

January 01, 2011

## "Objects of Emancipation": The political dreams of modernism

Hanna Musiol

---

### Recommended Citation

Musiol, Hanna, "'Objects of Emancipation': The political dreams of modernism" (2011). *English Dissertations*. Paper 9.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20001026>

This work is available open access, hosted by Northeastern University.

“OBJECTS OF EMANCIPATION”: THE POLITICAL DREAMS OF MODERNISM

A Dissertation Presented

by

Hanna Musiol

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the field of  
English

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts  
May, 2011



“OBJECTS OF EMANCIPATION”: THE POLITICAL DREAMS OF MODERNISM

by

Hanna Musiol

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of  
Northeastern University, May, 2011

## ABSTRACT

In the first part of the twentieth century three interconnected modernist trends, primitivism, consumerism, and nationalism, imagined the inclusion of new persons in the national polity through their engagement with what I call “objects of emancipation.” In such modernist imaginings, “quasi (legal) persons,” to use Bruno Latour’s idea, could become New Women, New Negroes, or New (and “civilized”) Americans through their intimacy with empowering objects such as consumer products, keepsakes, cultural artifacts, commodified natural resources, and even waste. Such person-thing fabrications were central, in my view, to modernist politics and aesthetics, and I argue that literary genres often considered to be nonmodernist (including the bildungsroman and the documentary) were particularly important vessels for debates about things and persons. Specifically, my work explores how Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Fannie Hurst’s *Back Street* (1931), John Joseph Mathews’ *Talking to the Moon* (1945), and James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) challenged the promise of personification-through-objects using generic conventions associated with both progress and material culture. I argue, however, that rather than simply attacking objectification as a negative, dehumanizing process, Hurst, Mathews, Larsen, and Agee and Evans examined how race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as class, placed limits on the liberatory reifications of persons. They also recognized the multiple possibilities that different forms of reification could offer. Far from glorifying progress or naively recording the material world, then, their modernist bildungsromans and documentaries participated in the complicated reconceptualization of human and object rights that took place from the late 1920s through the late 1940s.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been a collaborative effort in more ways than I am able to acknowledge here. Many people have supported me over the years, and I am very thankful for the intellectual nourishment and friendship they have offered.

First of all, I would like to thank my wonderful dissertation committee, professors Carla Kaplan, Guy Rotella, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, without whose patience, encouragement, and constructive criticism my dissertation would have not have seen the light of day. Professor Kaplan, my dissertation director and mentor, has inspired me in more ways than I can express. She has pushed me to think about writing and material culture in ways that opened new questions and new horizons for me. She taught me the great importance of recognizing what Laura Ann Stoler calls “the pulse of the archive,”<sup>1</sup> and respect for the labor it demands. I am also very thankful that she allowed me to continue my “occupation” of her office during the last stage of writing, which provided me a space in which to put things together, both intellectually and literally.

Second, I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Rotella, for the consistent guidance he has offered me over the years. He was unfailingly supportive as a scrupulous reader and critic of my work. He also made me appreciate different critical paradigms than the ones I was most comfortable with. His consistent critique of my writing and intellectual work throughout my graduate program, but especially during the final months of my writing, was absolutely invaluable.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Along the Archival Grain* 17.

Last, but not least, I want to thank Professor Dillon, whose encouragement and advice kept me going. Being her student and participating in the wonderful Futures of American Studies Institutes she co-directed have been transformative experiences for me and made me rethink my understanding of material and visual culture in extremely productive ways.

Moreover, I would like to thank several people in the Boston-area libraries: Yves Hyacinthe, from Snell Library Interlibrary Loans at Northeastern University, for always finding archival material nobody else could find, in places where nobody looked, and for literally helping me dig things up from underground; Lois Conley and Amanda Rust, also from Snell Library, for their help with my unending requests; and Sarah Shoemaker, from the Brandeis University Special Collections, for assisting me with my research on Fannie Hurst.

The Provost's Dissertation Fellowship provided time and much-needed financial support during the final months of writing. I would also like to thank Kristen Ebert-Wagner, who provided editorial help on the final draft.

Of course, I also could not have done much without my family and friends. I want to thank my brother, Marek Musioł, who encouraged, from the beginning, my decision to pursue a doctoral degree in Boston as the single parent of a toddler, and then did everything in his power to keep my spirits up in the years that followed. I would have certainly given up many times if not for his unwavering support, optimism, and generosity. My adopted family, Lisa Dush and Lee Hart, offered friendship, great conversations, and nourishment, and made me feel at home in Boston. I thank my Warsaw friends, Ania Trojanowska and Justyna Wyrąbkiewicz, for their support and for making me feel like I never left. My partner, Derek Jackson, needs to be thanked for his camaraderie, his patience, and his sustained support, especially in the last four frantic months, as well as for the many fierce backgammon games we have played over the years. His

sense of humor, his friendship, and his caring have lightened up my and Lila's lives. Finally, to my daughter, Lila, I owe as much thanks as I owe an apology for making the early years of her life defined by my never-ending research and writing. Having you has made a great difference. Thank you for the joy and questions you've brought to my life.

I dedicate this work to my beloved grandmother, Janina Podlowska, who let me and Marek ruin her house while she was writing plays and poems.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	5
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	8
INTRODUCTION: “Objects of Emancipation”: The Political Dreams of Modernism .....	9
SECTION ONE: Novel Fabrications of Things and Female Persons.....	37
CHAPTER ONE: “The Cultivation of Self” with Objects in Nella Larsen’s <i>Quicksand</i> .....	60
CHAPTER TWO: The “Social Lives” of Things and Persons in Fannie Hurst’s <i>Back Street</i> .....	101
SECTION TWO: National (Non)Fictions of Collective Subjects and Scarce Things .....	140
CHAPTER THREE: “The Lowest Trash You Can Find?” Abundance and Shortage in James Agee and Walker Evans’ <i>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</i> ....	157
CHAPTER FOUR: “Biology of America”: “Human-nonhuman assemblages” in John Joseph Mathews’ <i>Talking to the Moon</i> .....	211
POSTSCRIPT .....	258
WORKS CITED .....	264

## INTRODUCTION:

### “Objects of Emancipation”: The Political Dreams of Modernism

*Without personification, there is no law, at least as we know it.*

—Joseph Slaughter<sup>1</sup>

*The human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman.*

—Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup>

*Stuff is ubiquitous, and problematic . . . The idea that stuff somehow drains away our humanity, as we dissolve into the sticky mess of plastic and other commodities, is really an attempt to retain a rather simplistic and false view of pure and prior unsullied humanity.*

—Daniel Miller<sup>3</sup>

*The overdetermined nature of all political identities is not established a priori in a transcendental horizon, but is always the result of concrete processes and practices.*

—Ernesto Laclau<sup>4</sup>

When in 2010 the Supreme Court extended First Amendment protections from human persons to corporate political actors as well as unions in the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* case, the press on all sides of the political spectrum went berserk,<sup>5</sup> alternately praising the Court for protecting free speech and condemning the Court’s decision, and what

---

<sup>1</sup> *Human Rights, Inc.* 22.

<sup>2</sup> *We Have Never Been Modern* 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Stuff* 5.

<sup>4</sup> *On Populism* 249.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Chris Good’s “Citizens United Decision: Republicans Like It, Liberals Don’t”; Ken Klukowski’s “Founding Fathers Smiling After Supreme Court Campaign Finance Ruling”; and a discussion on NPR titled “‘Citizens United’ Ruling Opened Floodgates on Groups’ Ad Spending.”

many came to view as its apparently unproblematic view of the human–nonhuman divide.<sup>6</sup> Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who praised the decision, argued that “[f]or too long, some [i.e., corporations] in this country have been deprived of full participation in the political process” and said that “the Supreme Court took an important step in the direction of restoring the First Amendment rights of these groups.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, many cultural commentators believed that corporations were far less excluded from the political process than many persons, and that they should never be granted political rights reserved for human political subjects.

However, this landmark decision was not the first time in American legal discourse that the category of “person,” as a “subject” with political rights, didn’t refer to a human person, and was defined not in relation to a person’s innate human-ness, but rather in relation to her economic and social power, property, gender, race, or national origin.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there is a long history of legal personhood simultaneously being denied to human subjects and extended to nonhuman actors in American culture. The 2010 Court’s decision therefore offers a good occasion to revisit this history in the context of debates about the roles of, and boundaries between, humans and nonpersons in the American political, economic, and literary culture of the previous century.

---

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the Supreme Court’s decision was not unanimous, and Justice John Paul Stevens, joined by Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, and Sonia Sotomayor, presented a dissenting view. Justice Stevens stressed the importance of upholding the distinction between the political speech of American citizens and the political speech of corporate political actors. Stevens offered a compelling point when he warned that this Court’s decision extends the rights to free political speech to corporations at a time when the free speech of actual human persons (students, prisoners, members of the armed forces, foreigners, and governmental employees) is routinely and significantly limited. The transcript of the Court’s decision as well as the audio recording of the opinion announcement is available at [http://www.oyez.org/cases/2000-2009/2008/2008\\_08\\_205/opinion/](http://www.oyez.org/cases/2000-2009/2008/2008_08_205/opinion/).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Good.

<sup>8</sup> See Gregory A. Mark’s groundbreaking essay on personification, corporation, and American law. Mark cites several instances in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American law in which constitutional legal protections awarded to human persons (citizens) were extended to corporations, such as in the Railroad Tax cases and in *First National Bank of Boston vs. Bellotti* (Mark 1442, 1460).

Gregory Mark suggests that from the middle of the nineteenth century through the 1920s, nonhuman entities such as corporations began to achieve human, “real person” identity in American legal discourse and practice (1455-1483). Paradoxically, this process was taking place at a time when actual human “claimants” to justice<sup>9</sup> were legally only partially human or “real”: at the time, certain people were defined as dependent, nonautonomous, semilegal persons, if not actually incapacitated objects of the law.<sup>10</sup> For example, Native Americans were not considered persons until 1879<sup>11</sup> or US citizens until 1924, and were often legally “restricted” well into the middle of the twentieth century. The political and cultural participation of African Americans was severely limited through the economic, cultural, and sociospatial barriers of Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws,<sup>12</sup> for instance. Likewise, local and federal laws restricted women’s mobility, ability to own property, receive education, control their sexuality, and, last but not least, participate in the political process through voting (at least until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920).

However, the early twentieth century also initiated a series of contradictory cultural and political exclusions from as well as incorporations into the American polity; and the political integration of the corporate nonhuman entities I described at the beginning of my introduction was just one of many such arbitrary incorporations. It’s difficult to offer a genealogy of specific processes and events that led to such incorporations and exclusions, and the fact that we often

---

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Fraser uses the term in *Scales of Justice* (2, 12, 59).

<sup>10</sup> I am thinking here specifically of what Johnson et al. called “alienation of labor” laws in the South, which, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, prevented the free mobility of farm laborers, sharecroppers and tenants, black and white alike, and tied the labor of individual workers to a particular landowner and his or her land (in Maharidge and Williamson 13).

<sup>11</sup> *United States Ex Rel. Standing Bear v. Crook*. U.S. District Court in Omaha, Nebraska 1879.

<sup>12</sup> From the early 1910s through the 1920s, several, luckily unsuccessful, amendments to the US Constitution were proposed banning interracial sex and marriage. If they had passed, the repeal of state antimiscegenation laws in the 1960s would have been much more difficult.

trace the logic of such processes by examining primarily the place of humans in the national polity does not necessarily simplify the task. In my case, the early twentieth century, various nonhuman things (modern commodities, new visual and audio technologies, mineral resources, cultural artifacts) as well as corporations achieved a considerable degree of political, economic, and cultural importance,<sup>13</sup> overshadowing certain humans in terms of their political and cultural privilege. Thus, it might be tempting, for example, to retell the national history of such incorporations in this period with an eye toward enfranchised commodities, things such as typing and sewing machines, cars, the Coca-Cola bottle, the Northrop bomber, the Wurlitzer jukebox, or the Kodak camera, as Phil Patton does in his aptly titled *MADE IN USA: The Secret Histories of the Things that Made America*.

However, I contend that shifts in the political, economic, and cultural significance of objects are directly related to the social position of human subjects. Thus, I want to pay equal attention to the political, cultural, and economic integrations of objects *and* humans. I will start, therefore, with an instance—not the first, and only one of many—of the sort of strange human-object incorporations into the economy of the nation that literally fused together people and machines and produced a new biotechnology of the political. I am speaking, perhaps obviously, of the “Taylor method” that revolutionized the practice of labor. Taylorism transformed the character of the American economy and of national politics from the beginning of the 1900s on,

---

<sup>13</sup> Different things were enfranchised differently yet significantly in the early-twentieth-century American culture. New modern commodities and technologies not only became not only important to but also emblematic of American national identity and economy. Intellectual property, regulated by the 1906 Copyright Act, was granted state and federal protections. The political agency of petroleum was confirmed equally by those who criticized its power (see John Ise’s *The United States Oil Policy*) and those who supported it (see Harold L. Ickes’ *Fightin’ Oil*).

and was one of several incoherent, yet profoundly transformative, human-thing fusions I will turn to in a moment.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Winslow Frederic Taylor conceived a mode of labor management aimed at increasing the efficiency of humans by coordinating their work with that of new machines, literally integrating workers' human bodies into the national economy. In his description of his groundbreaking method, Taylor explained that he understood human labor and, specifically, the human body to be one of the most important national resources. Equating the "inefficient" movements of undisciplined workers' bodies to a waste of material resources, he prophesied a national crisis unless such human movements were regulated (6).

The whole country . . . recognized the importance of conserving our material resources and a large movement has been started which will be effective in accomplishing this object. . . .

We can see our forests vanishing, our water-powers going to waste, our soil being carried by floods into the sea; and the end of our coal and our iron is in sight. But our larger wastes of human effort, which go on every day through such of our acts as are blundering, ill-directed, or inefficient, and which Mr. Roosevelt refers to as a lack of "national efficiency," are less visible, less tangible, and are but vaguely appreciated.

We can see and feel the waste of material things. Awkward, inefficient, or ill-directed movements of men, however, leave nothing visible or tangible behind them. ("The Principles of Scientific Management" 5-6)<sup>14</sup>

In his managerial work and in his writings on the subject, Taylor drew a straight line that connected this archetypal body of the American worker to the machine he or she operated, and to the very heart of the nation. The economic fabric of American economic life consisted of, Taylor argued, things and what Michel Foucault came to later define as "biopower."<sup>15</sup> Taylor made it clear that the disciplined body and national prosperity were inextricably connected, and that both

---

<sup>14</sup> "The Principles" was originally published in 1911.

