the questioning of what had been formerly accepted as cultural truths. With regard to institutions, Hemingway invites the reader to assess the merits of government’s morality: he presents it with a similar level of ambiguity as it persecutes others for what it believes to be wrongdoing, but by not actively seeking to help citizens, it appears to share the lack of virtue. In a time period of drastic, pervasive uncertainty, *To Have and Have Not* provides a compelling, though often problematic, look at the ambiguous nature of morality in this setting and provides important context to American literature in the 1930s.

5.

Great Depression Politics: Opposing Ideologies in *In Dubious Battle* and Concentration of Power in *All the King's Men*

> *Labor doesn't get to win all its arguments, capital doesn't get to. But it's in the tension, it's in the actual fight between the two, that capitalism actually becomes functional, that it becomes something that every stratum in society has a stake in, that they all share.*
>
> —David Simon, 2013

While novels of the Great Depression, and political novels with any lasting value in general, largely operate with narrative subtlety in reference to political and social themes, there is little disguising the political ideology of the "Party" in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* as well as the biographical elements and political implications of Willie Stark's rise to power in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. These two novels complement each other as *In Dubious Battle* deals almost exclusively with working-class characters and *All the King's* Men with a local political elite. They also diverge in their political subject matter as Steinbeck's takes the approach of generalized characters reflecting specific political systems and Warren's operates with more memorable characters in a generic corrupt political setting in an unidentified State in the American South. While Steinbeck argues for valuing human beings over political ideology, Warren, largely omitting the struggle and voice of the everyman during the Depression, shows the consequences of such constitutive neglect.

In what is often called Steinbeck's "Dust Bowl trilogy" written between 1936 and 1939—*In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*—the first of these is the most overtly political as well as the least read and understood of the three. *In Dubious Battle* is heavily steeped in labor culture events during the 1930s as it is based on a composite of a peach strike on the Tagus Ranch in Tulare County, California in August, 1933 and a cotton strike in October of the same year (Benson, *True Adventures* 299). The Party is nearly identical to a 1930s-era American communist organization, to which Steinbeck refers synonymously with "reds." Steinbeck's use of topical events during the Depression, along with the F.B.I. famously investigating him as a "subversive" (Benson 406) that lasted decades, has naturally invited speculation into his own political allegiances. Most scholarship, however, opposes a characterization of the author as a Marxist or socialist and *In Dubious Battle* is far more consequential than a narrative of a labor struggle or a polemical novel celebrating a thinly veiled communist organization. In his seminal 1984 biography, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*, Jackson J. Benson characterizes Steinbeck's relationship with labor struggles less through political conviction, but rather as a source for much needed subject matter that was emerging in his native northern California after he finished writing *Tortilla Flat*. Benson argues that in Steinbeck's 1934 visits to California farms: "although surrounded by the genuine concern of many near him for the misery of the farm worker and migrant, he remained emotionally uninvolved. As usual, he was concerned primarily about his writing" (296). Warren French has also discredited links between Steinbeck and Communism, citing a more explicitly anti-communist letter written by Steinbeck shortly after the completion of the novel: "I don't like communists, either. I mean I dislike them as people" and French characterizes this as "an attitude he maintained throughout his life" (vii).

Rather than a novel sympathetic to Marxist theory, *In Dubious Battle* instead examines the two rising political ideologies of the 1930s that accelerated under the economic conditions of the Great Depression and would characterize the preeminent global political struggles of the 20th century, fascism and communism, while articulating both the conditions that help establish the implementation of these ideologies and the detriments of enforcing them. While the Party unambiguously represents communist organizations, the militarized police force that manipulates the law represents the growing force of fascism in the 1930s. Benson describes the political and social struggle between the two forces:

> Steinbeck deliberately avoids casting his characters in such a heroic mold, and in doing so he makes his story more believable. To recognize the actual heroism of his models would have been impossible—too many Marxist melodramas had been written over the years that automatically cast the labor leaders as heroes and the capitalists as villains. Anything that smacked of this same routine would have been perceived as propaganda (303).

A narrative emerges throughout the novel that shows the eventual convergence of these ideologies as Steinbeck aims to show the detriments of large-scale political institutions and unwavering violent ideological dedication. While the subject matter of *In Dubious*

Battle is certainly political, it is thematically apolitical and arguably even anti-ideological. In an era of mass unemployment, devaluation of people, and a crisis of self-government, *In Dubious Battle* instead aims to guide the reader away from the temptations of destructive ideology and toward a vision of valuing people and community during a decade-long social and economic crisis.

Steinbeck immediately introduces the relationship between fascism and communism with protagonist, Jim Nolan, joining the Party. This entrance is less from political conviction, though not absent of it, but is largely a means to escape the police force's frequent vagrancy charges and physical brutality. Most of the novel is mediated through Jim, who is defined by inexperience, naïveté, and passivity, though it is his mentor in the Party, Mac, who drives most of the action in the novel. Steinbeck uses these traits in his protagonist to distance himself from any personal political allegiance in the novel, while similarly using Doc Burton as an example of affirming humanity in difficult social and economic times. Burton, a major character with the minor role in the conflict of maintaining the health standards for the strikers' camp, transcends the political turmoil and evades Benson's damning interpretation of those affiliated with both sides of the strike. He is the only character in the novel not affiliated with the Party, the labor strike, or actively against it, but is rather a detached observer with nothing at stake in economic terms. While he has the benefit of privileged social status, particularly in comparison to the laborers, Burton simply wants a peaceful resolution to the dispute as well as better working conditions for others. He is also the only character that constructively critiques the strike: its leaders actively discourage attempts to improve it and manipulate the strikers, while opponents of the strike are satisfied only with ending it without any significant financial loss or destruction of property or capital. Both sides primarily represent economic concerns, while Doc's is strictly humanitarian. Doc explains his relationship to the labor strike to Mac:

> Well, you say I don't believe in the cause. That's like not believing in the moon. There've been communes before, and there will be again. But you people have an idea that if you can *establish* the thing, the job'll be done…If you were able to put an idea into effect tomorrow, it would start changing right away. Establish a commune, and the same gradual flux will continue (112).

Doc's says later in the novel: "I don't believe in the cause, but I believe in men" (153) and this apolitical valuation of humanity is the vision Steinbeck aims to articulate in *In Dubious Battle*.

Doc Burton also contributes to Steinbeck's navigation between the two competing political ideologies in his absence later in the novel. After commenting about the futility of the struggle between the workers and the police and his loneliness, Doc disappears for the reminder of the novel, which lends itself to many interpretations. Mac is the first to notice Doc's absence and introduces the possibility that the opponents of the strike have abducted or killed him to weaken the strike and force the camp's shut-down on the basis of poor sanitary conditions. While entirely plausible and even likely, Mac's heated and almost hyperbolic search for Doc can also suggest that he had a role in Doc's absence to motivate the workers' strike and defame the police, given his ease with using the misfortune of his allies to defame the opposition and create momentum for the strike. None of the characters, of course, make this suggestion, but it is at least as likely as either an abduction or even that Doc becomes disillusioned with the two groups and instead elects to leave without telling anyone of his plans. This absence is, however, is a small diversion in the labor strike as Mac quickly abandons his search for Doc. Similarly, Steinbeck crafts the narrative to mimic this lack of concern with the individual, as the novel does not reveal the cause of Doc's absence and instead leads the reader to become more concerned with the climactic action between the laborers and the police, and which, if either, side will prove victorious at the novel's conclusion. This absence represents one of the novel's most significant instances of the degradation of human interests in favor of ideology, perhaps more so than even the police killing Joy earlier in the novel and London during its climax and abrupt, open-ended conclusion. Any of the possible scenarios of Doc's absence reveal the willingness of both the communists as well as the fascist opponents of the strike to use whatever means necessary to advance their ideological interests.

While many similarities between communist organizations and the Party in Steinbeck's novel are obvious, examining the Party's structure and sources of power nonetheless help illustrate its ideological competition with fascism. While proponents of fascism use preexisting institutions like the police force and newspaper publications, the most important tool for members of the Party is their ability to manipulate public opinion and it is a prominent recurrence in *In Dubious Battle*. Mac alludes to this tactic toward the end of the novel:

> They say we play dirty, work underground. Did you ever think, London? We've got no guns. If anything happens to us, it don't get in the newspapers. But if anything happens to the other side, Jesus, they smear it in ink. We've got no money, and no weapons, so we've got to use our heads, London (223).

The police also have advantages of operating openly and creating anti-communist sentiment among the general public, while members of the Party must constantly conceal and deny their affiliation and sympathies. This suppression further prevents large-scale organization even with poor workers who potentially have the most to gain in a labor strike. The reader first sees this manipulation of public opinion as Mac establishes personal credibility and leadership among the workers by delivering a child at the apple pickers' camp shortly before the strike commences. Mac lies about his medical experience, of which he has none, and asks each of the men to contribute clothing for the newborn child that will later be burned under Mac's false pretense of being unsanitary in order to make them feel invested in the community. While the workers applaud Mac's resourcefulness and calmness under pressure, he privately tells Jim: "Men always like to work together. There's a hunger in men to work together…Most of the time they're suspicious, because every time someone gets 'em working in a group the profit of their work is taken away from them; but wait till they get working for themselves" (49). While this initially appears as a genuinely benevolent effort, as the novel progresses, it becomes obvious that Mac's delivery of the newborn is simply another instance of political theater: all of the workers quickly place trust in Mac immediately after his and Jim's arrival at the camp and Mac is able to establish group of leaders that unilaterally make decisions on behalf of the workers under the illusion of democratic representation.

After Mac persuades local sympathizer, Alfred Anderson and his father to let the striking workers camp on his property, the power structure Mac enacts represents an oligarchy limited to himself, Jim, and London. Borrowing the language and oligarchic power structure of the 1930s-era Soviet Union, Mac forms a Central Committee among the pickers to nominate London as the chairman under the pretense of democratic representation. In *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, historian Shelia Fitzpatrick characterizes the Soviet power structure of the time: “In principle, the Soviet Communist Party had no leader. It had only a Central Committee elected by its periodic national congresses of delegates from local party organizations, and three standing bureaus of the Central Committee elected in the same way.” Fitzpatrick also points out the process of decision-making by a “smaller group selected by Stalin who met privately in an apartment or in Stalin’s office in the Kremlin” that established policy with “signals” that could come in the form of speeches or newspaper editorials (24-5). This group also had the benefit of being “more easily repudiated and reinterpreted than explicit policy statements” (27). Such a structure in *In Dubious Battle* effectively distances its leaders from the pickers’ opinion and shows the degree to which the men are dispensable, especially as the majority of the workers are unnamed in the text. The Central Committee also relieves Mac, Jim, and London of responsibility, while allowing greater influence over the workers. The reader sees Mac’s manipulation both of public opinion and his role within the oligarchy as Joy, one of the striking workers, dies at the hands of the police. Mac sees this death as having the same potential to provide him with power within the group as delivering a new life earlier in the novel: rather than signaling the loss of a worker and supporter of the strike, Joy’s death is instead an opportunity to increase the enthusiasm of the other workers and to rally support of the cause among the general public. Mac’s use of the word “speech” rather than “eulogy” reaffirms this dehumanization, while helping the strike gain momentum. It also helps reveal his motives for selecting London to lead the strike in an official manner as he is easily manipulated and lacks Mac's galvanizing charisma. London, who admits that his oratory skills are lacking, falters and defers the speech to Mac who predictably rouses the crowd and hastily abandons the funeral in order to parade through the town to gain support for the strike.