<sup>15</sup> In *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-1978* 1-27.

depended on the elimination of waste, whether in the “ill-directed movements of men” or in the material waste of natural resources. In his vision, disciplined bodies of men working in unison would produce things, and thus produce national prosperity and, later, a national culture that the mass of newly incorporated workers produced and consumed. The synchronized movement of human bodies making things was one mode through which humans were absorbed into the national economic and cultural system in the beginning of the twentieth century.

However, not all human bodies were invited to participate in this project of great national and economic incorporation: female, ethnic, or disabled bodies were often explicitly excluded through legal, cultural, and economic measures taking place at the local, state, or federal levels. For example, Congress approved several exclusionary measures that prohibited or severely restricted immigration or naturalization of (female) persons of Asian descent. First, Congress extended the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; passed the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 (which denied permanent residence to East Asians); and then passed the Tydings–McDuffie Act of 1934, which stripped Filipinos of their American citizenship and imposed restrictive immigration quotas. On the other hand, several other marginalized political groups, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and the poor, received some legal recognition, and eventually won some legal protections based on the acknowledgment of their “legal personhood” in the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Among these important human rights expansions were the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment; the 1924 Immigration Act (the same act that limited the rights of Asian immigrants granted American citizenship to Native

---

<sup>16</sup> We should note here the peculiar situation of African Americans. Unlike (white) women and Native Americans, African American males became American citizens with voting rights prior to the twentieth century. However, their political and economic rights were in fact constantly chipped away by a multiplicity of legal maneuvers enacted on the state level (through Jim Crow laws, exclusionary covenant laws, and restrictions placed on voting through literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and voting taxes).

Americans); and various New Deal measures that served to alleviate widespread poverty through programs of limited redistribution of wealth and of limited access to paid employment to social subjects across the country.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, in the early twentieth century, as in our own times, the debates assessing the varying degrees of humanity of different social groups were widespread, as was the legal, cultural, economic, and physical segregation of all those classed as “different humanities” (Mike Davis 234). In a sense, during these years, human rights were not publicly articulated in terms of the more universalist (if still gendered) codes of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), a later project of post–World War II international culture. In the fragmentariness of multicultural America and her political and cultural life, the universalist fictions of the US Constitution or its Amendments were not read to “incorporate” all humans.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the political identities of marginalized groups were negotiated more often with regard to each group’s different social position, racial markers, or gender, than with regard to their similarities—let alone their shared human-ness. What mattered instead in the early-twentieth-century articulations of human rights (or, more specifically, humans’ political rights) was an emphasis on social characteristics or economic importance considered to be unique, or the established modes of each group’s participation with the US culture.

---

<sup>17</sup> I am thinking here of the Sheppard–Towner Act of 1929, the Wagner Act of 1935, and the Fair Labor Standard Act of 1938 as well as the work of numerous New Deal agencies in the 1930s (WPA, FSA, CCC, etc.).

<sup>18</sup> For example, the First, Fourth, and Fifth Amendments used words such as “people” and “person” without any disclaimers that would automatically exclude women or nonwhite person from either category, and yet the protections offered by these Amendments didn’t extend to women and ethnic persons. Similarly, there was nothing in the language of the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendments that would directly exclude women from the category of “person” or “citizen,” and these terms did not automatically apply to women prior to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, in 1920.

Moreover, as I said before, these debates about the legal personhood and degrees of humanity of different people took place at around the same time when nonhuman entities, such as corporations, achieved the legal status of “real” persons (Mark 1464). There were, of course, several reasons why, for example, corporations were granted “real” person status, not the least of which was the need to liberate corporations from the power of states<sup>19</sup> in an increasingly trans-state and global America. However, such legal personification of nonhuman entities produced important legal and cultural models according to which such nonhuman entities were to be considered “autonomous, creative, and self-directed human being[s]” (Mark 1478) that could often act independently of the laws of the state, and that had “control over the collective property of the corporation’s members” (1443).

While it may be fitting to decry such transformations within the American legal code and economic practices, I believe it might be just as important to explore how the category of legal personhood, and the modes of agency afforded to “things,” could become especially attractive to those human subjects deprived of legal rights and recognitions at the time.<sup>20</sup> If in the 1920s commodities could circulate across state and national boundaries, and across the boundaries of racially segregated physical spaces, wouldn’t such objects’ mobility be appealing to those human subjects whose movements were restricted?<sup>21</sup> If African or South American artifacts were treated

---

<sup>19</sup> Originally, corporations were created through charter grants from states, and were correspondingly viewed as “artificial” legal persons subject to the state’s oversight (Mark 1441).

<sup>20</sup> Even the infamous “Taylor method,” as well as Fordism, which deprived workers of the control of their bodies while at work, can be seen in fact as a human rights transaction, a “bargain,” which took away workers’ agency while in the workplace, but granted them more power as a class of consumers (Cross 20). Gary Cross argues that as part of this bargain, “labor would cede its claims over the workplace to management in exchange for high personally disposable income and shorter hours” (20).

<sup>21</sup> The chapters that follow will discuss several examples of human subjects whose mobility was restricted to varying degrees. In section one, I discuss restrictions placed on single, unmarried, or poor women, African American women, and Jewish Americans; and in section two, I discuss how labor obligations tied sharecroppers to particular owners’ lands.

with care, treasured, and protected when publicly presented in museums and at World's Fairs, wouldn't such publicly displayed protection of their physical integrity seem worth emulating to those human subjects whose physical violation was common in the South and rarely recognized as crime? My point is that if legal, economic, or cultural personification, divorced from the humanity of their bearers, guaranteed social, economic, and cultural privileges openly denied entire groups of people at the time, it might be important to look at nonhuman entities as those bestowed with more rights and privileges. Thus, in contrast with scholarship that places human rights and reification at opposite ends, my project intends to examine whether and how things were considered models for the rights of actual humans in modernist culture.

Scholarship on early-twentieth-century American culture has been saturated with work on the presence of matter and things in the aesthetics of modernist avant-gardes. On the other hand, critics interested in, among other topics, the ethnic, women's, and proletarian literatures and cultures of the period speak of the reification of human persons with great critical concern. For example, in a recent book, Cornel West says,

I come from a particular tradition of struggle. My people have been on intimate terms with the constant threat of social death. No legal status, no social standing, no public value—you were only a commodity to be bought and sold. (*Hope on a Tightrope* 157)

We instantly recognize that what West defines as a commodification of people who were nonwhite, or non-Anglo-American, must be understood as a degrading and dehumanizing practice.

My dissertation then, aims to combine the concerns of these two seemingly incompatible approaches, one that centers exclusively on the presence of objects of modernist culture within the examples of "modernist artistry" (Jaffe 7) and one concerned with the human, political, and

cultural rights of people, even if I see objectification as a more complex phenomenon than just a uniform and fundamental threat to humanization, a process leading to political subordination and “social death.” I want to analyze modernist aesthetics and various modes of commodification, but I also want to ask different and perhaps seemingly unacceptable questions. Is it possible, given the importance of the enfranchised objects of modernist culture—fashion, cars, artifacts, new technology, mineral resources, property, or other “power-things”<sup>22</sup>—to the national, economic, and cultural well-being of early-twentieth-century America, to see *things* as instruments of a modernist reimagining of personhood? If being human guaranteed so few protections in and of itself, unless one were white, male, Anglo-American, middle- or upper-class, and preferably able-bodied and heterosexual, wouldn’t being an “autonomous, creative” and propertied legal person such as a corporation seem more desirable, more liberatory, and, in some instances, actually more achievable? Similarly, legal and political rights depend on, among other things, norms and practices that are widely legible and conventional, a fact that opens up an interesting issue for modernist literary studies that are still very concerned with exceptional products of literary culture. Hence the specific focus in my dissertation on the conventional genres of the modernist period, the novel of formation and the documentary. In my project, I want to explore the role of such generic conventions, often viewed as nonmodernist, in modifying and “canonizing” new narrative possibilities of personhood (Slaughter 144). In other words, legible and recognizably conventional literary forms might be more radical than we think, and certainly more important to the process of normatizing and conventionalizing new narratives of personhood.

---

<sup>22</sup> I use this term after Jane Bennet in *Vibrant Matter* (xvi).

Let's think, for example, about Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (1925). In the novel, Sara Smolinsky, a Jewish American immigrant, wants to become a "person," a phrase she repeats over and over throughout the book to emphasize the importance of her goal and the drastic measures (leaving her family, surviving a grueling work schedule, and living in poor conditions) she must take to achieve it (28, 75, 159, 172, 237). Readers have no doubt that she is human. She has a family, she works, she starves; she craves affection, fittingly hates her father, and wants self-fulfillment rather than unending self-sacrifice. But she doesn't think of herself as a person in Gregory Mark's terms, that is, as an "autonomous, creative, and self-directed human being" who can own things (1478). To change this, she begins to make money and to control how she spends it. She also gets an education, begins to make decisions about the ownership and use of her free time, and last, but not least, saves money to buy all-important modern commodities, fine suits, hats, coats, and matching shoes (*Bread Givers* 237-243). Only then does she feel she can "make herself for a person" (172). With a \$1,000 in her pocket she eventually announces that "Sara Smolinsky, from Hester Street, changed into a person!" (237). In other words, Yeziarska recognizes that one is not automatically a legal person by virtue of being born a human. A human person must *become* a legal person.

We can hear echoes of the same recognition that human-ness is divorced from cultural citizenship and legal personhood in many early-twentieth-century productions. For example, in one of his speeches, W. E. B. Du Bois argues that "The Negro problem"

is the question of the *future*<sup>23</sup> status of the ten million Americans of Negro descent. It must be remembered that these persons are Americans by birth and descent. . . . Moreover, Negroes are not barbarians. They are, as a mass, poor and ignorant; but they are growing rapidly in wealth and intelligence, and larger numbers of them demand the

---

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis mine.

rights and privileges of American citizens as a matter of undoubted desert. (“The Negro Problem” in *W.E. B. Du Bois Speaks* 219)<sup>24</sup>

Du Bois understood that for African Americans, the possibilities of cultural personhood were, first of all, tied to national citizenship. At the same time, he was aware that in the aftermath of slavery, and in the context of Jim Crow laws, African Americans who were already territorially and nationally incorporated would have to increase their chances of achieving the privileges of legal personhood through education and “intelligence,” by which Du Bois meant a sense of cultural heritage, the possession of cultural capital, and not simply an innate talent, in addition to accumulating more wealth.<sup>25</sup> My point is that in such a formulation, neither economic nor cultural capital is an intrinsic quality of human-ness; instead, both can be produced through intimacy with cultural material (artifacts of culture, education, and so on) or with commodities (by making, buying, or displaying them). Members of and sympathizers with socially marginalized groups recognized that human-ness didn’t automatically guarantee legal protections or cultural privileges. Both Yeziarska and Du Bois see personification as an incremental process, literally as a movement, an “uplift” that can be achieved through various social, cultural, economic strategies. Yeziarska, a Jewish ethnic American but not a nonwhite American, is, of course, more optimistic than Du Bois about the success of such strategies. In any case, my main aim here is to recover the early twentieth century’s debates about reification and personhood. I

---

<sup>24</sup> This speech was delivered 1911 at a London conference about West and East. It is anthologized in *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks* (218-225). In another speech, “How to Celebrate the Semicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation,” delivered in 1913, Du Bois talks about the importance of material representation of the cultural heritage of African Americans; he suggests “mak[ing] use of all the different things and spiritual things which affect the colored people. For instance, maps and charts, and models and mechanical figures of various sizes, and marble, and pictures, and perhaps, photographs could be shown” (227).

<sup>25</sup> One of course should not confuse his position with that of Booker T. Washington, for whom accumulation of wealth (through the manufacturing and consumption of things) was the only way into the national polity at the time. Du Bois placed much greater emphasis on possessing cultural capital.

believe that the political, economic, and cultural actors at the time recognized the interconnection between reification and personification in very nuanced ways, both acknowledging and protesting the devastating power of objectification but also exploring new possibilities of emancipation through things. Examining such early-twentieth-century histories of reification, which can expand political rights, can help us trace reification's forgotten, often liberatory dimensions. Not less importantly, it might offer us a new way of looking at seemingly straightforward generic conventions of the modernist era as being more politically radical than usually thought in their pursuit of narratives of incremental humanization, of incremental achievement of political rights.

Several recent projects about things and literature charted new paths for literary studies invested in new materialisms, and greatly influenced my thinking about modernism, personification, and reification, and I would like to acknowledge their importance here. First of all, Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), as well as his subsequent editorial project, *Things* (2004), call for and demonstrate new ways of thinking about inanimate objects in American writing, ways that move beyond market-based materialist analysis.<sup>26</sup> Brown also provides a useful "prehistory of the modernist fascination with things" (*Sense* 14) that illuminates what he takes to be "a fundamentally modernist question (Williams'

---

<sup>26</sup> I would also like to acknowledge the work of Mark Seltzer, especially his 1992 *Bodies and Machines*, as well as Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects*. However, the interest in objects and people has been most revived by the theoretical and editorial work of Bill Brown in *Things*. By inviting scholars working in diverse disciplines of art history, sociology, anthropology, visual studies, history of science, and so on, Brown wanted to open up new modes of analyzing the nonhuman within the study of culture. There is also increased interest in the study of modernism and materiality among scholars working with the "bibliographic code" (Bornstein 1) and those working on modernism and the "ordinary." See, for example, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, by Liesl Olson, and *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*, by George Bornstein. For a reassessment of recent materialist-centered critical theory, see the recent collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost.

question, Lèger's question, Heidegger's question, Sartre's question), the question of things and their thingness (variously understood)" (*A Sense Of Things* 12-13). My own interest in modernist things centers on a particular aspect of the "fundamental question": the politics and aesthetic of things' rights. Second, Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* (2008) offers provocative readings of anthropomorphism and objectification in law, lyric poetry, and diverse products of popular culture. Her projects offer an overview of a dazzling array of person-thing combinations in different discourses. My own work doesn't share her premise,<sup>27</sup> the same understanding of reification, because I focus on the specific, if counterintuitive, liberatory potential of the nonhuman. However, I am indebted to Johnson for her tremendous work with multiple archives because they illuminate the multiplicity of human–nonhuman fabrications. Next, Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc., The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007) provides the most sustained comparative analysis so far of legal and literary forms of world literature in the aftermath of the 1948 *Universal Human Rights Declaration*. His work informs my understanding of the social, "cultural work" (to use Jane Tompkins' phrase<sup>28</sup>) that novels of formation and documentaries do for the disenfranchised political subjects of the modernist era by engaging with human rights discourse in legible, conventional forms. Finally, I rely on the work of scholars who investigate political and cultural incorporations of ethnic Americans: Joel Pfister's *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern*, Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, and Jinqi Ling's *Narrating*

---

<sup>27</sup> Johnson states that the focus of her work is not "the problem" of "treati[ing] things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure that we treat persons as persons" (2). In my view, human persons are treated much worse than things, as things often possess more political and cultural rights and privileges. Second, like Daniel Miller, I want to avoid a critical perspective that places "unsullied humanity" and "thingness" at opposite ends (*Stuff* 5).

<sup>28</sup> *Sensational Designs* xv.

*Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature*. All three provide indispensable models for scholarship that examines literary production in relation to modes of political being and the cultural participation of marginalized social subjects of early-twentieth-century America.<sup>29</sup>

In less explicit ways, my work also borrows from discussions of things in formalist criticism<sup>30</sup> centered on the object of text or a genre, as well as from Marxist-inspired scholarship. Both made important contributions to the study of reification by highlighting its role in literary forms and forms of social organization; both have also been productively expanded by other disciplines and by critical paradigms—feminism and gender studies, critical legal and race studies, anthropology, political science and political ecology—that, by default, recognize the complexity of thing–people fabrications.<sup>31</sup> Feminists and queer studies scholars (from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler to Lauren Berlant) have also been preoccupied with the corporeal, physical importance of the body as a person and a thing. Legal studies have offered particularly useful examinations of the way things and person are co-constituted in the social realm (Pottage and Mundy). Anthropologists such as Laura Ann Stoler, Bruno Latour, and Arjun Appadurai have consistently called for the reintegration of the study of nonhuman matter into the humanities, in ways that are attentive but not limited to the study of the “fetishism of commodities” (Karl Marx, *Capital* 81) or of the commodification of humans as a process of

---

<sup>29</sup> I would like to add here that, interestingly, both Lowe and Ling focus on processes similar to those I emphasize here, yet their work details the circumstances of political inclusion and exclusion of Asian Americans, which I do not cover in my research.

<sup>30</sup> I am also indirectly influenced by art scholarship, which tends to focus on the formal attributes of things, even if my reading of material objects is much more cultural studies–oriented. See, for example, William Rubin's infamous *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*. and a very interesting project by Edward Sullivan, *The Language of Objects*.

<sup>31</sup> I repeat the phrase after Alain Pottage, included in Pottage and Mundy, “Introduction: The Fabrication of Persons and Things” (1-39).

involuntary subordination (which it undoubtedly is in many, but not all, cases). Finally, recent work in the political sciences and political ecology by such writers as Donna Haraway, Arturo Escobar, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennet has focused on the connections between humans and different kinds of matter, man-made and biophysical. It is in these several critical traditions that I would like to place my project on modernist “objects of emancipation.”

Daniel Miller argues in *Stuff* that “[o]bjectification is a dialectical theory of culture, not just capitalist culture, because contradiction is not just a new feature of modern capitalism, or an aspect of living in cities” (68). For him, as for others working in anthropology-inspired critical paradigms, objectification “is intrinsic to the very processes we describe as culture” (68), and there is, in a sense, no way out of it. No discourses operating on the human versus nonhuman dyad, separating “the human family” from inanimate matter, recognizing the “inherent dignity”<sup>32</sup> of humans only in contrast to that of nonhumans, can adequately account for the mutual interpenetration of people and things, or for the particular conditions and processes that grant only some humans “the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, I don’t intend to celebrate “the parliament of things” just yet in my work (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* 142). Rather, my aim is to explore instances of the reification of people as a key person-constituting force that some early-twentieth-century social subjects comprehend; they attempt to mollify its most brutal effects, while also redirecting some of its creative, emancipatory potential in literary productions. In other words, I hope to rescue objectification from its infamy, by recovering the plurality of modernist reifications through my readings of early-twentieth-century texts.

---

<sup>32</sup> These quotes come from the Preamble to *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), available on the United Nations’ website (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>).

<sup>33</sup> Article 6 of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

My project focuses on American culture between the 1920s and 1940s, prior to the articulation of international human rights in universal terms embracing the entire “human family,” which, in the idealization of *The Universal Human Rights Declaration*, intends to move all humans to the highest place in the political valuation scale (Michael Thompson 11-13). I am interested in diverse American discourses, from that earlier time, discourses that engage with the question of human rights but that do so via the privileging of different persons and things, different “objects of emancipation.” Thus, my title, with its obvious play on words, fuses the complex meanings of the word “object” as a thing, a tool, and a focus, and as a subject of, as in an “object of study.” It also blurs the boundaries between human subjects and the material objects of modernist culture, that is, those disenfranchised humans who were eager to emancipate their political and cultural position to the level of full cultural participation, and those nonhuman objects I call modernist “humanizing things”—fashion, artifacts, gifts, mineral resources—whose proximity to disenfranchised humans was expected to have a liberatory effect. “Objects of emancipation,” therefore, frames a project that focuses on the human subjects of political debates about cultural and political personhood at the time, and the things they were encouraged to become intimate with in order to become, in Gregory Mark’s and Anzia Yezierska’s language, “persons.”

Meanwhile, my dissertation, undoubtedly informed by the diverse works of Daniel Miller, Bruno Latour, John Slaughter, and Donna Haraway, also has a much narrower focus and purpose. I want to offer a closer examination of the diverse ways in which the objectification of human persons was understood, practiced, and debated at a particular moment in American history when the political and economic rights of nonhumans were easily expanded while the legal rights of persons who were nonwhite, non-Anglo, not heterosexual, female, or disabled

were not. Thus, I want to explore the possibilities of liberatory and dangerous reifications as they were conceived of, practiced, and debated in early-twentieth-century multicultural and multiracial American culture. At the same time, I want to examine the role of conventional literary forms in the redefinition of “legal personhood” and in the production of “political identities” (Laclau, *On Populism* 249).

I intend to approach this topic not only through an interdisciplinary critical lens but also via three instances of framing,<sup>34</sup> through which I further reinforce the structure of my dissertation. First of all, I want to look at personification and reification within national (and, in fact, transnational) trends in American culture from the late 1920s through the mid-1940s: primitivism, consumerism, and nationalism. Second, I plan to examine specific generic forms traditionally associated with the exploration of personhood (the novel of formation), on the one hand, and the exploration of the material world on the other (literary modernist documentary). Finally, I want to answer questions about the liberatory potential of reification through my readings of work by writers who were deeply involved in the debates about cultural personhood of marginalized people, Nella Larsen, Fannie Hurst, John Joseph Mathews, and James Agee (and Walker Evans), and who employed, at least initially, conventional cultural forms.

By structuring my argument in such a way, I intend to achieve two goals. First, I want to demonstrate the prevalence of things in diverse discourses and disciplines concerned with new political, economic, and cultural incorporations of human subjects in early-twentieth-century America. Second, I want to examine specific novels and documentaries as at once products of

---

<sup>34</sup> My dissertation borrows heavily from Bruno Latour’s argument that things produce new political spheres that are not static but hybrid and constantly transforming. However, through my “framing” strategy, which I borrow in part from Nancy Fraser’s work in *Scales of Justice*, I want to bring equal attention to more static economic and political systems and networks and their importance to human rights.

larger political, economic, and cultural forces as well as individual responses by writers. I believe that these writers' unique and multiple social positions as ethnic persons (Hurst and Mathews), cryptosocialists (Hurst and Agee), racial and sexual others (Larsen and Mathews), and women (Hurst and Larsen) had a profound impact on their critique and reinvention of liberatory reification.

Thus, my dissertation focuses on how Nella Larsen in *Quicksand* (1928), Fannie Hurst in *Back Street* (1931), James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and John Joseph Mathews in *Talking to the Moon* (1945) adapt generic conventions to comment on the emancipatory potential that objects were imagined to serve in the political dreams of marginalized people in early-twentieth-century America. I contend that all of the writers (as well as Walker Evans, the photographer who collaborated with James Agee on *Famous Men*) were critical of how the incorporation of new political subjects was articulated in the primitivism, consumerism, and nationalism of the early twentieth century. All of the writers, however, also hinted at (Larsen and Hurst) or advertised (Mathews and Agee) alternative modes of reification that could prove liberatory, that could constitute humans differently, better, at least in their own works. I want to recover such narratives of reification because they offer narrative recipes for gaining human and political rights incrementally.

I am interested, for several reasons, in how the large-scale trends of the period, consumerism, primitivism, and nationalism, envisioned the incorporation of new political subjects, New Women, Negroes, Jewish and Native Americans, by encouraging their engagement with diverse "objects of emancipation," among them, empowering commodities,

artifacts, or keepsakes, waste, raw material, and natural resources.<sup>35</sup> Each of these phenomena played a crucial role in the early-twentieth-century transformation of American culture. Each gained prominence as a movement, trend, cultural practice, and an ideology that was credited with a revival of a different realm of American culture. In other words, all three corresponded to, in Nancy Fraser's terms, three "frames" crucial to any articulation of social justice: redistribution, representation, and recognition (142-159).

Primitivism was said to have reinvigorated American culture, just as consumerism, at least prior to the 1929 market crash, was said to have reinvigorated the American economy. Similarly, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's brand of nationalism (as well as John Collier's) had a long-lasting impact on the American national and Native American tribal political systems. And yet, paradoxically, each of these seemingly irreconcilable trends, advertising capitalist accumulation, or a disengagement from capitalist economy, or a politics of sharing goods within national boundaries, intervened simultaneously in all the other realms, remaking the political, economic, and cultural fabric of American culture and, at various points, reinforcing one another's rhetorical power.

Primitivism influenced the aesthetics of the avant-garde arts (T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound), transformed the narrative language of documentary cinema in Frances and Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), and popularized blackface as a

---

<sup>35</sup> Of course, "new" is not a very accurate term, although it was in wide use at the time. Some of the proposed incorporations referred to people who were not incomers, immigrants, but who had lived within the territorial boundaries of the United States: women, African Americans, and the poor. Moreover, there were also social groups, such as Native American tribes, that had always inhabited what became the US territory but which, at the time, both were and were not incorporated into the national polity as American citizens. There were also those social groups of recent immigrants, Asian or Jewish Americans, for instance, whose possibilities of acculturation to American culture were vigorously debated at the time.

passport into American culture in *The Jazz Singer* (1927). At the same time, it sold cigarettes,<sup>36</sup> or mobilized racist movements in support of war,<sup>37</sup> or in support of creative industries.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, primitivization of American society in the national arts was instrumental in popularizing the Roosevelt-era New Deal nationalistic policies of material redistribution.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, consumerism, as envisioned by its architects, Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers and Edward Bernays, the father of American public relations, was indispensable to America's economic prosperity.<sup>40</sup> However, by facilitating the transformation of the American economy from a "needs culture to a desires culture,"<sup>41</sup> consumerism transformed American nationalism, affected the political process, and, surprisingly, allowed new subjects into the national polity, as long as they partook in the "immaterial labor" of consumption.<sup>42</sup> Roosevelt was an expert at tying issues of economy, culture, and the national incorporations of new subjects (none of whom were really "new") to the very transformations of national identity he sought to achieve. As perfectly illustrated in his Second Inaugural Address, Roosevelt discussed in one breath the economic crisis, "the new materials of social justice," and the poverty of "one-third of the country's population." Roosevelt also made it perfectly clear, in his speech and in his work, that

---

<sup>36</sup> See for example *Admiral Cigarettes* (1897), a short commercial featuring actors in Native American headdresses, reimagining peace pipe-smoking as a twentieth-century consumer activity with the potential to bring different people together.

<sup>37</sup> *Our Enemy: The Japanese* (1943) or *My Japan* (1944).

<sup>38</sup> Blockbusters such as *Gone with the Wind* (1937) are a good example of this trend.

<sup>39</sup> See Barbara Melosh's brilliant work on the New Deal visual culture and performance art in *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theatre*. New Deal visual arts consistently "primitivized" women's social roles.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Paul Mazur's *American Prosperity* (1928), *New Roads to Prosperity* (1931), and *The Standard We Raise* (1953), as well as Edward Bernays' "The Engineering of Consent."

<sup>41</sup> I am referring here to the concept that Mazur articulated in his *American Prosperity* (25).

<sup>42</sup> I don't mean it in the sense of Maurizio Lazzarato's understanding of immaterial labor as that pertaining to the "produc[tion of] informational and cultural content of a commodity" (in Virno and Hardt 133). Rather, I am referring to the Veblenian sense of the labor of consumption as a "conspicuous" activity (in Lerner 111).

“the new order of *things*”<sup>43</sup> would first mean a literal reordering of things. A redistribution of material wealth was instrumental to the transformation of the national character, and to the processes of making “every American citizen the subject of his country’s interest and concern.”<sup>44</sup>

All three phenomena, then, had simultaneous economic, political, and cultural dimensions. All three were also tied to legacies of colonization, political disenfranchisement, and economic exploitation, albeit in different ways. Each also had a powerful aesthetic presence in visual and print cultures. Yet, what’s most important for my project is that each of these pervasively modernist phenomena imagined the incorporation of new political subjects by first rearticulating their relationships with material objects. Human rights were always articulated vis à vis material objects. Thus, the human rights expansion that each trend alluded to narrated possibilities of political and cultural inclusions of people not only in relation to things but “in things.”<sup>45</sup>

Primitivism, in its many guises, often grudgingly rearticulated the incorporation of racial subjects whose supposed distance from capitalist modernity prevented their full participation in American culture. Primitivists as diverse as Paul Gauguin, Robert Flaherty, and even W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>46</sup> thought that objects of culture could provide the entryway into the American national

---

<sup>43</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> The audio recording of President Roosevelt’s address as well as its transcript is provided by a joint project of George Mason University and City University of New York through the “History Matters” multimedia archive, available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5105/>.

<sup>45</sup> I am alluding here to Bill Brown’s discussion of the difference between the “history of things” and the “history in things” in “How to Do Things with Things” (935-936). He explains the latter as the “crystallization of anxieties and aspiration that linger . . . in the material object” (935). I, however, have in mind a broader understanding of the remaking of human rights in things. I mean not only the diverse things that were valued most in each of these trends, but also the material artifacts that enabled such thing-person fusion: ads, painting, murals, novels, documentaries, and so on.