Steinbeck invites the comparison of the police force to fascism in Mac's letter to Harry Nilson, an organizer in the Party, in which Mac writes that the "valley is organized like Italy" (220). Steinbeck is careful not to invoke a comparison to Nazism or genocide, but rather a vision of fascism that subverts democratic processes for the benefit of the powerful; glorifies violence; uses already-existing political institutions giving an air of legitimacy; denies the role of the individual in order to exercise extreme nationalism; and revolves around a central dictatorial figure. With regard to subverting democracy in order to serve the interests of the powerful few, the police force's actions in *In Dubious Battle* closely mirrors prescriptions of fascism as outlined in Mussolini's "The Doctrine of Fascism." The proper interests of the individual must coincide with the State, as Mussolini argues: "For Fascism the State is absolute, individuals and groups relative. Individuals and groups are admissible in so far as they come within the State" (27). The police do not enforce laws or protect individuals, but their only consistency is serving the interests of the State and the few capitalists who own the apple orchards, which is at odds with the interests of the mass of workers. In addition to frequently issuing vagrancy charges, having the ability to fix a jury to side with the State, and upholding unreasonable demands for health conditions at the strikers' camp, the police use coercion to advance the interests of the State. As the supervisor of the police force tells Mac:

> Then we kick you off this place in half an hour. Then we blacklist the whole damn bunch of you. You can't get go any place; you can't get a job any place. We'll have five hundred deputy sheriffs if we need 'em. That's the other side. We'll see you can't get a job this side of hell (102).

Steinbeck portrays the police force in this novel as unambiguously defending commerce and the State rather than the public, and willing, and perhaps eager, to use force to accomplish its motives.

While Steinbeck conveys a lack of humanity among the scabs, members of the police force, and the opponents of the strike by withholding names of members in the collective group, the new president of the Fruit Growers' Association is the only opponent of the strike who is identified, though only with his surname, Bolter. This singular leader's seemingly unlimited potential to use force and his overwhelmingly nationalistic rhetoric closely aligns with the fascistic notion of a charismatic individual leader like Mussolini, Hitler, or Franco. Bolter appears only once in the novel, in a brief attempt to resolve the strike by offering Mac, Jim, and London half the demanded wage, though he presumably orders much of the violence and destruction of property seen later. Bolter tells the triumvirate leading the strike: "We don't want to fight you men. We want you to come back to work. But if we do have to fight, we have weapons…The citizens are pretty tired of all this riot. And of course we may have to call troops, if we need them" (195). As an ally of the State and its interests of providing it with revenue and maintaining strict order among the general public, Bolter assumes a higher stature and commands more authority than anyone in the police force. His singular, brief appearance in the novel also signifies a distance he enjoys from violence between the police and strikers.

Bolter and those he commands operate with an understanding that not only is violence justifiable, but in continuing with their adhesion to fascism, it is glorified. There are instances of police brutality and killings throughout the novel, though the most destructive act the fascists take is burning the camp on Anderson's property, which serves as a base for the strike. Such destruction falls within the fascist ideology as Mussolini writes: "War alone keys up all human energies to their maximum tension and sets the seal of nobility on those peoples who have the courage to face it. All other tests are substitutes which never place a man face to face with himself before the alternative of life or death" (19). The police force deliberately commits the crime of arson in order to dismantle the organization of its political opponents while also destroying farm equipment and crops during an agricultural strike and an economic depression. It also takes authority and owns a positive narrative for its cause, using violence and intimidation. Mac notes this false narrative authored by the fascists earlier in the novel as he says: "They're the same ones that burned the houses of old German people during the war. They're the same ones that lynch Negroes. They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution" (131). The ownership of cultural and social narratives becomes more consequential and difficult to decipher in the closing pages in the novel, however, as the seemingly disparate forces converge both physically and ideologically.

In the climax of *In Dubious Battle*, the conflict between the workers and the fascists' glorification of violence accelerates and Steinbeck invokes a haunting vision of a fascist mob that denies the individual and achieves collective, state-sanctioned terror. The scene evokes imagery of Nazi marches and Mussolini's blackshirts as Steinbeck writes: "The crowd was changing rapidly. The eyes of the men and women were entranced. The bodies weaved slowly, in unison. No more lone cries came from the lone men. They moved together, looked alike. The roar was one voice, coming from many throats" and he further characterizes the mob as a "silent and deadly efficient machine (247).

The fascists predictably reach a totality of denying the individual in favor of the group, though Mac and the laborers match the fascists' fervor and desire for violence as Mac unequivocally repudiates his earlier speech about men hungering to work together to reach a common, productive goal after delivering a baby at the strikers' camp. Steinbeck conversely shows the destruction of dehumanized, violent men controlled by ideology. When describing the mob, Mac says: "It *is* a big animal. It's different from the men in it. And it's stronger than all the men put together. It doesn't want to same things men want—it's like Doc said—and we don't know what it'll do (249). The novel's open ending with the battle between both forces advancing further as the police kill London not only shows the dubiousness of the competing ideologies without hyperbole, but also anticipates the ideological conflicts of the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War both in the years after the novel's publication and the Cold War of the following decades.

Often called the great American political novel, Robert Penn Warren's 1946 *All the King's Men* departs from Steinbeck's ideological struggle, though is no less thematically consequential than *In Dubious Battle*, and presents a narrative, more familiar to readers in the 21st century, of individual power, corruption, and social class set in the Great Depression. Since its initial publication, *All the King's Men* has been assumed to have taken much influence from Huey "Kingfish" Long, populist Governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and United States Senator from 1932 until his death in 1935. In his 1963 essay, "*All the King's Men*: The Matrix of Experience," Robert Penn Warren states: "When I am asked how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30s, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and if Huey Long had not existed, the novel would never have been written" (54). Despite this parallel between Long and the novel's protagonist, Willie "Boss" Stark, Robert Penn Warren has long denied the relationship between the work of fiction and the politics of 1930s Louisiana, which has made its place in Southern literature more ambiguous and intensified the interest surrounding the novel. Because of its entrenchment in the setting and culture of the American South, *All the King's Men* has been placed almost exclusively within the Southern canon: it is a hallmark of Southern literature and while it has a uniquely American perspective, it is a novel that cannot be separated from its setting. *All the King's Men* likewise relies upon the time period of the 1930s and again, could not have the same effect had it been placed in another era. Warren's commentary on class structures is patent and among the most dynamic in all of American literature. While most Depression literature is told from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, what truly sets *All the King's Men* apart from novels during the Depression is its exploration of an impoverished, rural setting through the lens of an elite class. Warren's Southern influence diversifies Depression literature in a significant way and the authority and perspective with which he writes gives the novel an irrefutable place not only among Southern literature, but also the literature of the Great Depression.

While novels set in the Great Depression generally involve the struggles of ordinary people, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* focuses almost exclusively on an elite, influential, and insular social class of people from an unnamed State in the American South. The nucleus of power in *All the King's Men* exists with the protagonist, Boss Stark, Adam Stanton, an influential doctor, and the narrator, Jack Burden, whose allegiance shifts between his employer, Stark, and his childhood friend, Stanton. While the reader sees the novel through the lens of Burden, his narration remains largely detached from its action. Burden rather gives *All the King's Men* a moral distance without aligning himself too strongly to any of the competing forces of power in the novel**.** Warren uses this concentration of power within the larger context of the Great Depression to show the degree to which the wealthy controlled the inner workings of government and recklessly jeopardized the well-being of the everyday citizen without personal consequence.

Boss Stark, as a politician, thrives as a larger-than-life figure and is one of the most dynamic and memorable characters in all of American literature. He is the only member of the elite class in *All the King's Men* who was not born into wealth and this exclusion fuels his desire for power and social prestige. In contrast to the general disillusionment surrounding capitalism and social mobility during the Depression, Warren uses Boss Stark to argue for the potential of upward mobility, which raises the stakes for the reader when considering the similarities between Stark and the biography of Huey Long. The reader sees a concrete glimpse into his upbringing as he explains in a concession speech after his first run for Governor:

> Get ready to bust your sides for it sure is a funny story. It's about a hick. It's about a red-neck, like all of you all, if you please. Yeah, like you…He knew what it was to get up before day and get cow dung between his toes and feed and slop and milk before breakfast so he could set off by sunup to walk six miles to a one-room, slab-sided schoolhouse (136).

Warren does not directly show any of the Boss's childhood, but one can fairly assume that there is not much, if any, embellishment in this speech, especially considering the poverty in the rural South that the elite classes witness throughout the novel. Despite the charisma and political savvy Stark eventually develops, as a member of the lower class, he is initially ignorant of the ways of the elite and the reader sees this education through Jack Burden. In contrast to Stark, Burden is born into the wealthy, well-connected class: the area in which he grew up is named for his family, his mother has married multiple wealthy men, he had the opportunity to study at Harvard University, and was temporarily enrolled as Ph.D. student in History. Despite Stark's relative lack of formal education, his alignment with Jack Burden helps him achieve social prominence. Warren presents the class disparity between the two both to highlight class differences and to heighten Stark's rise to power. Early in the novel, Burden recalls his introduction to Willie Stark in the humble setting of the back room of Slade's pool hall. Burden describes Stark as not "anything but the County Treasurer of Mason County" (18). He also notes Stark's timidity with public speaking and the inferiority he feels among the elite as a young man from a poor background with virtually no political experience. Burden, as a member of the elite, mocks Stark for his appearance and lack of political instinct:

> You could see Willie standing on a street corner, sweating through his seersucker suit, with his hair down in his eyes, holding an old envelope in one hand and a pencil in the other, working out figures to explain what he was squawking about, but folks don't listen to you when your voice is low and patient and you stop them in the hot sun and make them do arithmetic (91).

In addition to looking upon Stark, initially, as a naïve idealist, Burden also shows his attitude toward the average voter in their state, whom he believes to be unintelligent and disengaged with the political process. Burden does, however, help educate Stark, and in a span of only a few years, he is able to make a remarkable ascent into the elite with immense political power. Through this dichotomy of Burden's and Stark's respective inherited social classes, Warren argues that even those without the advantage of wealth, social connections, or formal education can achieve upward mobility: the requirement for Stark, however, is immersing himself within the class of corrupt, concentrated power and wealth.

While Stark is largely self-educated and is highly driven to succeed, Warren challenges the American narrative of the self-made man with Stark's rise to power and shows the moral compromise that it requires. After Stark loses his first bid for the governorship, he further dedicates himself becoming a high profile lawyer in the State, which gives him the financial resources and the clout to make another run for Governor. The reader sees the Boss's self-sufficiency as he refers to himself in his powerful concession speech that he:

> figured if he wanted to do anything he had to do it himself. So he sat up nights and studied books and studied law so maybe he could do something about

> changing things. He didn't study that law in any man's school or college. He studied it after a hard day's work in the field (136).