<sup>46</sup> It could be argued that Du Bois had little to do with avant-garde or popular primitivism of the time. However, he consistently invoked the rhetoric of primitivism, by emphasizing the importance of African “art objects,” to argue for the political inclusion of African American subjects.

imaginary. Proponents of early-twentieth-century consumerism were quite concerned with the disenfranchisement of their most important consumer base, women. According to advertising industry estimates, “between 80 and 85%” of actual purchases at the time were made by women (Marchand 66), and advertisers explicitly fused the language of suffrage with the language of consumption of modern commodities to appeal to women.

In part as a result of all this, American culture of the early twentieth century was a particularly vibrant but confusing “story space” (Slaughter 143), where key narratives of national and transnational scope offered conflicting advice on how to become a person by transforming one’s relationship to different “stuff.” If one were female, one should buy and spend; if one were an ethnic person, one was less welcome, but through an accumulation of wealth and by means of an intimate engagement with cultural artifacts (both material and immaterial), one could try to prove her worthiness of the status of legal personhood. Under Taylorism and Fordism, workers should discipline their bodies so that their synchronized and constantly repeated movements could efficiently produce the new things America wanted. On the other hand, almost simultaneously Roosevelt and other New Dealers suggested that Americans should share their wealth with the less fortunate, rather than focusing on self-centered accumulation or “conspicuous consumption” (in Lerner 111). The difficulty of selecting the right recipe for humanization lay not only in the questionable feasibility of each suggestion, but also in the fact that many economically marginalized subjects were further marginalized by their ethnicity and race, gender, and class, a fact that certainly didn’t escape the attention of the writers I discuss in my dissertation.

The following chapters will first trace the impact of large-scale trends that proposed different modes of absorption of new political subjects through different kinds of intimacy with

different “objects of emancipation.” Then, I will explore how these arbitrary “processes and practices” of personification that produce “political identities” (Laclau, *On Populism* 249) resonate with the generic literary forms that Nella Larsen, Fannie Hurst, John Joseph Mathews, and James Agee and Walker Evans employ and modify in their works.

John Slaughter argues that “the public sphere is a story space that not only enables but also shapes and constrains narrative” (143). He believes that

it is not simply a clearinghouse for the publication of personal narrative but a kind of story factory in which the norms of public discourse become legible in the social interactivity of storytelling and in the story forms that it disseminates, conventionalizes, and canonizes, as “socially acceptable narrative[s].”<sup>47</sup>

The sections and chapters that follow reveal the pressures of this American “story factory” as it modulates between and among the acceptable, conventional, and novel articulations of personhood and thingness. They also examine the unprecedented diversity of ways of conceiving of human rights in relation to nonhuman material: food, handicraft, and technological inventions in Hurst; artifacts, fashion, and keepsakes in Larsen; waste and crops in Agee and Evans; and oil, “nature,” and technology in Mathews.

In section one, “Novel Fabrication of Things and Female Persons,” I discuss the importance of objects in the political dreams of trends seemingly antithetical in a political sense—consumerism and primitivism—and the importance these trends and their theories of female personification held for women. Drawing on careful readings of modernist consumerist theory and on archival research in national magazine culture (*Vogue*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Messenger*) as well as New Deal visual arts, I show how consumerism integrated women’s desires into the fabric of the modernist publics. Advertising

---

<sup>47</sup> Edward Said, “Permission to Narrate” 34, qtd. in Slaughter 143-144.

became the first women-centered form of public communication claiming to offer liberation through consumer goods, once women as consumers were recognized as the main market force. I also sketch the ways in which popular primitivism (in high and national arts), less concerned with gender parity and more with racial diversity and (often anticapitalist) economic and cultural social reorganization, promised partial inclusion to disenfranchised subjects through objects, albeit ones considered exotic. I also examine the significance of its antifeminism, especially for those who were “ethnic” and female.

In chapter one, ““The Cultivation of Self”<sup>48</sup> through Objects in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” I focus on how Nella Larsen explores multiple ways of performing female personhood in her 1928 novel, *Quicksand*. Like Fannie Hurst, Larsen brings attention to how gender and race preclude the possibility of successfully “personifying” ethnic female subjects. However, Larsen also exposes the cost of the collective emancipatory process in her description of how intimate publics and their things, their material representational codes, produce the collective identity of female persons of color. In my view, Larsen is particularly sensitive to how even those publics organized around progressive agendas suppress female desires and thwart the emancipatory socialization of their female members. I argue, however, that the ways Larsen makes Helga Crane desire objects while in postpartum delirium alludes to the ways in which women’s fashion magazines hinted at the possibilities of liberatory same-sex intimacy through intimacy with consumer products.

In chapter two, “The Social Lives of Things and Persons in Fannie Hurst’s *Back Street*,” I examine Fannie Hurst’s Depression-era blockbuster novel, *Back Street* (1931). I argue that

---

<sup>48</sup> The phrase comes from Laura Stoler’s “Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen” in *Haunted by Empire* (13).

Hurst's bildungsroman complicates the generic contract of the bildungsroman by doubly gendering the narrative progress. In her novel of formation, Hurst demonstrates that objects do liberate people, while also noting that they do liberate mostly *male* persons. In fact, in *Back Street*, only objects and men successfully “fabricate” to achieve a better “social life,” as Arjun Appadurai would put it.<sup>49</sup> The majority of female actors end up as “social waste” (in the Baumanian and Veblenian sense). Thus, Hurst challenges the consumerist ideology that promises female emancipation through commodities. At the same time, though, she is also critical of the tenets of Depression-era primitivism, which promised personhood to women through their disengagement from consumer culture and a return to patriarchal domesticity. In the end, Hurst confirms that technological inventions as well as the handling of financial instruments have liberatory potential even for ethnic American men. She is also adamant that such possibilities are closed to women.

In section two, “National (Non)Fictions of Collective Subjects and Scarce Things,” I examine how Depression-era nationalism rearticulated personhood through material objects, and I provide the introduction to two chapters about modernist documentary. I discuss first how Depression-era documentary was transformed in the context of the nationalization of public resources, services, and art production. I then examine the use of new visual and audio technologies in documentary genres in the New Deal and in corporate cultural management. I argue that Depression-era nationalization, partly steeped in primitivist rhetoric, promoted a new concept of national personhood based on sharing commodities and natural resources. In other words, changing the relationship between things and entire groups of people was a means of allowing new subjects into the national body. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the market crash

---

<sup>49</sup> *The Social Life of Things*.

of 1929, national and corporate documentary arts focused their attention on the social groups most affected by the economic crisis. By addressing the sharing of the scarcity, rather than the excess of objects, they produced what Jeff Allred calls the “collective subjects” of New Deal and commercial documentaries (7).

In chapter three, “‘The Lowest Trash You Can Find?’ Abundance and Shortage in James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” I focus on Walker Evans and James Agee’s 1941 collaboration. Agee and Walker want to resist New Deal representational codes that turn poverty, the absence of material things, into a narrative mode of personification. I argue that Evans and Agee offer different narrative strategies but ultimately rely on objectification as they produce their subjects for the audiences of *Famous Men*. Agee hinges his narrative inventories of material things and sharecroppers by proposing that people and things occupy the same position of “trash” in Depression-era culture. Evans, on the other hand, aestheticizes the meager possessions of the cotton tenants, and arranges the tenants themselves as artifacts in his minimalist photos.

My last chapter, chapter four, “‘Biology of America’: John Joseph Mathews’ ‘human-nonhuman assemblages’ in *Talking to the Moon*,” focuses on John Joseph Mathews’ nature study, *Talking to the Moon* (1945). I claim that Mathews deploys the documentary genre to fabricate a new account of Osage and non-Osage persons that aims to challenge the way commodities, mineral resources, and cultural keepsakes produced collective Osage subjects in the mainstream culture of the 1920s, in separation from other Native American tribes and from mainstream American culture. Mathews undermines the Depression-era documentary rhetoric of scarcity by emphasizing the Osages’ material excess and cultural wealth. But he also emphasizes the very agency and richness of “technonature” (Escobar 1) and strives to produce a historical

“biology” of America, an account within which people are produced by social and biological forces that are mutually constitutive. His study of nature fuses indignity, whiteness, a commodified environment, and new technological inventions in, but omits femaleness from, his supposedly all-encompassing narrative of people-thing fusions.

In the closing section of my dissertation, I reemphasize the importance of objects in the modernist incorporations of humans and things. I reflect on the complexity of Larsen’s, Hurst’s, Mathews’, and Agee’s articulations of cultural personhoods, as narrowly, locally produced in relation to the physical matter of culture, economy, and politics. I conclude by placing their views in the context of more current scholarship that debates the often presumed-to-be-natural divide between material culture, persons, and narrative forms. With many scholars moving toward articulations of nonoppressive reification, it’s important to recognize, as the writers I cover in my dissertation did, that many types of objectification coexist, and that fictions of incremental humanization through things have yet to realize the liberatory potential of emancipatory objectification on a larger scale.

## SECTION ONE:

Novel Fabrications of Things and Female Persons<sup>1</sup>

*A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood . . . it is, in reality, a very queer thing.*

—Karl Marx<sup>2</sup>

*I shop therefore I am.*

—Barbara Kruger, 1987

*[P]ersons and things have multiple genealogies, and . . . their uses are too varied to be reduced to one single institutional architecture.*

—Alain Pottage<sup>3</sup>

*Capitalism . . . liberates the flows of desire, but under the social conditions that define its limits and the possibilities of its own dissolution.*

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari<sup>4</sup>

Consumerism and primitivism, key shapers of early-twentieth-century American culture, held a particular significance for women in America. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 alleviated but did not eliminate women's political disenfranchisement,<sup>5</sup> and these two modernist phenomena, at once economic, political, and cultural, presented women with

---

<sup>1</sup> I use this phrase after Alain Pottage's "Introduction: The Fabrication of Persons and Things," in Pottage and Mundy 1-39.

<sup>2</sup> "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in *Capital* 81-82.

<sup>3</sup> In Pottage and Mundy 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Anti-Oedipus* 139-140.

<sup>5</sup> The Amendment did very little, for example, to eradicate the political, social, and economic oppression of nonwhite women, whose doubly marginalized social status was enforced by racist immigration laws, Jim Crow laws, or other discriminatory measures.

alternative models of political participation before and after 1920. In this section, I want to consider how both trends imagined the participation of American women in the public sphere, the particular cultural spaces where primitivism and consumerism intertwined, and to consider, too, the reasons why American female writers of modernist novels of formation were compelled to engage with ideologies and stylistics of both consumerism and primitivism in their works.

Primitivism and consumerism have often appeared (both in the accounts of actual modernist primitivists and in those of scholars of primitivism) as oppositional discourses and practices. After all, primitivism in high art advertised itself as an expression of discontent with the materialism, industrialization, and consumerism of Western modernity. Its power, in part, depended on how well it promoted political dreams of anticapitalist, or at least antistate, communitarian social organization through stylistic exoticism and transgressions.<sup>6</sup> In other words, primitivism often advertised itself as an antidote to consumerism. On the other hand, primitivism, like consumerism, offered a promise of social equity, of remaking the public sphere to include previously marginalized groups, through the engagement with certain “things,” exotic cultural artifacts, fashion, and so on. Of course, the nature of this engagement with different objects, things, commodities, or gifts varied in primitivism and consumerism. One might say that in primitivism it relied on creative repurposing, while in consumerism, on the act of purchase; but the distinction between artistic appropriation and commercial acquisition was in fact quite blurry, especially when primitivism was widely incorporated into the language of modern advertising and the spread of primitivism depended on global, commercial economic and artistic exchanges. Acquisition and the display of things and “thingness” were central to the ideological

---

<sup>6</sup> Popular documentary films of the Flahertys were great examples of such narratives. See *Nanook*, *Moana*, or *Man of Aran*.

and political power of both. Both argued similarly that the remaking of human persons' relationship with material objects could significantly increase people's chances for gaining political rights, for achieving legal personification.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in the early twentieth century, consumerism and primitivism often were conflated in American print and visual culture. Thus, the ideological differences between the trends were often moderated by the very fact that consumerism and primitivism not only often circulated in the same popular venues, but often appeared fused in the same physical spaces or material objects of popular print and visual culture. Challenging the belief that primitivism was primarily a domain of high arts, scholars such as Ronald Bush claim that already by the 1900s, “[p]rimitivism . . . had become a road show, a public entertainment” (Barkan and Bush 9). Extremely popular World’s Fairs<sup>8</sup> and Expositions designed to promote Western economic and political interests routinely featured exhibits featuring African, Asian, and Native American arts and peoples<sup>9</sup> and were sites where many primitivist artists first experienced the diversity of the world’s cultures.<sup>10</sup> Mass magazines, often circulating in millions of copies,<sup>11</sup> featured ads that

---

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed “legal personhood” in the dissertation introduction. I rely primarily, in this section as well, on Gregory Mark’s overview of legal personification in American law.

<sup>8</sup> World’s Expositions were perhaps the most important vehicles for the spread of primitivist ideologies and aesthetics. Promoted by federal, state, and local governments; businesses; and power brokers, and attended by millions, the Fairs offered a particular medley of pay-per-view performances, exhibits, and entertainment. The Fairs’ most immediate aims were both commercial (promoting and “selling” of American economic interests, technology, science, and arts, and encouraging investment in specific regions and in specific industries) and ideological (promoting a sense of national unity, policing racial and gender boundaries, advertising “progress,” justifying American foreign policy, and so on). Their commercial success depended on attendance, and the Fairs excelled at providing widely diverse offerings to their diverse audiences.

<sup>9</sup> Fairs routinely displayed non-American or nonwhite people as objects.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Paul Gauguin acquired his first taste for exotic cultures after his visit to Expositions Universelles in Paris in 1889, an experience that prompted him to travel to Tahiti later on to salvage Tahitian culture. Both T. S. Eliot and Max Weber attended the St. Louis Exposition of 1904. Ronald Bush argues that T. S. Eliot’s encounter with the Filipinos inspired his “lifelong study of anthropology that revolutionized . . . poetry” (Barkan and Bush 4). For an interesting articulation of the parallels between the “savage” and the artist’s mind, consider T. S. Eliot’s “War Paints and Feathers” (in Flam and Deutch

incorporated, in fact depended on, primitivist images.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, popular paperbacks, further popularized by Book-of-the-Month clubs in the 1920s, as well as diverse national arts in the Depression era, often fused the two together. In the process, consumerism and primitivism significantly destabilized categories of personhood and thingness, and offered an illusion, particularly appealing to women and ethnic persons, that they could effectively enter into national publics through their engagements with the “right” kinds of things in the “right” kinds of settings.

Such incorporation of things and persons in public discourses on art, economy, and politics is what links the seemingly oppositional modes of primitivism and consumerism in the twentieth century. Modernist “things” were believed to have the power to transform the people who formed certain relationships with them. And it’s just as important to remember that the simple categories of things and persons were anything but clear in the early part of the century. Even though we may think of the consumerist objectification of women and the commodification of primitive art as thoroughly negative, degrading, dehumanizing processes, or instinctively think of things as inanimate objects and persons as humans, many scholars remind us that these categories were less than clear-cut in the early twentieth century. And in many ways they remain so.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in the first part of the twentieth century, being a human stigmatized by belonging to

---

121-122). However, Fairs were attended by millions of Americans. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, attracted 2.7 million visitors from June to November of 1898 (Rydell et al. 48); about 20 million viewers visited the St. Louis Fair from April to December 1904. The Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 attracted 18 million visitors (Rice and Hovanitz); the 1926 Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia was visited by 7 million viewers (City of Philadelphia). The Century of Progress exposition, in Chicago, was visited by 48 million people (!) in its two years of operation (Rydell et al. 85).

<sup>11</sup> *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, or *Collier’s*.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, an ad for the Lockwood Chief Motor, featuring an image of a Native man (*Collier’s* 29 June 1929). The motor, the ad argues, is as silent as a “silent chief.”

<sup>13</sup> In my dissertation introduction, I discuss Gregory Mark’s overview of the evolution of “personification” in American legal discourse, a crucial source on this matter. For scholarship interested

the “wrong” race, class, gender, or nationality could mean access to fewer social freedoms and legal protections than being a thing, a corporation, or an artifact. For example, legal protections offered by Constitutional amendments often didn’t “apply” to African Americans, Native Americans, or Asian immigrants, and crimes against their integrity were met with fewer legal repercussions than violations of the integrity of material objects that people owned. Moreover, many manufactured objects enjoyed greater legal protections (against, for example, damage, theft, acquisition, copyright infringement) and enjoyed greater mobility than certain human persons (women, sexual minorities, African Americans, Native Americans, Jewish Americans, and children), as well as greater potential for social metamorphosis. For example, consumer objects or ads could appear in racially segregated physical spaces where whites and blacks could not appear together. Gregory Mark and Joseph Slaughter remind us in their projects that in pre-1920s US legal discourse, the category of “person” had little to do with innate human-ness, or with actual human subjects.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it defined non-human subjects with economic and political privileges who could be “spontaneous, creative, and self-directed” but who didn’t have to be human (Mark 1478). Therefore, in legal discourse, corporations had become persons before African Americans achieved that status, men did so before women, and so on. Women, well into the mid-twentieth century, were conceived of in law as quasi- or partial persons, as Bruno Latour would call them.<sup>15</sup> One may argue, of course, that these were just legal fictions, but these legal fictions had a direct impact on who could participate in the public sphere, and how; on who

---

more broadly in the fuzziness of boundaries between human persons and nonhuman things, see works by Bruno Latour, Alain Pottage and Marcia Mundy, Arjun Appadurai, Barbara Johnson, and Bill Brown.

<sup>14</sup> His most recent book, *Human Rights, Inc.*, explores the interconnections of law and literary narration, and world novels. At the same time, I would like to acknowledge the 2009 ACLA conference seminar “Worlding Literature, Globalizing Law,” organized by Elizabeth S. Anker and John Slaughter, as a source of great intellectual inspiration.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things* 12.

exercised legal rights and had access to social privileges; on who had the freedom of mobility and who didn't, and so on. In other words, American legal discourse did define subjects or "claimants of justice"<sup>16</sup> as persons, yet didn't define persons as necessarily human subjects, and often quite specifically excluded entire social groups—African Americans, immigrants from East Asia, and females—from the "legal person" category.

Even more importantly, things, more than humans, could experience a transformative "social life"; that is, their status, role, and intended use could radically change in modernist culture.<sup>17</sup> What objects are, in a sense, depends not only on the use they are meant for as everyday objects, artifacts, tools, or commodities, but also on what kind of economic, or emotional, relation they create with persons, and on the kind of exchange they participate in (monetary exchange, barter, gift-giving, fetishism, etc.). For example, everyday-use objects, when aestheticized, turned into collectibles; primitive idols taken out of their original cultural and religious contexts became commodities in the Euro-American art market and could travel across the globe. Conversely, a person's attachment to a thing intended for exchange could pull it off the commodities circuit. Additionally, in modernist culture, an accelerated process in which specific consumer products became obsolete as "last year's fashion," while we also some modern commodities, Chrysler cars, cigarettes, Kodak cameras, and radios, for instance, as well as "exotic" cultural artifacts, achieved near-cult status as emblems of national prosperity and identity.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> This phrase comes from a lecture delivered by Nancy Fraser in June 2009 at Dartmouth College, also in *Scales of Justice* (22, 12, 59). For an extensive discussion of her theory of political, economic, and social (in)justice (redistribution, representation, and, recognition), consult her "Redistribution or Recognition" and *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*.

<sup>17</sup> See Arjun Appadurai's "Introduction," *The Social Life of Things* 3-63.

<sup>18</sup> Consider, for example, Phil Patton's *MADE IN THE USA: The Things that Made America* for an excellent overview of the social and political lives of such objects.

These are among the reasons why legally well-protected and freely circulating “modernist things,” as well as other nonhuman entities imbued with economic and cultural rights of real persons, such as corporations, could and did provide models for human empowerment in the absence of universal legal norms and political practices that could expand and protect the legal rights of all humans, and not only of those already privileged legal persons. Through such convoluted logic, the reification of people was often seen as humanizing, and was indeed used as part of a very effective rhetorical strategy in both in consumerism and primitivism to model transformative social or political reforms after the lives of things.

American “women’s culture” of the early century was an example of the sort of mass-marketed intimate public” that, Lauren Berlant argues, emerges when “ a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires” (*The Female Complaint* 5). The industrialization and manufacturing boom of the first part of the twentieth century required a complex reaction in order to sustain the rate of development, production, and sales in America. Manufacturers had to produce “new consumers” who would desire new objects they didn’t actually need. For financiers, such as Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers, one of the key theorists of consumerism at that time, it was imperative that consumer-citizens “be trained to desire change, to want new things even before the old have been completely consumed” (*American Prosperity* 24). According to Mazur, in the new era of consumer culture, “man’s desires [could] be developed so that they [would] greatly overshadow his needs” (25). Consumption and leisure, and not simply production, were to be the driving force for America in the new millennium, and, paradoxically, women, disenfranchised as political subjects, were indispensable to this profound economic, cultural, and political transformation.

Consumption, of course, had always been a mode of political participation for American women, well before the birth of modern advertising and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. All important social movements in which women engaged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the abolition of slavery, temperance, and suffrage (which in a way grew out of the political power of the temperance movement)—were examples of consumer activism in which individual consumption of slave-produced products or alcohol was redefined as a public and political, and not purely economic, act.<sup>19</sup> However, with the birth of modern advertising, accompanying transformations in communications technologies and distribution channels, and with the increased accessibility of mass-manufactured consumer goods, the significance of consumerism in American culture, politics, and the economy drastically increased. Advertising and the newly emergent discipline of public relations incorporated, among others, Sigmund Freud’s theories of the unconscious and sexuality and Gustave LeBon’s psychology of crowds.<sup>20</sup> Edward Bernays<sup>21</sup> and Paul Mazur argued that consumerism, with its “engineering of consent[,] is the very essence of the democratic process” (Bernays, “Engineering of Consent” 114).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> For example, abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott, Frances Ellen Watkins, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and Harriet Beecher Stowe could be seen as promoters of one of the first “fair trade” initiatives in American history. Their “free produce” movement boycotted products made by slaves and promoted the use of food and goods produced free of slave labor. For a great history of consumer activism in the United States, consider Lawrence Glickman’s *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* as well as Gary Cross’ *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in America*.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, his 1897 work in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Bernays was Sigmund Freud’s nephew, which certainly was the main reason he incorporated Freud’s theories in his work as a manager of public opinion.

<sup>22</sup> Bernays worked as a Broadway press agent for dance groups and singers, as well as a “propagandist” for the Committee on Public Information at the War Department (1918), and a publicist for NAACP conferences and conventions (1920 and 1945). He also designed advertising campaigns for Procter and Gamble (1923) and was the mastermind behind the “torches of freedom” campaign that turned smoking in public by women into symbol of the fight for gender equality (1929). The New York-based Museum of Public Relations offers a multimedia online overview of Edward Bernays’ work, featuring his photos and interviews with him. Visit [http://www.prmuseum.com/bernays/bernays\\_1915.html](http://www.prmuseum.com/bernays/bernays_1915.html).

Bernays and others advertisers believed that by appealing to people's desires, one could change and control the behavior of entire masses and crowds of people.

Such integration of psychoanalysis into advertising and political propaganda had far-reaching implications, beyond the increased sales of General Motors' or Lucky Strike cigarettes.<sup>23</sup> It marked a tectonic shift in America "from a needs" to a "desires culture."<sup>24</sup> Desires-driven public relations and advertising, perfected by Edward Bernays' publicity events, transformed America into a "consumer democracy" (Karl 116). Citizens as consumers became most important to the national and economic well-being, which was increasingly equated with the interests of America's burgeoning industries and corporations.<sup>25</sup> However, early-twentieth-century consumerism was also promoted as a movement of human, personal empowerment, with women at its center.

The practice of presenting consumption in popular arts and in advertising as synonymous with, on the one hand, individualization and personal satisfaction and, on the other, civic participation, opened a particular space for women in the national culture.<sup>26</sup> Courted by multiple industries and corporations concerned about the loss of their consumer audience and new

---

<sup>23</sup> Lucky Strikes products were often advertised using the rhetoric of women's suffrage, as in the earlier mentioned "torches of freedom" campaign in 1929. Other examples of suffrage-infused advertising involved Listerine, which used slogans such as "When Lovely Women Vote" to sell their products (*American Magazine*, Oct. 1932: 1).

<sup>24</sup> This phrase is cited in *The Century of Self* and is accredited to Paul Mazur. I have been unable to find the source of the exact quote in his writings, but he does talk about this particular shift in his *American Prosperity* (24, 25).

<sup>25</sup> The position of women in American society prior to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment is a case in point. Their social role as consumer-participants in the marketplace preceded their role as citizen-participants of a nation.

<sup>26</sup> For a brilliant examination of the marketplace, sentimentality, and women's culture in America, consult Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in America*. Berlant also covers Fannie Hurst in her book, devoting one chapter to Fannie Hurst's 1933 *Imitation of Life* and its cinematic adaptations. For more work on consumerism and modernist women's culture, see Alissa G. Karl's *Modernism and the Marketplace*.

markets, advertisers of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s aggressively targeted women in print advertising, in popular entertainment, at World's Fairs, at the movies, and elsewhere. While women constituted roughly half the nation's population and a smaller fraction of wage earners, advertisers recognized that in fact women were mainly responsible for making purchases (Marchand 66). In most accounts of the 1920s and 1930s era, women constituted between 80 and 85 percent (!) of "the consumer audience" (qtd. in Marchand 66).<sup>27</sup> In other words, as Marchand puts it, "[t]he consumer [of the first half of the twentieth century], whether class or mass (but increasingly mass) was a 'she'" (66).

More importantly, however, when Mazur says in *American Prosperity* that desires could be "developed," he most likely means producing new desires for new objects of consumption (25). What early-twentieth-century advertisers actually did, however, in order to develop women's desires for modernist commodities was to first appeal to and develop new desires for "things" other than the consumer products women wanted, namely autonomy, mobility, social parity, and so on.

Thus, the promotion of what Cindy Katz calls "patriotic overconsumption," paradoxically opened a space for public discussion of women's (actual and produced) desires.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, in 1920 *Advertising and Selling*, a comprehensive study of male and female consumers, found that "the appeal to civic duties, patriotism, . . . is stronger with women than with men," and thus such a form of appeal was advocated as an effective marketing strategy (Hollingworth 295). Of course, legitimate (public) desires of women were mainly those that were

---

<sup>27</sup> Marchand cites here multiples sources from the 1930s to confirm these statistics: Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborne; INC; *News Letter*, 14 Mar. 1936: 8; *Printers' Ink*, 12 June 1930: 57; *Advertising and Selling*, 16 May 1928: 32; *Tide*, July 1932: 25, Dec. 1932: 31, Mar. 1936: 41.

<sup>28</sup> This phrase comes from Cindy Katz's talk "Countertopographies," delivered on 6 June 2009, at Dartmouth College.

in sync with the interests of cultural power brokers and producers of goods. Nonetheless, women were encouraged to desire, to want more, if only things or through things. In turn, consumer products themselves became the objects onto which women's desires for parity, independence, power, sexual freedom, wealth, leisure, health care, and more could be inscribed, even while those things often acquired a life on their own. We could say then that the incorporation of things, to some degree, preceded or provided the conditions for the incorporation of women in the public sphere in the 1920s and 1930s. The importance of new commodities (clothes, cars, radios, gramophones, cigarettes, household items, etc.) to the US and global economies, the need to manufacture, deliver, and sell more things to more people, were the reasons why women, a major disenfranchised social group even after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, were encouraged to participate in the public sphere in the first place.

In his work on the public sphere, Vito Acoonci argues that “public space . . . is a space that is *public*, a place where the public gathers because it has the right to the place [but it also is] a space that is made public, a place where the public gathers precisely because it doesn't have the right—a place made public by force” (in Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere* 159). Consumerism opened a public sphere to women and allowed them to participate in it through their relation to things. Yet, at the same time, by acquiring, displaying, and collecting things, women often managed to force themselves into the spaces of the public sphere where they were not welcome; in fact, some of them, notable examples including such icons as Mae West, a Hollywood actress and playwright, and Madam C. J. Walker, one of the first African American business moguls,<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Madam C. J. Walker's slogans were extremely therapeutic. Consider, for example, the “Glorifying our Womanhood” campaigns that advertised hair products (*Messenger*, July 1926). Even “Men Prefer Beauty” ads promised that “you too can know the joy of being the preferred person, an utterly lovely creature” (*Messenger*, August 1927, September 1927, and October 1927).

managed to modify the rules of their own participation in the public sphere by careful engagement with objects of consumption.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, women of the early twentieth century were not a homogeneous category. They were as different in terms of class as they were in terms of race, ethnicity, and national and cultural background. In mainstream consumerism, only visibly white women were presented as consumers who could objectify-personify themselves through the act of purchasing consumer goods. Marchand suggests that the advertising of the period seldom featured racial others as consumers,<sup>31</sup> and since visibly “ethnic or racial” persons “failed to qualify as modern” consumers (193), the liberatory potential of intimacy with consumer products was unavailable to them.<sup>32</sup> In national publications,

---

<sup>30</sup> Walker, an African American businesswoman, became extremely rich and popular thanks to her beauty product company and her famous advertising campaigns that “glorified womanhood” of African American women, a very uncommon practice in American visual culture of the early twentieth-century. Her company’s phenomenal success had much to do with the fact that Walker advertised cosmetics to African American women, who were not considered consumers in mainstream publications. More importantly, however, her ads were an interesting mixture of celebration of black female bodies and advice on how to make these bodies more socially acceptable and thus more politically empowered. Mae West was one of the most notorious female Hollywood stars, famous for her outspokenness about sexuality, and her extravagant shopping and fashion style. Both of these celebrities achieved their popularity and success thanks to their engagement with consumer products, and both not only represented a new type of womanhood, but quite literally place their own female bodies, which were not “welcome,” in public culture: Walker, a black body, and West, a large body, seemingly unfit for leading ladies of the time on display.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, an ad for Drano cleaning agents in the *Saturday Evening Post* of 9 May 1931 (126). While an African American man is featured in the ad, his use of the cleaning liquid cements his underclass position.