After his initial failed run for Governor, Stark's political breakthrough occurs with two events in a short period of time: the first comes as he represents a gang of workmen who were injured on a bridge the State was constructing and the other is due to his involvement in the litigation between an oil company and independent leaseholders in which, according to Burden, he "saw folding money for the first time in his life" (145). Not only is Stark undoubtedly an opportunist, but contrary to the image of himself he projects, his political and economic gains are largely due to a fortuitous ability to gain from the success of others. He likewise gives little credit to Jack Burden for educating him in politics and how to interact with wealthy, influential people. It is also worth noting that Stark's initial presence on a statewide political stage is also based upon luck and his former political naïveté rather than on his personal merit as he was personally chosen by high-ranking State official to divide the vote of the incumbent Governor's challenger. For Warren, social mobility is a sort of enigma and Stark is the only character in the novel that truly achieves it in an upward form. Warren directly confronts the idealized notion of hard work and ingenuity as concomitants for financial success. Rather, he views this narrative with immense skepticism, as seen with how Stark uses his biography to seduce voters and give them false hope of better economic conditions. It is also a tool primarily for the self-gain of the powerful that is particularly elusive for the working class during the Great Depression.

Through Adam Stanton, Warren argues the need for the wealthy to use their power to help others, and in many ways, Stanton is a foil to Stark. The reader learns that

Stanton was born into wealth as his father was once the Governor of the State and Stanton likewise grew up with Jack Burden in privilege. While Stark and nearly every character among the elite seek upward mobility and greater social influence for self-gain, Stanton actively seeks to downplay the wealth he was born into in order to devote himself entirely to helping the less fortunate. Burden describes his childhood friend after not seeing him in years as:

> a hot-shot surgeon now, with more folks screaming for him to cut on them than he had time to cut on, and a professor at the University Medical School, and busy grinding out the papers he published in the scientific journals or took off to read at meetings in New York and Baltimore and London (152).

Stanton's social standing and competence in his profession are immediately evident to the reader. His choice to live in a shabby apartment likewise shows the reader his devotion to his profession, helping others, and freedom from frivolous distraction. Warren presents Adam Stanton as the exception to the inherent corruption and selfishness that defines the elite class in *All the King's Men*. He is an exemplar of benevolence in a self-interested setting. Although the novel was published after the Depression ended, his inclusion argues for this class to have played a greater role in addressing the needs of those suffering during this time period. Stanton's role in *All the King's Men*, however, is contingent upon Stark choosing him to run the children's hospital. In this regard, Stanton and Stark heavily rely upon one another's power: Stanton need Stark's political power in order for him to make a greater impact for others and Stark needs Stanton's expertise as a doctor and philanthropist to ensure the success of his political legacy. Although the Boss has the legislative goal to build a massive hospital free of charge for residents of the

State, his motives are not as altruistic as they appear and he is primarily concerned with advancing his power and legacy. By contrast, Adam Stanton expects nothing for his medical help for others. Burden characterizes Stanton's rejection of his inherited wealth and recognition of his ability to alleviate the suffering during the Great Depression: "I used to wonder why he lived the way he did when he must have been having quite a handsome take, but I finally got it through my head that he didn't ask anything from a lot of the folks he cut on" (152). Warren further reveals the separation between a character like Burden and the common person during the Depression, through Burden's bewilderment that Stanton would choose both to live significantly below his means and work to help the less fortunate.

Along with *All the King's Men*'s solidified placement within the Southern canon and as a political novel, it is generally read as an exploration into both the inherent nature for one to become corrupt in search for personal power as well as the consequences of attaining such power. This is especially relevant during the setting of the Great Depression as Stark is a realistic, familiar character that cogently represents power structures in this era. While Warren asserts the ability for one to achieve upward social mobility, he adds that largely requires one to manipulate and cause injury to others. Boss Stark characterizes this traditional interpretation of the novel with his *modus operandi* that appears multiple times in *All the King's Men*: "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the die to the stench of the shroud" (75). Arthur Mizener, likewise offers a common argument of the novel's themes of the ability for power to corrupt the individual:

> Thus, in the confrontation of its two central characters, *All the King's Men* poses what is for Mr. Warren the central problem of existence, the irrepressible conflict between the conception of life that gives action meaning and value and the act of living in the world in which meaning and value have to be realized. This conflict appears unendurable. Yet both Jack Burden, who tries to exist in the conception without accepting the responsibility of action, and Willie Stark, who drifts into acting effectively for its own sake, find it impossible not to know that it must be endured (61).

The Boss's desire for power, even after achieving great social mobility, can be read as a further commentary of American values of upward mobility and self-determinism during the Great Depression. While Warren affirms the possibility of achieving social mobility during the Depression in his portrayal of Willie Stark's rise, he also shows the detriments that result in an individual's unfettered ambition. Stark refers to his unguided search for power and states in reference to the governorship: "Hell a man can lie there and want something so bad and be so full of wanting it he just plain forgets what it is he wants" (116). Stark initially seeks less to become powerful than to prove to himself that he has the intelligence and the fortitude to enter a class to which he had been excluded during his upbringing. The result of his greed for power eventually causes his decline and has calamitous effects for others: while many of Stark's constituents suffer through the Great Depression, most of his action in office involves personal political gain and trying to hide his corruption. Stark's self-interest largely prevents him from helping his constituents by building the children's hospital, which is never constructed by the end of the novel.

Boss Stark's manipulation of others and ability to connect with his everyday constituents becomes evident during his entrance into the novel, which underscores the Governor's near-universal approval among the State's working class and the degree with which Stark can both identify and control it for his own purposes. While stopping at a drug store in Mason City in 1936, a crowd approaches Willie while he makes an elaborate speech about not making a speech. Through his colloquial rhetoric, Stark identifies with the uneducated lower class that makes up his political base and whose interests he claims to represent. Stark says: "But I'm not a politician today. I'm taking the day off. I'm not even going to ask you to vote for me. To tell the God's unvarnished and unbuckled truth, I don't have to ask you (15). He goes on to say: "But I don't expect all of you to vote for me. My God, if all of you went and voted for Willie, what the hell would you find to argue about? There wouldn't be anything left but the weather, and you can't vote on that" (16). In effect, Stark has the approval of the lower class without having enacted any effort to alleviate its suffering in the form of unemployment benefits, welfare, or job creation. Stark's foray into the corruption of politics, however, begins in earnest by employing Jack Burden to find incriminating information about Judge Irwin to use for his political advantage. Stark tells Burden: "Yeah, I'm Governor, Jack, and the trouble with Governors is they think they got to keep dignity. But listen here, there ain't anything worth doing a man can do and keep his dignity" (58). This revelatory statement reflects the novel's powerful class. Stark is not only aware of his moral shortcoming, but he reflects Warren's larger argument that the injury of others is a necessary part of obtaining power and elevating one's social status. Judge Irwin, another major character in the novel, is likewise no exception from the nearly universal corruption of the elite. When

Burden researches into Irwin's past, he learns of Irwin's personal neglect of the lower class for personal gain. This revelation represents a crisis to Burden: not only does he think less of Stark for his eagerness to bring down a political opponent, but he learns that even the man whom he views as "more of a father to me than those men who had married my mother and come to live in Ellis Burden's house" (60-61) is guilty of this same moral shortcoming, which is symptomatic of his social class.

Robert Penn Warren introduces a minor character, Lily Mae Littlepaugh, and contrasts her with Judge Irwin with to reveal the enormous class division during the Depression and the consequences it had on individual level. The reader learns that as a result of Irwin's corruption, Littlepaugh's brother, Mortimer, committed suicide and unlike Irwin who is part of the elite ruling class and has political protection, Lily Mae subsequently lives in poverty and fear. Warren uses Lily Mae to illustrate the consequences of a corrupt ruling class and as the most concrete example of the widespread fear and suffering during the Great Depression. While Mortimer has the honest intention to make Irwin's corruption known, he lacks Irwin's financial and political clout and is threatened. The system in place is designed to reward corruption and prevent any threat to the structure from coming to light. Judge Irwin, however, is an influential political figure, a plantation owner, and a former Attorney General of the State. As the one who violated the law, he is rewarded, while Mortimer dies: Burden learns that Irwin resigned to "become counsel and vice-president for the American Electric Power Company, at a very good figure, $20,000 a year" (329). This outcome reflects the opinion many had toward those who caused the Depression: those who were to blame suffered few, if any consequences and often gained financially, while the people who suffered were uninvolved in its formation. In *The American 1930s: A Literary History*, Peter Conn cites historian, John Garraty's argument that "during the Great Depression, people who had full-time jobs were usually better off, at least economically, than they had been before 1929" (2). Through this development, Warren further argues of the disregard for others inherent in one's rise to financial or political power and to Burden, this marks a validation of Stark's belief that every man, despite appearances of honesty or morality, is conceived in sin and born in corruption.

The most notable example of Stark's loss of honest intentions and ability to be corrupted lies in the State Hospital, which reveals the view toward government during the Great Depression that *All the King's Men* espouses: while it is potentially effective for helping those in need, it instead, often benefits those in power and neglects those who need it most. The Boss intends to build a $6 million complex, which is the centerpiece of his legislative agenda as Governor. The hospital also reaffirms Stark's initial belief of government's ability to help its citizens during the Depression and it reflects his concern for the poor. The conception of the hospital begins as a genuine effort on the part of Stark to use his power as Governor to provide to others what he had been deprived of when he was younger and in a lower social class. Stark promises an institution in which: "Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors and know that all will be done that man can do. To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right" (392). The function of Stark's hospital and the rhetoric with which he presents it closely resemble Huey Long's political slogan of "Every Man a King." Warren's lack of black characters in the novel, especially in a Southern setting, and Stark's populist, lower class political base in the 1930s presents significant ambiguity as to whether or not

Stark's proposed hospital would benefit each of his constituents regardless of race. There are not any notable invocations of race in *All the King's Men* and it is not a subject that characters of either the elite or lower class offer much consideration. The demands of the governorship and the need for Stark both to maintain and expand upon his power as Governor, however, distract him from beginning construction of the hospital. Its purpose shifts from helping the people of the State and toward representing Stark's legacy as Governor and serving as a monument to himself as he will be its namesake. The Boss characterizes his misguided intention and ambition to build the hospital, invoking his folksy, populist language:

> I'm going to build me the God-damnedest, biggest, chromium-platedest, formaldehyde-stinkingest free hospital and health center the All-Father ever let live. Boy, I tell you, I'm going to have a cage of canaries in every room that can sing Italian grand opera and there ain't going to be a nurse hasn't won a beauty contest in Atlantic City and every bedpan will be eighteen-carat gold and by God, every bedpan will have a Swiss music-box attachment to play 'Turkey in the Straw' or 'The Sextet from Lucia,' take your choice (209).

To Stark, the hospital becomes an unrealistic abstraction and significantly diverges from its original intention to provide health care to the State's poor. By the conclusion of the novel, the hospital is never constructed due to contract mismanagement and estrangement between Boss Stark and Adam Stanton and with this failure to enact legislation, Warren argues that the government and the wealthy class that controlled it have severely neglected those who elected them to office in favor of their self-interest.