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, white-looking maids were often presented in ways that made them appear to be capable of upward mobility. Marchand notices that despite the realities of the domestic help market in the 1920s and 1930s, in which most maids were racial minorities and immigrants, ads consistently featured “French maid” types (202). While presenting such fashionable maids appealed to their employers’ upper-class ambitions (few households could afford maids who were fluent in several languages and who looked like fashion models), working-class white women seemed more like their employers, modern consumers. See Marchand’s “Modern Maids and Atavistic Ambitions,” in *Advertising the American Dream* (200-205).

Blacks never appeared as consumers, or as fellow workers with whites, or as skilled workers . . . Primarily, they functioned as symbols of the capacity of the leading lady and leading men to command a variety of personal services. (193)

Alissa G. Karl suggests that such “widespread exclusion of blacks from consumer marketplaces concurrent with racial and political disenfranchisement sheds a critical light upon the promises of a so-called consumer democracy” (116). However, consumerism did push the role of women to the foreground in unprecedented ways. And, as the success Madam C. J. Walker’s<sup>33</sup> campaigns suggest, ethnic presses appealed to their female consumers by framing consumer activity as a passage toward full personhood and political participation. In many instances, whiteness was advertised as, and alongside, other commodities. If acquired, or well performed, commodified whiteness would not so much let ethnic females enter the public sphere as it would let them *pass* into it.<sup>34</sup>

Primitivism, “the most familiar [and significant] vernacular” of modernism (John Marx 123), produced even more interesting and conflicting articulations of things and persons, especially with regard to people of color. As I suggested before, it would seem that primitivism was antithetical to the discourse of consumerism. After all, most primitivists projected political dreams that were oppositional to the ethos of industrial modernity and consumerism, and emphasized the dichotomy between the natural and mechanical or pastoral and commercial. The utopian visions of pre- or anticapitalist worlds they created called for a creation of a new sociality and political intimacy that would reject the key features of Fordism and Taylorism:

---

<sup>33</sup> Of course, it is significant that Walker’s appeal had a lot to do with the fact that she advertised personal beauty products, which were a more affordable quick fix for the problems of political disenfranchisement than were the luxury products, gramophones, cars, and so forth advertised in *Ladies Home Journal* or *Vogue*.

<sup>34</sup> Since Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation, limiting the participation of African Americans in many social institutions, light-skinned women often “passed” as white in order to gain access to such segregated spaces.

mechanization, automatization, urbanization, commodity fetishism, and alienation of labor. And yet, like the discourse of consumerism, primitivism turned things into vehicles for desires for a new social order, sexual freedom, and racial (in)equality, and so on.

Primitivism, I would argue, depended on things just as much as consumerism did; it also “sold” its ideologies through its *thingness*. The practice of primitivism, in both its ideologically conservative *and* progressive manifestations, depended then on what Jacques Macquet calls metamorphosis and “diversion” of things, processes that transform goods and artifacts into exchange commodities, by absorbing them into new circulation spheres and changing their uses (qtd. in Appadurai 16). Primitivist de- or recontextualized, “exotic,” styles derived precisely from this process. Primitivist narratives expressed collective desires for new forms of social organization and new cultural expressions through styles and new forms of things, as if narratives of cultural development could be told simply “in things” associated with material aspects of traditions variously conceived as “primitive.”<sup>35</sup> Primitivism's anthropological branch, quite predictably, was based on the observations of the sphere of the House<sup>36</sup> (a clan or family structure, for example) rather than of the Market circulation sphere.<sup>37</sup> Primitivism thus often

---

<sup>35</sup> “Primitive” in primitivism was not a stable category, and in different contexts could signify folk culture, African traditions, or Native American or Filipino culture. As a kind of Western projection, the primitive was whatever was seen as temporally, culturally, economically, or spatially distant in a particular geopolitical space.

<sup>36</sup> Chris A. Gregory says that the House is “a corporate body who owns an estate consisting of land, tools, livestock, and intangibles such as family stories, names, titles, religious powers, and character” (*Savage Money* 13). The Market “refers to institutions of alienable commercial exchange, material and speculative” (*Savage Money* 16).

<sup>37</sup> Chris A. Gregory makes an important observation that explains why primitivists, influenced by modern anthropology, privileged the House and not the consumer marketplace as their models for circulation of things and people. Gregory explains that

Historically speaking anthropologists tended to work with rural dwellers rather than urban industrial workers with the result that the site of most of their observations of

relied on excavating things (artisan items, ritual objects, keepsakes, tools, utensils, jewelry, weapons, etc.) and placing them outside of their original cultural context. The commodification of things in primitivism depended on the earlier-mentioned “diversion” (qtd. in Appadurai 16). on their travel across diverse geopolitical spaces and diverse spheres of circulation; it depended on Euro-American collection and theft practices but also occurred via other modes of cross-cultural circulation: gift exchanges, translations, and so on. In other words, even primitivism, a trend that emphasized its anticommodity culture stance, communicated its aesthetic and political messages through circulating or “diverting” material objects.

Moreover, in Europe and America, primitivist things were never limited to inanimate objects. Thanks to different modes of collection and display, primitivist exhibits regularly included live subjects as “objects.” Non-European and nonwhite humans as well as plants were routinely part of the primitivist displays of things. For example, at the Buffalo World’s Fair of 1901, Africa Americans were displayed as part of the Old Plantation village. This exhibit was located just across from the “Darkest Africa” (actual name) exhibit, complete with African natives and monkeys. The 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair featured a famous Filipino village and showcased Native Americans. Ota Benga, a famous Pygmy from Central Africa, was displayed in a cage in 1906 at the Bronx Zoo for visitors to see. Through primitivist displays in museums, at World’s Fairs and Exhibitions, and in films and radio talks, people and plants could become objects, and as things, they took on new social, economic, and political meanings, as well as new identities and roles. Similarly, masks or other ritual objects, such as those associated with North African religious practices, could be transformed into luxury artifacts of high art culture.

---

human life is the hearth rather than the supermarket or the factory floor. (*Savage Money* 16)

What is both troubling and fascinating is that objectification in a market-commodity culture might have implied a reverse “diversion” process, in which human persons acquired entry into national and other, local, publics, precisely and only through their (self-)objectification. In other words, it seemed as if in the early part of the twentieth century the proximity to things, or even the inhabiting of the role of thing rather than of person, could imply greater legal protections, and greater mobility—at least, such was the dominant fantasy of public incorporation.<sup>38</sup> In other words, certain nonwhite bodies could never appear at the Fairs or museums unless they were displayed as objects. While this might not seem as a particularly liberating activity, as human displays, people gained access to racially and culturally segregated places, and often used their position as things on public display to address diverse audiences they would otherwise not be able to meet.<sup>39</sup>

Many primitivists believed that only through the primitivist appropriation of things—of medieval-like robes, African bracelets and chains, peasant dresses, or Native American cloths—could people achieve a new social identity: they could become new social persons.<sup>40</sup> Not less importantly, primitivist things allowed people to experience what Lauren Berlant would call (global) “public intimacy”<sup>41</sup>: they allowed people to imagine themselves as participating in global, translational networks, which trespassed local and national borders. Such an

---

<sup>38</sup> Nowhere in popular magazines was this process more evident than in the 1920s and 1930s issues of *Vogue*.

<sup>39</sup> It is also important to note that such human displays were designed to expose American audiences to the cultural and racial diversity of the world while reinforcing the notion of Euro-American civilization’s superiority. The fact that such displays had a great impact on many World’s Fairs’ attendees, who began to question racial hierarchies, the premise of cultural superiority that Western culture was based on, or the humaneness of the American capitalist system, speaks further to the power such person-things could hold.

<sup>40</sup> Early sociologists, such as Georg Simmel, noticed the identity-making role of fashion as early as 1904. In his seminal “Fashion,” Simmel focuses on the importance of fashion in the creation of unity of a social group and in class segregation of one social group from another.

<sup>41</sup> See Lauren Berlant’s “Intimacy: A Special Issue” in *Intimacy* (1-8).

incorporation of things into the social identity of persons made clear-cut separation of things and persons difficult or even impossible. In other words, primitivism, not unlike the legal, anthropological, or advertising discourses of the first part of the twentieth century, construed its own complicated, transnational networks of people “bound by things,”<sup>42</sup> as well as its own powerful fictions of things and persons. At the same time, while primitivism questioned the stability and separateness of other seemingly obvious categories, things and their materiality mattered profoundly in its reformist politics. Things, their shapes, colors, designs, textures, were crucial in the production and revision of knowledge about foreign, exotic, or archaic peoples and cultures, as well as in the construction of the primitivist political dreams of a new modern society.

By the 1920s, visual culture and product advertising were complicating thing–person boundaries and relations even further. Newspapers and fashion magazines had begun showcasing photos (instead of just drawings) of models advertising various products. In many such images, the female body itself became inscribed with the properties of things (softness, durability, reliability, etc.), which, in turn, were indexes of particular desires (for power, equality, sexual fulfillment, and so on). Roland Marchand points out that as early as 1914, and consistently in the 1920s and 1930s, advertisers moved away from simply promoting a product to promoting the “benefits” associated with its ownership: power, “prestige,” “sex appeal” (10). Second, popular magazines of the era—*Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Everybody’s Magazine*, *McClure’s*, *Literary Digest*, and *Ladies Home Journal*—used a visual language that further confused the boundaries between objects and subjects as well as disciplinary boundaries, by mixing primitivist travel

---

<sup>42</sup> I am alluding here to Bruno Latour’s idea that objects produce networks and connect people, not the other way around (“From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or How to Make Things Public” 5).

accounts of foreign places, and images of exotic peoples and faraway landscapes, with advertisements for new consumer products.<sup>43</sup> Women, especially white women,<sup>44</sup> in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century owed the production of public “women’s culture” at least in part, to the production of things/commodities mentioned above. What I mean is that the politicized creation of demand for new commodities in the twentieth century required the production of a quasi-public sphere in which women could experience themselves as fully capacitated consumer-persons. This consumer public sphere was not equally welcoming to visibly nonwhite females, whose consumption of goods was encouraged, yet regulated through more or less segregated channels.<sup>45</sup> However, local and ethnic newsmagazines, magazines, and other media offered parallel venues for advertising, with Madam C. J. Walker’s advertising campaign being one of the most successful and obvious examples of this trend.

However, as primitivism seeped into all disciplines, media, and even national arts by the 1930s, women found themselves in a peculiar position as its consumer-persons as well as its object-things. For example, early industrial films that were produced to educate workers offered images of the modern paradise of efficiency and technological prowess, by, paradoxically, reinforcing Victorian gender roles on-screen. Women were often presented as an antimodern force of chaos and inefficiency, which could only be regulated with the strict guidance of the

---

<sup>43</sup> This paradoxical blending was particularly obvious as in *Literary Digest* and *Vogue*, where the proximity of various texts (news, beauty advice, political analysis, travel advice, and book recommendations) and advertising on the same page collapsed registers and reinforced a sense of fluid continuity and coherence between consumerism and primitivism.

<sup>44</sup> I use this quite vague and charged term quite consciously to refer to women who were represented as white in visual culture, irrespectively of their actual racial and ethnic background.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Marchand argues that African Americans and most ethnic minorities were represented as consumers only in ethnic presses and not in national magazines and newspapers. See his “Supporting Players” (*Advertising the American Dream* 191-194).

Company and its Men.<sup>46</sup> Part of the industrial films' purpose was to placate social anxieties about new technologies that had introduced radical changes to the very structure of society. Industrial-training and promotional films encouraged a view that new technologies and new forms of labor organization would in fact restore the appropriate—that is, heterosexual—“gender assignments”<sup>47</sup> of prior eras. In other words, technology would restore the golden age of patriarchy; the highly modern, technologized future would be nothing but a return to the past.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, in many disciplines, the perceived feminization of culture met with an immediate backlash. Similar to mass culture, consumer advertising, popular film, and primitivism often spoke on behalf of, and about, women. But the increased visibility of women in mass culture shouldn't be mistaken for actual power. Economic changes that facilitated the partial emancipation of women also led to a cultural anxiety about gender roles and masculinity. As a result, from the late 1920s through the 1930s, even benign representations of femininity and less hierarchical gender roles were under constant scrutiny in mainstream media (as well as in commercial popular films and New Deal state-funded public art, for example). Depression-era visual art, intended to promote national unity through state-sponsored art, offered a prequel to the well-publicized backlash against women of the 1980s, analyzed so thoroughly by Susan Faludi in *Backlash*. New Deal tableaux in public spaces were replete with images of nurturing women. Such images were intended to offer a corrective to the iconography of the 1920s, with its

---

<sup>46</sup> Industrial, sponsorship training films created for Westinghouse or Western Union were a perfect example of this trend.

<sup>47</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 161.

<sup>48</sup> Primitivism in many popular films was based on a similar premise, yet intertwined gender and race more tightly. The infamous *Birth of a Nation* (1915) imagined the restoration of social order through the leadership of Klansmen (themselves an arch primitivist movement of the era), but D. W. Griffith's vision wouldn't be complete without implicating white femininity in it. White femininity, in his view, was in peril, and with it, the entire white Anglo culture. Klansmen would restore social order by policing racial and gender boundaries equally.

flappers and emphasis on female sexual independence. In another medium, popular film, internal censorship guidelines (known as the Production Code) had been adopted in Hollywood in the 1930s, and they included very direct provisions concerning the acceptable presentation of women, gender, and sexuality. One of the Code's main aims was to regulate on-screen representations of nonheterosexual unions, female sexuality, and women's independence.