In contrast to the insular elite social class, there is mention of largely inconsequential characters that make up the lower class, which reveals not only class division but also the elite class's disengagement and contempt toward those who do not share its social prominence. The reader sees the scorn with which those in power direct toward the poor. One instance occurs when Burden encounters a person in poverty whom he describes in relation to his wealthy father:

> An unfortunate is a bum who is fortunate enough to get his foot inside a softy's door and stay there. If he gets a good berth he is promoted from bum to unfortunate. The Scholarly Attorney had, on several occasions before, taken in unfortunates. One unfortunate had popped the organist down at the mission where the Scholarly Attorney operated. Another unfortunate had lifted his watch and Phi Beta Kappa key (294).

This perception of the poor dominates the opinion of the ruling class in *All the King's Men*. Although Adam Stanton does not view those in lower classes this way, Stark frequently shows malevolence toward the poor, though he grew up in poverty and has experienced such hardship. He dehumanizes the poor as a group rather than viewing them as individual people. He makes this explicitly clear toward the middle of the novel, when he tells Byram B. White, his State Auditor: "A fellow like you, fifty years old and gut-shot and teeth gone and never had a dime, if God-Almighty had ever intended you to be rich he'd done it long back" (197) and shortly after, says to Burden: "My God, you talk like Byram was Human! He's a thing! (203). Stark shows no respect to those not in his social class and only views them in terms of his ability to benefit from them. Jack Burden and Willie Stark also frequently demean Stark's driver, Sugar Boy, as evidenced by his nickname, and is a reflection of the simple-mindedness they believe him to have. He is, like many of the lower class, viewed simply in terms of his usefulness to Stark.

The most notable example of degrading those not in the insular elite class occurs with Tiny Duffy, who by virtue of his perceived cluelessness and lack of political threat, is Stark's Lieutenant Governor. Burden introduces Duffy early in the novel: "If the wind was right, you knew he was a city-hall slob long before you could see the whites of his eyes. He had the belly and he sweated through his shirt just above the belt buckle…" (18). Burden also fails to take Duffy seriously because he is merely a Tax Assessor, and as far as the reader knows, this is his only political experience before becoming Lieutenant Governor. While part of the ruling group, there is an unquestionable exclusion of Duffy in the State's governance, which reveals not only Stark's lack of responsibility in governing, but also his manipulation of those in a lower class. Jack Burden describes Duffy and his relationship to Stark: "Tiny Duffy became, in a crazy kind of way, the other self of Willie Stark, and all the contempt and insult which Willie Stark was to heap on Tiny Duffy was nothing but what one self of Willie Stark did to the other self because of a blind, inward necessity" (147). Rather than appointing people whom Stark believes to be competent, Stark selects a Lieutenant Governor on the basis that he serves Stark's simplistic self-interest. This disregard for his constituents has detrimental effects. When Stark is assassinated, Duffy assumes the role of Governor and as someone who has little political knowledge and is believed to be wholly incompetent, he is presumably unable to help the State and its people in a time of economic calamity. In this regard, Tiny Duffy is a symbol like Stark's Children's Hospital of government's inability or lack of desire to serve the interests of the poor as they are left suffering.

All the King's Men is undoubtedly a tragic novel as both Adam Stanton and Willie Stark are killed during its climax, but the real tragedy, however, lies in the elite's unlimited, unused, unconsidered power to alleviate the suffering of the enormous poverty and suffering specific to *All the King's Men*'s time and location. The novel's remarkable realism and verisimilitude illustrate the undeniable similarities between the misuse of power in Warren's Southern State and the ways in which the powerful caused the Great Depression and left others to suffer, while they were protected. Echoing the conclusion of *In Dubious Battle* in which London is killed and the conflict continues and is escalated without a semblance of resolution between the two groups, in the conclusion of *All the King's Men*, the inevitable reaction is to wonder happens to those who must live with the consequences of Stark's governorship that will continue directly for years and indirectly for decades and the same question of the lasting effects of needless suffering must be asked in the study of Great Depression literature.

6.

Depression-Era Poetics: Williams Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes

Like many writers who chronicled the suffering of the Great Depression, William Carlos Williams is often considered primarily as a Modernist poet and is grouped with poets like Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, and the Imagists. His best-known works include “The Red Wheelbarrow,” “This is Just to Say,” and “The Great Figure,” which are notable for their economical use of words and their intense focus on seemingly mundane objects. These early works and his large, late-career poem, *Paterson*, dominate the discussion of Williams’s poetry. Like many in his generation, however, Williams became disillusioned with the potential for art after the destruction of World War I. He “longed for a ‘normalcy’ in which the avant-garde could function as before” (Frail 127) and in this period, Williams began a transformation in his subject matter and an understanding of the necessary function of a poet. He would later say: “The mark of a great poet is the extent to which he is aware of his time and NOT, unless I be a fool, the weight of loveliness in his meters" (141) and in this regard, he focused his attention and creative output toward the dominant social and political issue of interwar America: the Great Depression.

Contrary to popular associations with work, Williams wrote a great deal on everyday life during the 1930s and addresses many familiar themes in Great Depression literature, which include drastic class division and a systemic disregard for the lower class, rural Americans being excluded from the political process, and questioning the very idea of democracy after the stock market crash of 1929. For his skepticism toward cultural narratives like the United States being a nation of social mobility and opportunity, Williams is an essential part of any study of the literature that arose from the Great Depression. Perhaps Williams's most visual representation of hardship during the Great Depression occurs in his poem, "The Yachts," which discusses social mobility in the United States in the form of a race between varying sizes of watercraft. Williams establishes class division in the setting of an "ungoverned ocean" (3) and further notes a "well-guarded arena of open water surrounded by / lesser and greater craft" (12-13). This setting symbolizes the lack of financial regulation that preceded the stock market crash and the upper class's insulation from its effects—a system of inequality in which the highest five percent of the population received about one-third of all personal income (Zinn 386). Williams definitively contends: "Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts / move, jockeying for a start and they / are off' (21-23). With symbolism bordering on allegory, the ocean represents democracy, while the race refers to capitalism. Despite the appearance of the two being compatible, as well as the societal belief that despite economic hardship, social mobility could still be attainable during the Depression, Williams argues that the wealthy will always have an indisputable advantage over the lower classes. It is also important to note that while there are a small number of yachts and many smaller boats, there is not an intermediate size of boats, which signifies the absence of a middle class and large income inequality. By virtue of this disparity, Williams argues that even before the Depression there was never any chance for entry into the upper class, which will instead exert its influence in self-interest and remain protected from economic calamity.

Whereas dehumanization of the lower class is a recurring theme in Great Depression literature, Williams inverts this common conception and uses a material status symbol to represent the elite as something other than human. Much like Steinbeck's use of cars and tractors in *The Grapes of Wrath* to represent landowners and bankers, the symbolic yachts in Williams's poem remove all humanity from the upper class that has been protected from the fallout of the stock market crash. This reductive representation suggests that, as a whole, the wealthy are not capable of experiencing sympathy for the poor. There is little ambivalence in Williams's symbolism and disdain toward the self-interest of the ruling class. As evidenced by the poem's title, the lack of concern for those outside the ruling class is the preeminent social injustice of the time period. Rather than referring to the lower class or the lawless setting in the poem's title, Williams implies that human suffering and poverty are inevitable: the ease with which the ruling class caused the Depression, however, is a more important and constructive focal point for his verse.

While Williams uses a material status symbol to dehumanize the wealthy, the destruction of bodies represents in a more literal sense, the neglected lower class and this representation is reminiscent of Harry Morgan's corporeal deterioration in *To Have and Have Not* as the speaker describes the bodies being: "Broken / beaten, desolate" (31-32).

Not only has the working class experienced economic and physical suffering as well as a lessened sense of self-worth, Williams continues this symbolism to argue that they are unable to change it. Williams uses synecdoche to show the reduction of the working class merely to physical labor, as the bodies are described as: “Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows / Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside. / It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair” (26-27). The great numbers of bodies represent the immensity and duration of suffering in the Great Depression. “The Yachts” argues that the individual’s struggle will largely be forgotten: there is nothing that distinguishes one’s suffering from another’s. “The Yachts” predicts an inability for civil society to learn from the mistakes and wrongdoing that led to the stock market crash of 1929 and it contends that the neglect of the lower class will continue in the future. In this way, Williams’s poem can be read in an identical light from the time of its publication with regard to the Great Recession: it overwhelmingly applies to the current economic climate and is as relevant now as it was during the 1930s.

In his poem, “The Forgotten City,” first published in *Poetry* magazine in September 1939, William Carlos Williams examines the economic devastation of the Great Depression, and in contrast to the clear images in “The Yachts,” he presents an ethereal, unfamiliar setting after a massive and destructive event. Williams chooses the setting of a city to better communicate the fragility of economic prosperity and to illustrate the degree to which such an economy and unequal society are unsustainable. The speaker begins by noting the landscape of the city: “When I was coming down from the country / with my mother, the day of the storm” (1-2) and uses this singular event, resembling a natural disaster, as a metaphor to characterize the stock market crash of

1929. It is also important to recognize the dichotomy of location in this poem: a city setting suggests innovation and a more cultured, civilized society opposed to that of a rural area. There is also a strong connection to time as the speaker reports his findings. Williams is careful not to make the eponymous city sound archaic, but aims for the reader to identify with his chosen setting and to apply the juxtaposition of "the metropolis" and the city where the setting takes place to Depression-era America. The speaker notes: "extraordinary places, as vivid as any / I ever saw" (12-13) yet there is an unfamiliarity between the speaker and his surroundings. This unfamiliarity and detachment from the widespread suffering of the Depression is further noted when the speaker shows his bewilderment, despite his physical proximity to the forgotten city: "I had no idea where I was and promised / myself I would some day go back to study / this curious and industrious people" (22-24). These lines also allude to the uncertainty of what had happened with the stock market crash: nothing like it had happened before and there was no way to truly understand the economic and personal destruction it caused. Such an understanding would require time to pass and distancing oneself from the storm that occurred. Williams also removes much ambiguity in the final lines of the poem as the speaker asks:

> How did they get
> cut off this way from representation in our
> newspapers and other means of publicity
> when so near the metropolis, so closely
> surrounded by the familiar and the famous (28-32).

As a defining characteristic of Great Depression literature, there is a distinct corrosion of the relationship between people from different settings, but more importantly, among different social classes. There is a lack of unity and sense of concern for people of different background in a presumably shared civil society. Williams argues that this separation is what both caused the Depression and accounted for the continued suffering that resulted. As is the case with the entirety of “The Forgotten City,” these conclusive lines in particular, emphasize the neglect of those suffering on both a public and private level.

A few months later, in May of 1940, Williams also published “Raleigh Was Right” in *Poetry* and this poem both laments the lack of work in Depression-era America and longs for a time in which opportunity was more plentiful. This straightforward poem of three stanzas with seven, nine, and nine lines apiece, begins: “We cannot go to the country / for the country will bring us / no peace (1-3). It is unclear if Williams writes of the country in terms of nationalism or in a rural setting, but there is an evident, pervading belief that the ambiguous country to which this poem refers has lost its sense of identity and uniqueness. There is a sense of unfamiliarity with the current setting: the speaker does not communicate his connection with the country other than previously being there and he denounces what was the country once was. The speaker laments for a time that has passed:

> when country people
> would plow and sow with
> flowering minds and pockets
> at ease—if ever this were true (13-16).

There is a careful consideration in line 16 not to ascribe an idealized view of pre-Depression work conditions and ability for an individual to thrive. There is, however, a sense that the country will not be able to reproduce this age in which work and opportunity were more common. Williams also makes an explicit connection between the ability for one to find work and realizing individual potential as Williams reiterates this crucial link between economic and human value in the poem's conclusion as he writes: "Empty pockets / Make empty heads" (19-20) which speaks to the limited human potential brought about by the Depression. "Raleigh Was Right" advocates a connection between an economic system of shared prosperity and increased human worth, which benefits civil society.

As with the shift in William Carlos Williams's poetry from being primarily an Imagist poet to one with a clear, cogent social message, the poetry of Langston Hughes began a similar transformation during the 1930s. Where Williams is associated with the Imagists, Hughes first enjoyed literary fame with writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen who explored poetics of black identity and makes use of black vernacular expression during the Harlem Renaissance of the preceding decade. In *The American 1930s: A Literary History*, Peter Conn characterizes Langston Hughes's personal biography as representative of a wider, new opportunity for black writers during the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s:

> African-American writers in the 1930s also looked back at the 1920s as a time and place apart. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), Langston Hughes wrote, 'Harlem [in the twenties] was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere.' Through all his early years, living in

> Kansas, Illinois, Ohio, and Mexico, Hughes dreamed of Harlem. When he finally got there, a young man of nineteen and already a published poet, he felt an inspiring joy (30).

Conn, however, also writes: “By the mid-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance, with its aesthetic and exotic overtones, was finished. While it remained the vital center of African-American culture in the 1930s, Harlem was devastated by the Depression” (30) and that Hughes’s output in the 1930s similarly reflects the decreased optimism for African Americans as a direct consequence of the economic conditions. Hughes’s poetry of the 1920s remains the most popularly read and studied in his career, which spanned into five decades. Where much of the focus of Williams’s poetry lies in poems like “The Red Wheelbarrow” or “The Great Figure,” much of both the study and popular appreciation for the poetry of Langston Hughes is similarly limited to his works like “The Weary Blues,” “Suicide’s Note,” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” or later, less socially involved poems like “Harlem” and “Theme for English B.” The divide between such studies of Hughes’s career is so great that James Smethurst has noted: “No portion of Hughes’s literary career has been more commonly dismissed than that of the 1930s” and this period of “red poetry” was “spurned by English departments across the nation” (185). In his poems of the 1930s, Hughes explores political disenfranchisement, financial struggle, and the appeal of Communism common to much Depression poetry, but builds upon the black identity poetics of his earlier work and offers a stark rejection of religious and capitalist institutions in a manner unique within poetry of the Great Depression.

Of Hughes’s poetry written in the 1930s, that which is most familiar with the general public is “Let America be America Again.” First published in *Esquire* in 1936, and described as “Whitmanesque,” (Kutzinski 211) it invokes many of the common themes in this period of Hughes’s career like political and economic disenfranchisement. It enjoys such familiarity because it is less objectionable to firmly established cultural beliefs and enjoys a palatable status for a mass audience while still offering sharp social criticism. In a way, the speaker in this poem appears to be a detached from time and place, while dreaming of a nation that is able to live up to its stated values of equality, freedom, and opportunity. Despite this seeming separation from time, and a degree of timelessness, however, the year in which “Let America be America Again” was published and its reference to “The millions on relief today” and “The millions who have nothing for our pay” (53, 55) clearly makes this a Depression poem. Hughes directly alludes to the discrepancy between a nation’s values and the economic and social reality of the 1930s in the refrain in which the speaker attempts to minimize, through the use of parentheses, his personal frustration with power structures in the United States. First, the speaker says: “(America never was America to me.)” (5) and later expands this critique: “(There's never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this ‘homeland of the free.’)” (15-16). Hughes refers to a litany of oppressed people in the poem including African Americans, the Irish, poor whites, farmers, and workers to whom the elusive promise of prosperity in America has been denied. Hughes goes a step further and refers to a collective removal of the lower class from the political process and economic system of the time. Hughes nonetheless maintains optimism in the possibility for America to connect its professed ideals to political and economic reality. “Let America be America Again” is as important for what it includes as for the subject matter it omits. There is no mention of Communism, Marx, Lenin, the Soviet Union or anything related, as seen in

“Goodbye Christ” and “Put One Morse ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” By his careful calculation to make a palatable argument for the American population, it is easy to understand why this poem has served as an important reference in the study of African-American poetry and civil rights and has been consistently evoked by politicians since its publication. With his poems praising Communism and the Soviet Union, however, Hughes makes similar arguments of equality and disillusionment with the political process of the 1930s, seen in “Let America be America Again,” but in a much more bold, subversive manner.

In “Goodbye Christ,” Hughes makes no attempt to make ambiguous his opposition to capitalism and organized religion, and for its unapologetic refutation of the social order of the 1930s, “Goodbye Christ” gives an invaluable glimpse into marginalized, Depression-era political thought. The speaker shows frustration while deconstructing Christianity’s ability to simultaneously preach against wealth, while profiting from this message. The speaker believes that a Christian messages of poverty, embracing simplicity, and committing to social justice are admirable, but like the disparity between American cultural narratives and reality seen in “Let America be America Again,” institutional Christianity has long been corrupted as it begins: “Listen, Christ, / You did alright in your day, I reckon— / But that day’s gone now” (1-3) and goes on to say: “The popes and the preachers've / Made too much money from it” (7-8). This sort of hypocrisy has particularly strong implications in the context of the Great Depression with regard to a loss of faith in organized religion and other public institutions seen in many Depression works. It also mirrors the disparity of American values of equality and the reality of disenfranchisement in “Let America be America Again.” While on one hand, Hughes offers a condemnation of the Christ figure, the speaker replaces his former belief with an exaltation of a self-empowering brand of Communism. There is a dramatic shift in the poem as the speaker says:

> Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
> A real guy named
> Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—
> I said, ME! (20-23).

Hughes represents the widespread disillusionment of a country in which unemployment generally noted as reaching one-fourth to one-third of the population in 1933. "Goodbye Christ" aims to affirm the validity of the average worker and offers a contrasting argument to the prevailing belief of the day, which can be characterized, for example, by Henry Ford who said in March of 1931: "the average man won't really do a day's work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it" (Zinn 387). Unlike in "Let America be America Again," where there is hope in the American economic and political systems to eventually reach widespread equality, "Goodbye Christ" unequivocally argues that a very fundamental change in these systems is a necessary response to the Great Depression. Such a prescription for change is common in Depression-era literature, but Hughes's unrelenting critique of religion and the economic system separates this poem from many social critiques in the literature of the Depression.

Langston Hughes's poem, "Put One More 'S' in the U.S.A." has an unmistakable polemic tone and where "Goodbye Christ" implores the reader to substitute dogmatic religion for the advancement of Communism and the need to assert one's individual rights, this poem argues for a large scale movement to achieve the prescriptions laid out in the previous poem. “Put One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” first appeared in the *Daily Worker* in 1934 and it is, along with “Goodbye Christ,” part of what prompted Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Senate subcommittee to subpoena Hughes in March 1953 (Kutzinski 188, 194). The speaker in this poem refers not to an “I” at any point, but rather to a collective “We” as a lyrical call for workers to take control of the farms and factories much like in his poem “Good Morning Revolution.” The “S” to which the title refers is an important affirmation of this idea as it stands for Socialist as in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Like Steinbeck’s texts *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Cannery Row*, one of the most significant themes in “Put One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” is finding strength in numbers to create social change. There is noted ambiguity with regard to the means in which this change should occur as the speaker says: “So let us take things in our hand / Then down and way with the bosses’ sway—” (18-19). At first, this appears a direct endorsement of a violent overthrowing of the established order, but there is, however, a lack of an explicit call to violence. Contrary to the fears of the Red Scare, Hughes subverts the association of Communists plotting to overthrow the government and instead argues that the wealthy who profit from war are to blame:

> Oh, the bankers they are planning
> For another great big war.
> To make them rich from the workers’ dead,
> That’s what all that war is for.
> So if you don’t want to see bullets holding sway
> Then come on, all you workers,
> And join out fight today (33-39).

Rather than advocating violence, the speaker calls upon those of different races to live in harmony, with an arguably post-racial vision, and uses Communism as a means to accomplish this by saying: “Come together, fellow workers! / Black and white can all be red" (30-31). Hughes boldly takes issue with the Depression's particularly negative effect upon the financial standing of black America and as Conn notes of Harlem during the Great Depression:

> Harlem's economic infrastructure was strained to the breaking point. Black unemployment outpaced white joblessness; thousands of Harlemites were unable to afford rents and mortgage. The small but vibrant black middle class substantially disappeared. Average family income across all classes declined from about $1,800 to just over $1,000, a difference of over 40 percent (30).

Hughes's sort of American utopia, however, resonates with the tone and vision as seen in "Let America be America Again," though it presented Hughes with difficulty in seeking publication for poems of social protest in the decades after the Great Depression. Hughes's poems endorsing Communism indeed show age when read in the present-day. While Communism represented an undeniable opposition to the political order during the Depression and through the 1950s, after McCarthyism and particularly since the end of the Cold War, it has at best, been reduced to the fringe of the political Left in the United States. Hughes's consideration maintains significant value, however, when considering the historical and social context of these poems. This period of Hughes's career demands a renewed study, not only to account for a more full, honest look at his political views and those of his leftist contemporaries, but also to gain a firmer understanding of an underrepresented perspective of life in the Depression.

William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes are two of the most important American poets of the 20th century and while poets like Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens generally receive such accolades, in contrast, Williams and Hughes deserve such equal status for both their involvement in social issues and as poets of color in a pre-Civil Rights movement America. Despite the age of some of Hughes's pro-Communist poems, the Depression-era writings of both Williams and Hughes remain as relevant to the Great Recession as in the 1930s for their consideration of the inherent contradictions of American values and the economic and social reality of the time.

7.

Complementary Great Depression Narratives in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*

> *In every bit of honest writing in the world…there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other.*
>
> —John Steinbeck journal entry, 1938

John Steinbeck's texts, *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* depict complementary perspectives of the Great Depression to the degree that they almost seem to describe different time periods as the former features two dynamic characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, and has a concrete, consequential plot, which has helped it become ubiquitous within American and Depression-era literature, while there is not much of a developed plot in *Cannery Row* and its characters are largely stand-ins. *Of Mice and Men*'s consideration of the American individual search for personal economic independence and the value of the individual during desperate economic times contrasts with a narrative that closely examines the interconnectedness of people in civil society and ways in which communal bonds strengthen during hardship. *Cannery Row* presents itself as a counterweight to the more common Depression narrative of struggle and hardship and has much to say about the potential of democratic values, capitalism, and public institutions. In pairing these texts, John Steinbeck shows nuance in his understanding of everyday life in northern California during the Great Depression.