Most generally, modern advertising in the early twentieth century appealed to women's desires directly and allowed them a modicum of freedom (of choice of purchase, and with it, for example, the possibility of class-surfing). Or, to put it differently, in their attempt to increase demand for products, advertisers consciously used the rhetoric of suffrage and liberation to attract female consumers.<sup>49</sup> Paradoxically, primitivism, often conceived of as a more progressive cultural force than consumerism at the time, consistently promoted heteronormative desires (its Sapphic "branch" would be the exception to this rule<sup>50</sup>). In fact, American primitivism, both the avant-garde and the New Deal kinds, seemed threatened by the changes of gender roles and the growing power of the women's rights movement, and its back-to-basics ideology often translated into a promotion of the utopia of a prefeminist world.

Bill Brown warns us against the "discourse of objectivity" that allows us only to "look through objects" and to miss the "particular subject-object relation" (*Things* 4). Objects should then be defined not only by their innate qualities but by the relations that produce them and the uses people put them to. According to the Marxian view, the very production process that creates commodities "creates not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object" (Marx

---

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, ads for Delatone, a hair remover for women, that pronounced boldly that only after using the product could women "stand the Public Gaze" (*Cosmopolitan* July 1931: 162).

<sup>50</sup> Some female writers used primitivism to narrate stores of lesbian desire, and Robin Hackett calls this trend "sapphic primitivism." See *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction*.

in Tucker 230), and Marx does not mean it in a liberatory sense. Many scholars agree that things and persons are produced by processes and discourses equally (Appadurai; Pottage and Mundy; Latour), and while “modernity artificially made an ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects,” Brown emphasizes after Bruno Latour that “the world is full of ‘quasi-objects’ and ‘quasi-subjects’” (*Things* 13).<sup>51</sup> But one of the most common Marx-inspired critical perspective emphasizes mainly one kind of powerful object-subject relation: dehumanizing reification. Reification, warns George Lukács, “requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (*History and Class Consciousness* 91). Marx was equally disillusioned about the liberatory potential of “commodity fetishism.”<sup>52</sup> However, reification is an even “queerer” process than Marx acknowledged. In the words of Daniel Miller, it is the very fabric of culture, and “not just capitalist culture, because [such a thing-person] contradiction is not just a new feature of modern capitalism, or an aspect of living in cities” (*Stuff* 68). Instead, “the very processes we describe as culture” are based on it, in Miller’s view.

In primitivism and consumerism, reification was articulated, performed, and experienced in surprising ways. It was simultaneously deployed to oppress and subordinate, as well as to emancipate; and the following two chapters, “‘The Cultivation of Self’ through Objects in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” and “The Social Lives of Things and Persons in Fannie Hurst’s *Back Street*,” grapple with different kinds of human-making and unmaking reification. They also explore questions about what it meant for women to desire things that symbolized and displaced

---

<sup>51</sup> Bill Brown refers here to Bruno Latour’s ideas developed in his seminal *We Have Never Been Modern* (10-11).

<sup>52</sup> *Capital* 81.

their longing for legal and cultural equality, sexual freedom, and equal participation in the public sphere, in the context of the Depression, ongoing racial violence, and discrimination.

Many women actively participated in primitivism in the arts or sciences, hoping it would bring about real change with regard not only to economic and racial but also to gender politics.<sup>53</sup> By the mid-1920s, it was clear for some of them that primitivism and consumerism failed on several counts. By being equally the style of choice of conservatives and progressives, racists and human rights activists, consumerism and primitivism's ideological indiscriminacy troubled many progressives.<sup>54</sup> Second, popular primitivism in advertising, films, and World Fair's displays, on stage and in literature and, later on, in New Deal art, consistently placed women, if not in the background of the great cultural revolution, then definitely "in place."

Female writers responded to the conservative shift of the late 1920s in many ways. Some of them, such as Gertrude Stein or Willa Cather, continued to refashion primitivism and turn it into what Robin Hackett calls "Sapphic primitivism," primitivism that through the use of all-too-familiar "modes of self-representation" articulated narratives of "erotics between women" and, specifically, "white lesbianism" (2-3). But, while Gertrude Stein or Willa Cather attempted to modify primitivism and its stylistic strategies to promote nonheterosexual narratives, in *Back Street* and *Quicksand*, Larsen and Hurst risked going against stylistic primitivism altogether. In this difficult cultural climate, Fannie Hurst and Nella Larsen employed the novel of formation, a genre that had been ridiculed by many others as an exhausted, nonmodernist, and "old-

---

<sup>53</sup> I'm thinking here of a diverse group of female artists, writers, scientists, and activists, including Georgia O'Keefe, Josephine Baker, Gertrude Stein, Nancy Cunard, Willa Cather, Madam C. J. Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and others.

<sup>54</sup> John Grierson, a British documentarian and a friend and a collaborator of the Flahertys, was troubled by the Flahertys' romanticization of exotic peoples.

fashioned” literary form.<sup>55</sup> And yet precisely this genre, which depends on tracing the protagonist’s process of individuation, proved to be of particular use for Larsen, Hurst, and other bildungsroman writers of the period. As a vehicle for exploring the possibilities of “becoming” the bildungsroman could trace the processes, reveal the particular conditions, under which ethnic female persons were encouraged to socialize and achieve “personhood” in early-twentieth-century America,

In the modernist era, categories of things and legal persons were being radically redrawn, and it was no accident that Larsen and Hurst placed objects, in addition to female protagonists, at the centers of their respective bildungsromans. Both Hurst and Larsen explore the stylistic markers of primitivism and consumerism, their thingification, while still searching for other modes of objectification that could salvage some of the political ideals of remaking the social landscape to incorporate female and ethnic subjects.

---

<sup>55</sup> The issue of temporal, cultural, or geographic distance was of great importance to primitivists of all kinds. Paradoxically, the use of exotic or archaic cultural forms was extremely effective and popular, and could earn one critical acclaim, a name as a truly modernist artist, and, often, financial success as well. However, being labeled “old-fashioned” meant that one was unable to assess temporal distance adequately, that one could not select correctly from the cultural repertoire according to the dictum of “make it new.” That’s why going against the conventions of the modernist novel had serious implications for women writers such as Larsen and Hurst.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### “The Cultivation of Self” with Objects in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*<sup>1</sup>

*To study the intimate is not to turn away from structures of dominance but to relocate their conditions of possibility and relations and forces of production.*

—Laura Ann Stoler<sup>2</sup>

*Desire never stops investing history.*

—Felix Guattari<sup>3</sup>

Nella Larsen opens her 1928 novel *Quicksand* with a painterly description. After a “taxing day’s work,” Helga Crane, the novel’s protagonist, is described seeking refuge in her room among her favorite things (Larsen in Thadious Davis 5). “[O]riental silk,” “bright covers of . . . books,” a “brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums,” a “blue Chinese carpet” partly lit by the shades of “Southern sun,” and a small lamp allow Helga to create an “oasis” and escape the stifling atmosphere of Naxos, the “huge educational community of which [Helga feels herself to be] an insignificant part.” The image introduces readers to Helga Crane and her life in a conservative college town in the South. This opening ekphrasis, that is, the textual reproduction, the translation of a paintinglike image into prose, is a very significant moment in Larsen’s novel. The way in which the paintinglike image will literally encase Helga Crane foreshadows a succession of other material and aesthetic conventions associated with diverse publics that will similarly envelop and absorb Helga in the novel. The opening description,

---

<sup>1</sup> The phrase comes from Laura Stoler’s “Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen” in *Haunted by Empire* (13).

<sup>2</sup> *Haunted by Empire* 13

<sup>3</sup> *Desert Islands* 217.

therefore, will haunt Larsen's entire narrative "of revolt,"<sup>4</sup> dramatizing Helga Crane's failed attempts at the "cultivation of self" through intimacy with different things in the contexts of several supposedly empowering publics.

Meanwhile, what's peculiar about this depiction is that the light and shade in the room don't just frame Helga's favorite objects. They frame Helga, too; she herself is part of this tableau. Dressed in a "vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocade mules," buried in Marmaduke Pickthall's *Saïd the Fisherman*,<sup>5</sup> satin-skinned Helga herself completes the luscious, primitivist image. Yet, the harmonious scene of the perfect fusion of things and person is soon interrupted in *Quicksand* as Helga grows restless, longing for "action of some sort" (Larsen in Thadious Davis 8).

The picture might not seem very unusual to contemporary readers used to a visual culture in which inanimate objects suddenly become animated and anthropomorphized, and in which objects in films and cartoons routinely escape the frame. And yet there are several things that are unusual about this scene. First, in the animated picture in *Quicksand* the *thing* that becomes anthropomorphized and animated, and that wants to escape the frame, is actually a person first depicted as a thing. Second, Helga seems to fit in with objects just as naturally as with persons in Larsen's description. Third, Helga, a person-thing, who decides against her passive role in still life,<sup>6</sup> violates the primitivist representational code that regulated images of female persons of

---

<sup>4</sup> Several reviews emphasized this aspect of Larsen's narrative. See, for instance, H. R. W.'s "Quicksand: A Story of the Revolt of a Negro School Teacher," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 20 June 1928: 2, or Roark Bradford's "Mixed Blood; Quicksand. By Nella Larsen," *New York Herald Tribune*, 13 May 1928: 522.

<sup>5</sup> *Saïd the Fisherman* was an orientalist novel, very popular in the States in the 1920s (Thadious Davis *Quicksand*, 138).

<sup>6</sup> It might be useful to think about foreign translations of English "still life." French "nature morte" works seem to point out even more explicitly the distinction between images of live, active persons and passivity, and the stylized "deadness" of objects.

color.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing from W. J. T. Mitchell, one may then want to ask, “what does this picture want?”<sup>8</sup> If, as Mitchell argues, “pictures are like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites” (6), what desires animate this image? Whose appetites does it satiate and suppress?

In the opening image, Nella Larsen first reifies Helga, who, unlike other still objects in her room, only then “awakens.” The seamless way in which Larsen paints both objects and a human in her novel, the way she moves from objects to person and back to objects in her description, feels familiar and, at the same time, out of place. All the objects that decorate the picture, from the very book Helga reads, to the very central *thing* of the image—Helga Crane herself—betray a primitivist (as well as consumerist) aesthetic, marked by the presence of cosmopolitan objects from faraway places, their careful arrangement, and the exotic feel they exude. I argue that Helga doesn’t simply escape the tedium of the industrial college life to hide in a room full of luxuries and modern commodities. The objects in Helga’s room are all selected, arranged, and depicted with a primitivist sensibility, selected with the taste of a primitivist who longs more for cultural, racial, “color” difference than for wealth. Once Helga upsets the static image by nervously pacing across the room and throwing things around, she upsets not only the order of things in her room. By animating the static image with the thing-person at its center, Larsen disrupts the very logic of the primitivist tableau, which often fused exotic things and exotic female persons and specifically denied agency and unrestrained mobility to exotic

---

<sup>7</sup> Central to primitivist aesthetics and ideologies, images of exotic women in European and American visual culture, from paintings by Henry Matisse and Pablo Picasso to films and photos by the Flahertys, emphasized such women’s otherness, sexuality, passivity, and seeming lack of modern self-awareness.

<sup>8</sup> I’m referring here to W. J. T. Mitchell’s recent book *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*.

persons.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Helga doesn't just quit her job and abruptly end her intimacy with her keepsakes in this passage. When Helga *decides to move on*, she breaks some of the cardinal rules organizing dominant primitivist representations.<sup>10</sup> The objectified and primitive female person-thing in Larsen's description shows agency, a desire to not be static, to travel, and eventually escapes the frame.

But Helga is not happy with conservative Naxos, either. She feels that the college town—fashioned after Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee—also frames or fixes her as one of its unimportant parts. But her “oasis,” she comes to realize, the very room she inhabits and so beautifully decorates alongside other primitivist objects, “fixes” her too. The primitivist representational code is just as rigid and oppressive as Naxos' moral codes. The fact that Helga wants to become an agent of her own mobility, that she wants to “cultivate the self” (Stoler, *Haunted By Empire* 13), defines her own path and identity outside of common patterns of circulation of things and persons, and is very significant to Larsen's critique of primitivism as an emancipatory as well as aesthetic project. More generally, Larsen also critiques the way any early-twentieth-century dominant publics of national culture and “counterpublics” (which Michael Warner defines as publics organized around “an awareness of [their] subordinate status”

---

<sup>9</sup> This is especially true of primitivist paintings and primitivist films by European and American artists; I discuss this later on in the chapter, as well as advertising in national magazines, which often employ primitivizations to sell new technology or new consumer products.

<sup>10</sup> Nella Larsen was not alone in using this strategy of animating, mobilizing primitivist representations of African Americans and other peoples considered exotic. By alluding to the way that mainstream culture represented African Americans, artists both capitalized on the legibility of such primitivist codes and used them as a springboard of sorts, for their own narratives that revised and challenged primitivist representational codes. Some of the most direct treatments of this cultural predicament can be found in W. E. B. Du Bois' articulations of “double consciousness,” that is, the practice of “always looking at one's self through the eyes of others” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 3); Examples of this strategy include Langston Hughes' “Note on Commercial Theatre” (190); Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* as well as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Also, see *Opportunity* covers for April, October 1926; May, June 1927. Carole Sweeney discusses reappropriation of mainstream representations of blackness in *From Fetish to Subject*.

and centered on “supply[ing] different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity” [119, 121-122]), among them women’s clubs, educational “factories” of the Tuskegee kind, and Du Boisian Harlem Renaissance art circles, produce, predetermine, and ultimately outline the limits of identity for female persons of color.