The characters in *Of Mice and Men* maintain optimism, for most of the novella, in their distinctively American cultural narrative, despite the devaluation of human beings that persists. While George and Lennie are like any average working-class characters in Depression literature, due to the economy of the text, they are able to find decent-paying jobs with relative ease, which is markedly unique in Depression literature. Their difficulty is less immediate than in texts like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, or *To Have and Have Not*, but they face a familiar inability to transcend their poverty and live with financial stability. Despite this confinement to their class, they maintain their work and belief of a better future for much of the novella. George has a specific and largely material, though modest, vision of what his independence and happiness will look like and this ability to work and live independently is largely how Steinbeck views the individual’s worth in *Of Mice and Men*. George discusses his modest aspiration with Lennie frequently, nearly at any instance of downtime or lull in conversation, and describes it: “Well, it’s ten acres. Got a little win’mill. Got a little shack on it, an’ a chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, ‘cots, nuts, got a few berries. They’s a place for alfalfa and plenty water to flood it” (57). The character of Candy, another hand at the ranch, adds another dynamic to the pursuit of financial independence in *Of Mice and Men*. Candy sees strength in George and Lennie’s plan to work together to save money for a house and property and proposes to George that he contribute to their plan. In many respects, Candy's belief and excitement in these American narratives are stronger than George's or Lennie's and this is the defining part of his character. In another time period, the vision that the three characters share is more attainable, though still questionable: it is not lavish or overly idealized and work ethic is never called into question. In the context of the Depression, however, this belief leads to the characters largely becoming pacified like Boss Stark's constituents in *All the King's Men*: instead of recognizing their status as pawns and demanding a greater role in the political and economic process, they entertain a misguided belief of a better future. *Of Mice and Men* takes a position that due to the Great Depression, people from the working class cannot escape it and those who with political and economic power have prevented the possibility of upward economic mobility for others.

Lennie Small, along with Benjy Compson from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, is arguably the most prominent character with a mental disability in American literature and, reflexive of Lennie's surname, he represents an "Otherness" and a further devaluation of the individual in the novella. From its beginning, Steinbeck presents no ambiguity to Lennie's mental disability as he is able to function, but requires George's assistance and camaraderie. Lennie is described as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws" (2). Especially within the context of the 1930s, there is very little sympathy given to Lennie's disability: it is not recognized as such and instead, the attention he receives for it is scornful. In a 1937 interview with *The New York Times*, Steinbeck reflects on the autobiographical parts of the novella and his experience as a bindlestiff in California, revealing attitudes toward people with disabilities in the 1930s:

> The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn't stop him until it was too late (Parini).

Steinbeck not only uses Lennie to show the emblematic devaluation of the individual, particularly from the working class, but he also speaks to the greater injustice of the mistreatment of people with mental disabilities in the time period. Steinbeck dramatizes a systematic misunderstanding of people with disabilities, which caused Lennie’s death and precluded the institutionalization of someone Steinbeck knew personally, who should have received proper care rather than being institutionalized. Despite Lennie’s mental disability and the perception of him as less than human, however, he is valued for his strength and ability to work. Rather than giving Lennie a greater sense of value as a person, however, it further represents his devaluation as he is viewed in terms of nothing more than the amount of work he can do and the profit he can provide his employer. In this way, Lennie is an ideal worker for those who own the ranch: he can do more work than anyone else and does not possess the mental facility to question the mistreatment he receives. Lennie’s strength, which easily surpasses that of any of the other workers, is the only reason he is able to work on the ranch and provides his only value as a person in the world of the novella.

Along with Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie as someone with a mental disability who represents the devaluation of man in the Depression, Steinbeck frequently uses animal imagery, as he makes reference to mice, bears, and most of all, rabbits, when describing Lennie, which serves a similar purpose. Where George's ambition lies mostly with having his own property, Lennie's vision for himself most heavily involves his obsession with rabbits. He tells George: "Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it" (14). The topic of animals is the most concrete example the reader sees of Lennie's thoughts in *Of Mice and Men* and he is more concerned with being around them than finding work or financial independence, which is the priority of most of the workers. Lennie's obsession with animals also shows the reader a compassionate, gentle side of him contrary to the perception that the other characters have of him, which is someone who is dangerous and incapable of having thoughts or much emotion. Through this imagery, which appears consistently throughout *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck offers the perception that both for people with disabilities, and on a larger scale, working people in the Depression, their value is akin to that of an animal and are only as usefulness as the profit they can provide to those with capital.

Contrasting with the egalitarian nature of *Cannery Row*'s setting, there is a hierarchy even among the tenant workers, who are all of the lower class in a larger social context, and Crooks, the novella's only black character, is at the bottom of the power structure because of his race. Charles Johnson characterizes Crooks's placement in *Of Mice and Men*: "During the Great Depression, it also presented a strong and influential indictment of racial segregation, for which Steinbeck is still praised today, and rightfully so" (236). Also reflecting his name, there is no indication of whether it is a nickname or surname, Crooks also experiences significant isolation from the rest of the workers. He has worked at the ranch longer than most characters and through his personal experience and witnessing of former workers try and fail to transcend their working-class status, he has become disillusioned with the idea of workers planning for financial independence. Crooks tells another character:

> I see hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it (74).

While a white character like Candy maintains belief in the possibility for social mobility, Crooks recognizes such a belief as delusional for a laborer, and particularly for African Americans, during the Depression. Johnson also argues with regard to Crooks: "Often in fiction published during the modernist period, the racial Outsider is given the role of being a vehicle for truth, a truth that 'insiders' and people who are privileged or conform to society cannot know" (247). Crooks's pushing back against the cultural narrative also represents a turning point in the trajectory of the novella, effectively shattering any of George's, Lennie's, or Candy's earlier genuine optimism, and arguably, naïveté. The truth they realize also directly precedes the tragedies of the novella, and with these narrative developments, Steinbeck builds upon disillusionment to ask what is the value of the individual.

The devaluation of the individual in *Of Mice and Men* continues most strongly and immediately with its two murders: the first of which is Lennie's unintentional murder of Curley's wife, which directly leads to George killing Lennie. Steinbeck incorporates animal imagery in both murders, which immediately follow Crooks's dialogue in his role as a vehicle for truth. Lennie's death is as simple as his life: George leads him to an area away from the ranch and shoots him with his back turned as one would shoot a rabid or ailing animal. In fact, Steinbeck makes this connection between human and animal explicit as Carlson shoots Candy's dog at the beginning of the novella in the belief that it has become useless. There is foreshadowing involved as Carlson says in reference to the dog: "If you was to take him out and shoot him right in the back of the head—right there, why he'd never know what hit him" (45). This is not only exactly what George does to Lennie in the closing pages of the novella, but the back of the head is also exactly where he shoots him, which makes this parallel undeniable. There is, however, no violent intent or maliciousness. George simply aims to remove the burden of life from Lennie and takes into his own hands what the State would have likely done anyway for the murder of Curley's wife as Steinbeck subtly connects the State's use of capitol punishment to its inability to help working-class citizens. Lennie's death is fatalistic as either his mental disability or lowly social status would play a role in it. There are only a few words spoken, it is in no way sacrificial, and presumably, George leaves the body there without ceremony or a burial, effectively completing a symbolic decomposition. It is at once, both a simple act as George and another ranch hand, Slim, show little emotion and are dismissive of its importance, while it forces the reader to examine the inherent worth of human life within the context of mental disability and lowly social status in the Great Depression. Despite the enormous stakes for the reader, within a diegetic context in *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie's death is inconsequential in that the only person who knew him well or will potentially, though not definitely, miss him is the one responsible for his death.

The death of Curley's wife, however, is more complex. Steinbeck has alluded to this complexity by saying of Curley's wife: "She's not a person, she's a symbol. She has no function, except to be a foil—and a danger to Lennie" and this is why she was not given a name (Parini). Curley's wife's is the only female character in the novel and the workers view her as a very attractive woman. She is of a higher social class than the other characters and represents, through both seduction and social class, what they cannot have, which is also what inadvertently kills her. While Mark Spilka has also drawn attention to Steinbeck "taking a boss's son and his wife as sources of privileged pressure on migrant farmhands," (66) Howard Levant sees her as a sort of femme fatale who embodies "the Hollywood ideal of the seductive movie queen as the only standard of love" (83). Curley's wife also uses both her class and sexuality to threaten the only other character with a status as low as Lennie's, which is Crooks. Curley's wife is quick to exercise this power and foreshadows her role in Lennie's death when she tells Crooks: "Well, you keep your place then, nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (81). Not only does Curley's wife have more power than any character in the novel, she maintains an obvious level of malevolence. When Curley's wife lets him touch her hair, his lack of awareness of his strength effectively kills her, cementing her status as a pawn within the larger drama at hand. Steinbeck again invokes animal imagery, but this time for Curley's wife, as he writes: "he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck" (91). While quite different, the deaths of Lennie and Curley's wife share a short, simple, and non-glorified. The general attitude of the workers is that the death of Curley's wife represents a sort of morality plot: Candy immediate recognizes the danger her presence was bound to cause as someone from a higher class living among migrant workers. He says: "You God damn tramp. You done it, di'n't you? I suppose you're glad. Ever'body knowed you'd mess things up" (95). In contrast to the relative lack of consequence in Lennie's death as an unimportant everyman, Curley's wife's death not only demands Lennie's inevitable death, but unlike Lennie, she has someone who will truly mourn her and seek retribution. Curley's wife's death is also more permanent to those who remain on the ranch than Lennie's death. Her class and lack of mental disability, like Lennie's, give her life inherently greater worth than his. Steinbeck not only wonderfully exploits class dynamics in his writing, but with this pair of murders, he offers a poignant argument for the diminished worth of working people in Great Depression literature. Although *Of Mice and Men* fits rigidly in the category of Great Depression literature and has been less appropriated into other literary periods than many Depression texts, it retains relevance outside this context. Through its elements of friendship, pursuit of independence, and tragedy, *Of Mice and Men* has a large appeal with regard to the value of life and the implications of death. These motifs are at the root of its continued widespread readership and have solidified its place as a prominent work in both American and Great Depression literature.

In contrast to the egregious, systematic mistreatment of people in *Of Mice and Men,* Steinbeck's 1946 novel, *Cannery Row* offers an optimistic alternative for the possibility of people to work together and values interconnectedness between people, which becomes evident during its opening. This novel takes place in Monterrey, California and Lee Chong is the proprietor of a general store in which the community of

Cannery Row buys essential goods and socializes. There is no significant mention of Chong's Asian background in *Cannery Row*, nor does his race define him as a character. He transcends a stereotypical perception of his race not seen in *Of Mice and Men* or *To Have and Have Not*, which given the time period, further adds to a utopian dynamic in the community.

Instead of receiving mistreatment from others because of his race, Chong is an integral part of the community. His store is at least as much a public institution, in which people show remarkable faith for its setting in the Great Depression, as it is a place of business. It also gives a concise glimpse into the ways in which people depend on one another in a social and economic context. In the novel's opening pages, the reader learns:

> The grocery opened at dawn and did not close until the last wandering vagrant dime and had been spent or retired for the night. Not that Lee Chong was avaricious. He wasn't, but if one wanted to spend money, he was available…Over the course of the years everyone in Cannery Row owed him money. He never pressed his clients, but when the bill became too large, Lee cut off credit (5).

Chong's business is not an idealistic perception of community outreach or charity and it still follows basic business principles, but right away, the reader sees that compared to most places of business, there is something different about it. The reader knows Lee is not married nor has any children and there is little indication that he does much with himself when not working. He does, however, offer as much as possible of himself and his resources to those on Cannery Row and because of this, he enjoys the patronage of all its citizens as indicated by the narration: "if the tenants ever had any money, and quite often they did have, it never occurred to them to spend it any place except at Lee Chong's grocery" (12). *Cannery Row* cogently argues the merits of a specific brand of capitalism and democracy. Chong's business is the center of the community and he is its main creditor. There is likewise little in the way of government or social programs aimed at providing economic assistance and there are no political implications in the novel like those seen in *In Dubious Battle*. Business is paramount and charity is seen, to some degree, as an insult to one's dignity and to personal relationships between people. When someone needs financial help in Cannery Row, he or she can obtain it with self-respect as there is always a solution to be created. While this text takes the approach that capitalism is the most effective system to generate prosperity for all classes, it also clearly shows that an economic system is more productive when there is not a drastic separation of classes and when people, rather than institutions or large businesses, are empowered to play a substantial role in civil society.

Cannery Row can also be read as a microcosm of Keynesian economics. As stated in John Maynard Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*, the ability for governments to invest money, whether in the form of public works or unemployment benefits, helps increase consumption and reduces unemployment. Unlike the view of public institutions in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters of *Cannery Row* hold the system they have created in exceptionally high regard and exercise a near-exemplary form of democracy. Keynes writes that the government "will be liable, willingly or unwillingly, to run into a budgetary deficit or will provide unemployment relief, for example, out of borrowed money" and goes on to say: "employment can only increase *pari passu* with an increase in investment; unless, indeed, there is a change in the propensity to consume" (98). There is an accepted system of debt, borrowing, and investment that sustains the economy in Cannery Row, which mirrors Keynes's economic prescriptions. Chong has the most capital of the characters in the novel, gives credit to others, and expects them to do the same. He also invests more in the community than any other character and subsequently has the most debt. Steinbeck describes Chong's position in the community: "What he did with his money, no one ever knew. Perhaps he didn't get it. Maybe his wealth was entirely in unpaid bills. But he lived well and he had the respect of all his neighbors" (6). Steinbeck shows that there is not social pressure or guilt that motivates the interconnectedness of Cannery Row's economy as he argues that it is in everyone's best individual and collective interest to help others.

Not only does Lee Chong own the primary place of business, but in the first chapter, the reader also learns that his capital extends beyond the store. When Horace Abbeville, who is noted as having "a grocery debt second to none in Monterrey" (6) seeks to pay off his debt without having any money, Chong agrees to acquire a property that Abbeville owns in exchange for paying off the debt. A few pages later, when Mack, who is frequently referred to as a "bum," asks Chong to rent the building to him and his friends for four dollars per month, Chong begrudgingly agrees. Being able to contribute to the local economy is not reserved to those with capital. In Chapter Nine, Mack tries to assist Doc, a marine biologist who, like Chong, is a selfless person and an integral part of the community. Steinbeck writes: "Now Doc really needed the frogs. He tried to work out some method which was business and not philanthropy. 'I'll tell you what I'll do,' he said. 'I'll give you a note to my gas station so you can get ten gallons of gas' " (53). Mack, despite not having any capital, provides Doc, the second-most influential person in Cannery Row, with the resources to do his job and Mack likewise benefits. As many economists view Keynesian economics as having helped end the Great Depression, particularly through military deficit spending surrounding the Second World War, these types of exchanges similarly allow the people of Cannery Row to avoid the destitution seen in many other Depression texts. The intentional system of lending and borrowing, debt and capital provide basic necessities in the community as well as prevent excessive hardship and give dignity to the citizens.

In many ways, Steinbeck's novel is admittedly light and simple. There is not much in the way of a definite plot or character development: much of the text's premise involves Mack attempting to gather people for a party to show appreciation for Doc and it cannot even be said with much certainty that Chong is *Cannery Row's* protagonist. The personal relationships between the characters, however, very closely reflect their economic relationships. Steinbeck clearly displays this parallel when Mack says to Lee Chong: "I think a guy's friends ought to help him out of a hole when they can, especially a nice guy like Doc. Why I bet he spends sixty seventy dollars a month with you" (55). While *Cannery Row* has much to say about the benefits of these interactions based upon business, it offers much more in the way of the importance of community and personal relationships: for solidarity during hardship and as a source of greater meaning in the lives of individuals. It does not idealize the shared suffering of the Depression or ignore the reality of economic and personal devastation. One minor character, Joey, for example, mentions toward the end of the novel that his father committed suicide after a year of unemployment. Although *Cannery Row* does not evade social realities of the time period, it mostly reads as a divergence from the typical Depression narratives of hardship, offering a more optimistic perception and prescriptions.

Whether through George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* or in the wider setting in *Cannery Row*, relationships between individuals are at the core of texts. Steinbeck employs dehumanization of man, mental disability, and tragic death in *Of Mice and Men* not only to show the devastation of the Great Depression, but also to argue for a greater emphasis of human value in the setting. *Cannery Row* likewise aims to communicate this value and show the possibility for human interaction as a vehicle to create understanding and optimism between people even among the fear and frustration of the Great Depression. Despite the drastically different narratives dealing with the Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* have a significant commonality in that they each exemplify Steinbeck's belief that the primary goal of literature is to makes readers more compassionate and aware of the interconnectedness of people.

8.

Conclusion: The Great Depression and the Great Recession

Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what comes around goes around.
—Ishmael Reed, 31 January 1971

We need a long-term American strategy, based on steady, persistent effort, to reverse the forces that have conspired against the middle class for decades. That has to be our project.
—President Barack Obama, 24 July 2013

Toward the beginning of the Great Depression in 1932, the United States changed its economic and social trajectory by electing Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency, reversing the laissez faire economic policies of previous administrations, who would enact both short-term New Deal relief programs as well as create for the first time, a social safety net including the Social Security Administration; the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a minimum wage law and standardized a 40-hour work week with overtime pay; the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to insure bank deposits; and the Securities and Exchange Commission to regulate the financial system. The result was a new American era, which featured the strongest economy in the nation's history and continued through the Lyndon Johnson administration's "Great Society" nearly thirty years later. Johnson's instituting legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 as well as Medicare, Medicaid, and Head Start echoed the New Deal of the 1930s. The liberal consensus of the mid-twentieth century that began in response to the Great Depression, however, eroded with the fallout of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the energy crisis of the early 1970s until Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 signaled a new conservative era, often referred to in the present day, by figures like the 2008 Nobel laureate in Economics, Paul Krugman, as the New Gilded Age, with emphasis on financial deregulation, lowering the top marginal income tax rates, and supply-side economics.

Much of Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson's *And Their Children After Them* chronicles this cultural shift that both devastated and diminished the middle class, and especially the poorest Americans. In the prologue of his 2013 book, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, George Packer writes: "If you were born around 1960 or afterward, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of that unwinding. You have watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape" (3). David Simon has similarly remarked: "And that notion that capital is the metric, that profit is the metric by which we're going to measure the health of our society is one of the fundamental mistakes of the last 30 years. I would date it in my country to about 1980 exactly, and it has triumphed." This conservative era of the past few decades has coincided with a sharp decline in Americans' trust in public institutions—particularly those which promote economic opportunity like public schools, organized labor, and government agencies—while the

American middle class has become quantifiably smaller and the potential for economic mobility has largely been determined by ZIP code to the detriment of inner cities and rural areas alike. Simon has also spoken to the effect of limited economic and social opportunity in urban areas, arguing:

> There are definitely two Americas. I live in one, on one block in Baltimore that is part of the viable America, the America that is connected to its own economy, where there is a plausible future for the people born into it. About 20 blocks away is another America entirely. It's astonishing how little we have to do with each other, and yet we are living in such proximity.

In keeping with this cyclical interpretation of history, much like the unraveling of the liberal consensus during the late 1960s and '70s, the American political, economic, and social trajectory again changed with the twin crises of the Iraq War's fallout and the Financial Crisis in the fall of 2008—partially helped by the Clinton administration signing into law the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act in 1999, which repealed the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act's provision that separated investment banks from commercial banks—leading to the election of Barack Obama only weeks later in November with the promise of a new commitment to helping middle- and lower-income Americans.

One town that has reflected America's shifting cultural trajectories is Rochester, Indiana and it is the topic of an article simply titled "Pop. 3,518," in the August 1936 issue of *Fortune* magazine, which ran its first issue six years earlier toward the start of the Depression. While James Agee's and Walker Evans' findings on Southern poverty were deemed unsuitable for *Fortune* readers and never resulted in the intended article, the product of the publication's founder Henry Luce also sending a team of reporters a typical, middlebrow Midwestern town is an article that is “straightforward and reportorial, untouched by self-consciousness or anything resembling emotional complexity” (Conn 38). “Pop. 3,518” serves as an exemplary document regarding conservative, WASP-y Middle America during the Depression, written in a matter-of-fact, mundane tone that avoids any controversial opinions. It resembles, to a degree, the setting in W. H. Auden’s poem, “The Unknown Citizen,” first published in *The New Yorker* in January 1940 as both place importance on brand names, social organizations, and reputation rather than individualism. Its unlisted authors describe a relatively confortable, small town: “fourteen blocks long and maybe eight wise, a ragged-edge rectangle laid flat on the level land” (53) in which there is definitely a struggling working class, but where economic mobility is also quite tangible.

The article features the seven McMahan brothers, who “were laughed at and snubbed when they came up to school in town. But after they got out of school they borrowed a little money and opened a small grocery business” (54). The article goes on to say that the brothers owned “a dozen or more farms” in addition to cattle-trading, furniture, real-estate, and hotel businesses and four of them were able to use what they had learned and earned in Rochester to live and establish businesses in Los Angeles (55). “Pop. 3,518” also mentions a Mr. Dawson, proprietor of a local drugstore, and his granddaughter, Caroline Barr, who is “home from Northwestern, where she graduated with a Phi Beta Kappa at the head of her class” and has a job “as a secretary to the editor of the Chicago *Times*” (58). The economic climate of Rochester, even during the latter years of the Depression, is largely conducive to those who wish to live comfortably in their hometown, while having the resources to help its citizens achieve economic mobility and thrive in major American cities.

The authors also recognize three distinct social classes in the relatively prosperous community. There are around five hundred laborers' families who may live on as little as $500 a year and may pay as little as $5 a month in rent compared to the town average of $17 per month and there is also a strong middle class of three or four hundred "moderately well-to-do families," who are shopkeepers and farmers and who the *Fortune* writers describe as "a solid part of the base of Rochester's social pyramid" (62). The upper class consists of "the hundred or more families with incomes ranging from $2,500 to $5,000 (maybe three or four of them have as much as $10,000) who live in the best section of town" (62-3). Rochester's politics are generally conservative and its people show skepticism toward any institutions or behavior with which they are unfamiliar. Peter Conn compares the reportage of "Pop. 3,518" to that of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "Where the Alabama tenant farmers embody the financial and metaphorical bankruptcy of traditional beliefs, the people of Rochester, Indiana continue to find solace and coherence in the patriotism and hierarchies bequeathed to the past" (39). The town voted for Roosevelt in the 1932 election, but despite recognizing the direct, positive influence of New Deal programs, which by 1936 seemingly helped many of its citizens avoid the more devastating effects of the Depression, "Pop. 3,518" assumes that Rochester will vote for Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon three months later. Despite the politically and socially conservative instincts of Rochester during the 1930s, there is a recognition that government can play a productive role in reducing poverty and there is a social compact in which those who own wealth and capital feel a personal role in contributing to the community. The authors of the article note Rochester's property tax of $3.85 per $100 of assessed value that helps relieve its poorest citizens. From the city's property tax:

> A dollar goes to the city the rest to state and county. It's a high tax—higher than usual because of the eighty-eight cent poor-relief tax. On the surface it seems as if most people had gone back to work, but the fact is there are still a lot of men unemployed, 236 heads of families, more than a fifth of the total number. You don't think about them as much as you did three or four years ago because they're almost all on federal rolls (142).

This sense of a shared social compact in which business, government, and private citizens each contribute to society and have faith both in public institutions and in their peers has largely corroded in recent decades: what was generally seen as a necessity of healthy communities is now often labeled as socialistic or erring toward it.

Rochester, Indiana is also the town in which I was raised. It has formed many of my views on social class and politics and nearly eighty years after the Great Depression, it remains remarkably similar to the pictures of Main Street and the types of people highlighted in "Pop. 3,518." Although there is currently more economic opportunity there than in many other parts of the nation, if reporters from a national magazine were to return today, they would find that Rochester is emblematic of the corroding middle class and diminished possibility for economic mobility in many rural regions in the United States. Rochester and small towns like it have been economically and socially stagnant since the New Gilded Age began around the 1980s, which is partially reflected in population figures. According to a 2013 Census Bureau estimate, Rochester's population is 6,105, which shows little change when considering the national population growth since 1936. In the *New York Times* feature highlighted in Chapter 3, "Where are The Hardest Places to Live in the U.S.?" Fulton County, of which Rochester is the county seat, ranked as the 2,131st hardest county to live in out of the 3,135 counties in the United States. While Rochester's economic life is far from the worst in the nation, it reflects the era of limited well-paying blue-collar jobs and few ways to attain economic mobility: 14.7% of its population has a Bachelor's degree, which is less than half of the national average according to a March 2011 Census Bureau report and unemployment is also notably, though not drastically, higher than national average.

While it is possible that a student educated in Rochester' public schools could be awarded Phi Beta Kappa at Northwestern University and immediately be offered a job at what is now the *Chicago Sun-Times*, as Caroline Barr did in 1936, it is highly unlikely as anything more than an anomaly for many reasons. An unfavorable job market for recent college graduates as well as declining standards and valuation of public education are largely to blame. Most troubling, however, are the overwhelmingly rising price of higher education and the increasing concentration of students attending elite schools, both public and private, from wealthier areas (Douglass, Thomson), which give many high-performing students in inner cities and rural areas the assumption that they could neither afford nor gain admittance to prestigious universities if the possibility of attending occurred to them. This lack of opportunity is both palpable in areas like Rochester and is statistically quantifiable. In a December 2011 speech on income inequality in Osawatomie, Kansas, President Barack Obama said with regard to one's ability to achieve economic mobility:

> a few years after World War II, a child who was born into poverty had a slightly better than 50-50 chance of becoming middle class as an adult. By 1980, that chance had fallen to around 40 percent. And if the trend of rising inequality over the last few decades continues, it's estimated that a child born today will only have a one-in-three chance of making it to the middle class.

This is devastating news for a country that has prided itself on equal opportunity for generations and gives credence to the general distrust of institutions in current public life.

The Great Recession began in December 2007, and while technically lasting until June 2009, its effects are evident years later and will continue, particularly in human costs and diminished potential, long after the economy fully recovers. The Great Recession, frequently cited as the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, witnessed a 53.8 percent decrease in the Dow Jones Industrial Average and in October 2009, unemployment reached its highest level of this time period, which was 10.8 percent (Geewax). In September 2013, a study by the University of California, Berkeley, reported that U.S. income inequality, partially as a result of the Recession, was at its highest level since 1927 as the top one percent of households accounted for 19.6 percent of household incomes and the top 10 percent represented "just under half of all income in the year" (Saez). The Great Recession came as a shock for many and exhibited a betrayal of American ideals similar to that of the Depression. Though not nearly as severe, the Great Recession has undeniable parallels with the economics of the 1930s.

During the past decade, and particularly since 2008, countless Americans have experienced a similar level of disillusionment to that seen in the literature of the Great Depression: many have felt resentment in the both government's insufficient prevention of and response to the economic downturn and that the American promise of upward mobility with the concomitant of hard work has been betrayed, while the populist rhetoric of bailing out Wall Street rather than Main Street and the American people has particularly resonated with many. According to a January 2014 Gallup poll, 67 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with wealth distribution (Riffkin) and the years leading up to the Great Recession were "the worst for the U.S. economy in modern times" in which there was zero net job creation between December 1999 and the following decade and economic output rose at its slowest rate of any decade since the 1930s (Irwin). Perhaps the most threatening development, however, is a lost a sense of national unity, confidence, and direction. As Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum argue in their book, *That Used to Be Us*: "As a country, we lost the plot. We forgot who we were, how had become the richest and most powerful country in the history of the world, where we wanted to go, and what we needed to do to get there" (232). There are, however, major differences between the Great Depression and the Great Recession. The peak of unemployment in the Depression was more than double that of the Great Recession's worst figures and largely because of the social safety net established in the aftermath of the Depression, working and living conditions seen in texts like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* seem unthinkable in today's developed world. Such economic catastrophe, however, is less forgivable today as Paul Krugman writes in *End the Depression Now!*: "In the Great Depression leaders had an excuse: nobody really understood what was happening or how to fix it. Today's leaders don't have that excuse. *We have both the knowledge and the tools to end this suffering*" [Krugman's emphasis]

(20). The suffering of the Great Recession pales in comparison to that of the Depression, though its impact nonetheless demands inquiry that should last decades.

Barack Obama has made the issue of income inequality a centerpiece of his presidency, frequently calling it the defining issue of our time during his 2012 reelection campaign. His enacting the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which is credited with preventing a second Great Depression; the Affordable Care Act; the Frank-Dodd Act, which established the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; renewing emphasis on and promoting the recovery of the automobile and manufacturing industries; and raising large public support for raising minimum wages across the United States collectively signal a new era in the American story much like that which began with the New Deal. The Affordable Care Act in particular seems a natural successor to Social Security and Medicare in a new generation's expansion of a basic social safety net, while reforming higher education finance likewise seems an inevitable development in the coming decades. Historically speaking, there is a precedent for periods of great economic growth after crises, as Packer also writes in *The Unwinding* about the fallout of the mid-century liberal consensus: "The unwinding is nothing new. There have been unwindings every generation or two…Each decline brought renewal, each implosion released energy, out of each unwinding came a new cohesion" (3). There are many reasons to be more hopeful for the coming years and decades, compared to the economic and political climate in the early months of the Recession.

Literature like Charles Simic's poem "Driving Around," which was published in June 2012 in *The New Yorker* and compares a blighted, desolate Main Street to "an abandoned movie set / whose director / ran out of money and ideas" (3-5) to the detriment of a young generation's ambitions and potential as well as Philipp Meyer's 2009 debut novel, *American Rust*, has already begun an essential literary conversation of our time. *American Rust*'s rural setting in Pennsylvania, in which there were formerly well paying jobs in the steel industry and a healthy economy, reveals the public values of market speculation and large corporations over the manufacturing sector and an American middle class. From the novel's opening in which its roughly 20 year-old protagonist, Isaac English and his best friend, Billy Poe, attempt to leave home by travelling to California by railroad, echoing *The Grapes of Wrath*, and are implicated in murder committed in self-defense during this escape, the tone of *American Rust* is overwhelmingly pessimistic toward the prospect of young generations to succeed and is likewise nostalgic for an era in which people created things and felt a strong personal connection to their work. At one point, Billy thinks to himself that soon there would be "nothing left standing to show that anything had ever been built in America. It was going to cause big problems, he didn't know how but he felt it. You could not have a country, not this big, that didn't make things for itself. There would be ramifications eventually" (289). Isaac's sister, Lee, another major character, attends Yale University and Meyer illustrates the rift between the class of Americans that struggles to transcend their working-class environment, which includes both Lee's younger brother, Isaac, and Billy, and another in which economic success and comfort is a given. Education is directly implicated as the primary vehicle for economic mobility as Lee reflects of her classmates at Yale:

> They'd all been born to the right parents, in the right neighborhoods, they went to the right schools, had all the right social instructions, had taken all the right tests.

> There was simply not a chance they would fail. They worked hard but always with the expectation they would get what they wanted—the world had never shown them anything different (293-4).

Also like *The Grapes of Wrath*, Meyer concludes *American Rust* with sacrifice on the part of older generations, which prevents Isaac and Billy's possible incarceration and allows them an opportunity to author their adulthood, showing the possibility for a hopeful, more humane future.

While not strictly a Great Recession novel, David Foster Wallace's unfinished *The Pale King*, posthumously published in 2011, examines government bureaucracy while arguing for renewing faith in public institutions and for a stronger social compact. Set in 1985 at a regional IRS center in Peoria, Illinois, it comments on the rhetoric of fervent distaste toward government and public institutions of the New Gilded Age, anticipates an unraveling of this national ethos, and is in conversation with economic and social issues of the Recession. In the nearly 100-page long § 22 of *The Pale King*, IRS agent, Chris Fogle recounts his stereotypically nihilistic Generation-X youth, the transformative effect of his father's death had upon him, and a fortuitous experience in college in which a substitute lecturer in his Advanced Tax course is the first to challenge him to find a higher purpose. Even—and especially—in a profession like accounting, the lecturer argues, heroism requires service, commitment, sacrifice, and indifference to the opinions of others. Mirroring Fogle's realization, Wallace, resisting naïveté, touches on popular culture and political ideology, predicting a shift when the cynicism and apathy of the New Gilded Age would progress into an era that recognizes and finds strength in the interconnectedness of each member of society:

> You can see where it's going. The extraordinary political apathy that followed Watergate and Vietnam and the institutionalization of grass-roots rebellion among minorities will only deepen…Americans now vote with their wallets. Government's only cultural role will be as the tyrannical parent we both hate and need. Look for us to elect someone who can cast himself as a Rebel maybe even a cowboy but who deep down we'll know is a bureaucratic creature who'll operate inside the government mechanism instead of naively bang his head against it the way we've watched poor Jimmy do for four years (149).

While Wallace died in September 2008, the novel has an impeccable understanding of the political and cultural shifts of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and in many instances, seems prophetic in describing what would happen in American politics in the months and years immediately following his death.

If the major roles of literature include discussing and navigating the issues of the day as well as providing human accounts to what will be studied in the future, it is absolutely necessary both to read the literature of the Great Depression with emphasis on this historical, economic, and social context and for it to have a more substantial place in the study of American literature. Such consideration of Great Depression literature certainly provides a better understanding of the past, can help our citizenry make more sense of the current devastation, and can even help establish a more firm understanding of our cultural values and the responsibility that we, in the absolute broadest sense of American society, have to one another's well-being. It will also encourage literature that captures the human suffering in today's economic climate where unemployment figures and stock market indexes do not suffice. Writers like Wright, Agee, Steinbeck, Warren, Hemingway, Hughes, and Williams are not only among the most notable writers in the American canon, but they exemplify the possibility for literature to communicate the difficulty of life during such a tumultuous time period. Their works are an irreplaceable source for current and future readers alike to learn about who we are, where we are, and how we got here.

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