It seems, then, that through its representational fissures and faux pas, the *picture* shows us Helga’s first attempted escape from the powerful logic that regulates representations and actual movements of things and female persons of color in the primitivist arts and in such “uplift factories” as Naxos. But, as the novel develops, Helga finds out that other publics and movements that dictate rules of intimacy with certain kinds of objects in order to supposedly empower their members, and that use things to construct social identity, are in fact just as oppressive to female persons of color. Throughout the novel, Larsen presents Helga in various frames (exoticist, religious, cosmopolitan) that struggle to control Helga in the text through their fascinating yet inflexible visual conventions. The reappearance of the picture of Helga wanting out in the novel then tells us a lot about the “desire and appetites” of both available representational frameworks and the social conditions that produce them. The fact that Helga is repeatedly described as trying to escape this or that representational mechanism, or “picture,” invariably exposes the inability to figure African American women’s “desire and appetites” within the available pictorial and cultural arsenal of American publics and counterpublics.<sup>11</sup> The

---

<sup>11</sup> Again, I am referring here to Michael Warner’s articulation of counterpublics, “Publics and Counterpublics,” as publics sharing a common discourse and operating on the premise of their subordination and oppositional relation to a public considered dominant (*Publics and Counterpublics* 65-124).

different pictures' "desires and appetites" and Helga Crane's "desires and appetites" are almost always at odds with each other in the novel.<sup>12</sup>

In early-twentieth-century America, race constantly inflected narratives and representations of things and persons. The institutional and widespread racism as much as the primitivist discourse of at times superficial racial affirmation produced extremely complex accounts of different things and different persons,<sup>13</sup> often reifying racial others to the point that telling them apart from objects (or exotic animals or plants) was hardly possible.<sup>14</sup> Gender further complicated representations of objects and humans, or, as some critics argue, the discourse on sexuality and gender was always a "recuperation of a protracted discourse on race" (Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* 171). Mainstream culture influenced by the burgeoning consumerism of the 1910s and 1920s was censored to prevent any explicit suggestions of transracial intimacy,<sup>15</sup> the relationship between things and nonwhite persons, or persons of color and privileged whites, in advertising, posters, films, the visual arts, was usually

---

<sup>12</sup> I will discuss these two isolated instances when Helga feels liberated, the first, when she is crossing the ocean to visit her relatives in Europe, and the other, when she suffers from her postpartum exhaustion and delirium, later on in the chapter.

<sup>13</sup> In his recent work, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that unlike other root words and the concepts that derive from them (e.g., "idea and idealism"), it is racism that is the root word, the cause, that produces the "race" category, not the other way round. I disagree with Mitchell's broad application of this concept of race formation to all cultures, which paints all cultures with the same structuralist brush. I think, however, that in the context of American society, Mitchell's description of race production is spot-on. I'm referring here to ideas presented by Mitchell during the three-day lecture series "Teachable Moments: Race, Media, and Visual Culture" delivered at Harvard University on 20, 21, and 23 April 2010, as part of the Du Bois Lecture series. For more information, visit <http://dubois.fas.harvard.edu/news-and-events/april-20-22-professor-w-j-t-mitchell>.

<sup>14</sup> This is very true for the Flahertys' *Moana* (1926), in which beautiful Samoan women are presented as part of the beautiful fauna and flora. Also, see Paul Gauguin's series of paintings of Tahitian women (*The Brooding Woman, Two Tahitian Women*, for example).

<sup>15</sup> Carla Kaplan states that "[a]s any casual reader of the 1920's newspapers would know . . . extraordinary measures were taken throughout the decade to keep people from crossing racial lines in any way" ("Introduction," *Passing* xvii).

not intended to offer liberatory messages.<sup>16</sup> The rhetoric of “consumer citizenship”<sup>17</sup> propagated in consumer culture of the 1920s and 1930s appealed to visibly white-looking American women—in fact it was perceived in terms of real possibilities for political and social participation by many modern female consumers. However, African American, Native American, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Chicana, or even female immigrants from the east and south of Europe were rarely invited to share the consumerist fantasy of feminine political revolution. National and mass-circulated modern magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan* offered racially and ethnically sanitized ads.<sup>18</sup> If visibly *other* women did appear in modernist mainstream periodicals, it was not as potential consumer-citizens and persons, but rather, as quasi-persons and quasi-objects,<sup>19</sup> hybrid part-persons, part-commodities. Their role was either to mediate the transfer of commodities from producers to white consumers, or to passively aid primitivist projects of cultural transformation, but never to promote radical changes in American race and gender relations.

In popular visual culture, especially in advertising, racial and ethnic otherness was framed by colonialist or imperialist metaphors and hierarchies. Exotic “others” facilitated the movement of objects but also placated the fears of white consumers.<sup>20</sup> If Lucky Strikes was to lead to white women’s suffrage, as Edward Bernays envisioned it in his “Torches of Freedom”

---

<sup>16</sup> Of course, this statement is true only when we focus mainly on the intentions of the producers, sponsors, censors of mainstream visual culture. As any scholar and consumer of popular culture knows, popular culture is consumed by audiences who are not entirely predictable in their responses to what they read and see.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss this concept in detail in section two, “Novel Fabrications.”

<sup>18</sup> For example, see *Cosmopolitan* ads for Luckee Girl slips (January 1929: 170) or Bathasweet bath cosmetics (February 1929: 162), and *Vogue* fashion images (January 1926: 11).

<sup>19</sup> I am alluding here to Bruno Latour’s discussion of object-subject hybridity in “What Is a Quasi-Object?” in *We Have Never Been Modern* (51-55).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Coca-Cola ads did include African American characters, but only as waiters serving drinks for white consumers.

campaign,<sup>21</sup> it was not to upset old racial and cultural boundaries. Ads for popular products, from Aunt Jemima mixes and condiments to Coke, played the triumphalist tunes of racial superiority ad nauseam. Primitivist incorporations in the mainstream consumer culture served primarily the same purpose as post-1950s tourism: to proselytize “the final victory of modernity over other sociocultural arrangements” (MacCannel 8). Peoples and cultures viewed as incompatible with the progress of modernity were foregrounded as “playthings” (8) in order to “. . . establish in consciousness the definition and boundary of modernity by rendering concrete and immediate that which modernity [was] not” (9).

Thus, in mainstream culture, consumer citizenship, steeped in primitivist rhetoric, was apparently not for all. Things and discourses about “ethnically different” people and consumers or artisan objects circulated differently in racialized American culture. Fannie Hurst, a Jewish American writer I will discuss in the following chapter, addressed racism and anti-Semitism in several of her novels, yet she could and did seize the opportunity to challenge the anti-Semitism prevalent in early-twentieth-century America through consumer activism.<sup>22</sup> She managed to launch a successful public career, often deemphasizing her Jewish background. Hurst promoted herself as a self-made woman who, she wanted her readers to believe, lived and thrived by a nearly “Protestant” work ethic. Hurst stressed individual skills and industry, unbounded optimism and perseverance,<sup>23</sup> and she became a media icon, a poster woman for narratives of

---

<sup>21</sup> I’m referring here to the Bernays-engineered Lucky Strike campaign infused with suffragist undertones. I discuss it in section one, “Novel Fabrications.”

<sup>22</sup> Again, it’s important to remember here that Hurst, a beneficiary of American consumerism, was much more skeptical about its liberatory potential in her writing (novels, short stories, films scripts, etc.) than her professional life and public image would suggest.

<sup>23</sup> Her autobiography, *Anatomy of Me*, is a good example of how Hurst produced her image as a hard-working American girl. See, for example, passages about her studiousness on page 130; and on perseverance when she looked for writing assignments on pages 156-158, 176, and 186.

successful assimilation into the national culture.<sup>24</sup> In *Anatomy of Me*, Hurst praises the possibilities of “personification” that America affords to its Jewish citizens, in almost the same, unproblematic way that Anzia Yeziarska does in *Bread Givers*.

In America, where the Jew has not escaped discriminatory practices, he has nevertheless enjoyed his longest period of comparative peace and security and has had the opportunity and wherewithal to indulge his aesthetics. He has succeeded industrially and professionally, and the fruits are sweet to a people who have made a torturous journey through the century. (351)

On the other hand, neither Nella Larsen nor Zora Neale Hurston could assimilate into the mainstream consumer culture as easily. The main obstacle was, of course, the visibility of their race and their ethnic difference.

Although often separated in cultural scholarship,<sup>25</sup> primitivism(s) in early-twenty-century avant-garde arts and popular entertainment—paintings, sculpture, and films—had predictable codes regulating their representations of exotic things and persons. The display of exotic objects, primitivists believed, was a panacea for problems as wide-ranging as the fragmentation of society, transformation of the economy, feminism, and stifling sexual mores.<sup>26</sup> Primitivist documentarians and artists consistently made use of objects and persons in order to record the cultural benefits or possibilities of “ante- and anti-capitalist” worlds (Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* 44). Painters, obsessed with the loss of world-cultural heritage and the modernization of both the West and non-West, incorporated exotic objects into their art in order

---

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note here that while Hurst carefully navigated issues of race and anti-Semitism in her public life, she wrote about them more frankly in many of her novels, including *Back Street* and *Imitation of Life*.

<sup>25</sup> In literary as well as art history, popular and high culture often seem to be discreet, oppositional spheres. They appear to operate not only according to different rules of production, dissemination, and consumption, but oftentimes to exist in self-contained, impermeable geocultural spheres.

<sup>26</sup> The earlier-mentioned Tahiti-inspired work of Paul Gauguin and the Flahertys’ film about the Inuits, Samoans, as well as Aran Islanders, are perfect example of how presentation of peoples and environments considered distant and exotic was supposed to offer cultural and economic therapy.

to turn back the cultural clock, so to speak.<sup>27</sup> Persons were on display, just as were artisan objects or other cultural products, as part of the so-called human exhibits at numerous World's Fairs and Expositions,<sup>28</sup> in museums, and zoos. Most importantly, however, the visual logic that governed the presentation of objects often applied to female persons, and especially to visibly racially "other" female persons. Women, in primitivist articulations, seemed to exist in the same sphere of circulation as things, as aestheticized and static alienable keepsakes; things that could blend perfectly into the man-produced material culture they were associated with or into nature.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the presence in the national forum of many progressive movements invested in social, economic, and cultural change, most marginalized social groups created their own counterpublics, such as African American women's clubs,<sup>30</sup> religious communities, or pan-African publics, at least in part as alternatives to racially or ethnically restrictive national publics, including supposedly progressive ones. Given, then, the traumatizing history of human rights abuses and objectification of African Americans in America over several centuries, on the one hand, and the reification of African American persons in figurative visual arts in the twentieth century, on the other, one would imagine that the racial-uplift and human rights discourses

---

<sup>27</sup> Which is what Robert Flaherty was accused of doing in several of his movies, such as *Nanook* and *Moana*, where he forced his native actors to dress up in traditional clothes and to use old weapons that predated the arrival of Western settlers.

<sup>28</sup> For example, during the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, the famous Pike strip included several ethnic human exhibits; during the Paris exhibition in 1900, the work of and images of Tuskegee, Howard, and Fisk students were displayed as an object lesson of sorts about the possibilities and achievement of American blacks. The notorious Bronx Zoo exhibit of 1906 featured Ota Benga, a Congolese man who was displayed and lived among zoo animals. While it wasn't clear whether the organizers wanted to present him as part-human, part-object, or part-animal, the very practice of museumlike display linked this instance of human exhibit to other examples at World's Fairs and in museums.

<sup>29</sup> Consider, again, the stills from the Flahertys' *Moana*, Paul Gauguin's *Hail Mary* (1891-1892), Maurice de Vlaminck's painting *Bathers* (1907), or Ernst Ludwig's painting *Negro Dance* (1911).

<sup>30</sup> *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* offers an interesting selection of early-twentieth-century texts focused on black women's movements. See, for example, Fannie Barrier Williams' "The Club Movement among Colored Women of America, 1900" (in Gates and Jarret 54-59).

regarding American blacks would not use narratives about the lives and rights of “things” as a model for narratives of emancipation of persons. Certain human persons of non-Anglo descent could only be protected by law as things, or through their relationship with things of commercial value—their parahuman legal status guaranteed few privileges or rights on its own—and a certain kind of mainstream *thingification* of such persons historically reduced their access to social, cultural, and economic rights and protections.

Surprisingly, though, several African American racial-uplift ideologies, trends, and movements of that time (for example, Garveyism, the Washingtonian philosophy of vocational education, Du Boisian Pan-Africanism, or Madam C. J. Walker’s beautification of blackness) fashioned their political message and aesthetics around certain “objects of emancipation.” These movements, of course, shunned the most explicitly racist and mainstream manifestations of consumerism and primitivism found in the “white” national press, national media, and popular entertainment more than others.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, how they articulated the role of certain things (commodities, cultural capital, artwork, or beauty products as a sort of bodily prosthesis) defined their articulations of black personhood. Larsen alluded to these uplift movements, their aesthetics and their ideologies, in *Quicksand*, examining the impact each one had on the life of Helga Crane.

For instance, the university community of Naxos that Helga Crane quits in the beginning of the novel is based on the Tuskegee vocational institute, which was operated according to Booker T. Washington’s vision of black empowerment. Washington’s views, best articulated in his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, as well as his “Atlanta Compromise” speech delivered in

---

<sup>31</sup> George Padmore credits W. E. B. Du Bois with consistently antiracist philosophy and juxtaposes it with that of both Garvey and Washington, who accepted racist doctrines of separatism (and capitalism) in the name of African American progress. See “Background to Pan-Africanism” (83-94).

1895,<sup>32</sup> relied almost entirely on the premise that African Americans would achieve partial individual sovereignty if they managed to enter into the American marketplace as producers of new, modernist “things” or agricultural products. This, he believed, could then translate into a new relationship with things as African Americans transformed into the traders or consumers of objects. By generating more wealth, blacks, Washington would argue, could finally become fully capacitated consumers and, by extension, at least partially incorporated citizens. As Edward Bernays and Paul Mazur knew well, the fantasy of consumer citizenship was a powerful one, and not without merit, even if it applied only to select social groups, and Washington’s ideology had many supporters on both sides of the color line. Similarly, Marcus Garvey, who advocated mass exodus of blacks to Africa, also advocated the capitalist accumulation of things (and capital) as the best means to black emancipation.

Washington’s main ideological opponent, W. E. B. Du Bois, whose ideas inform the activism of several racial-uplift proponents in Larsen’s novel, attacked the very concept of granting humans rights based on a very specific relationship they could have with consumerist objects, as either their producers or consumers. Du Bois believed, and rightly so, that rights should be granted collectively and not earned by, or bestowed on, individuals lucky enough to enter into the market economy. As Du Bois saw it, in the context of endemic racism and structural discrimination, the free-market ideology was a dangerous fiction that obscured the ways in which its institutionalized discrimination prevented entire social groups from fair participation. And yet, even Du Bois recognized the power of things, albeit not necessarily modern commodities, and their importance to the articulation of cosmopolitan antiracism and

---

<sup>32</sup> In Gottheimer 128-131.

human-ness.<sup>33</sup> “Alienable” possessions (things such as utilitarian household items that could retain their identity separately from who owned them) and “inalienable possessions” (things such as artwork, religious or ritual objects, African masks, or Egyptian sculptures, and textiles that were originally not intended for commercial exchange and whose identity is produced and inseparable from “cumulative” and “exclusive” relationship with a “series of owners over time”<sup>34</sup>), were instrumental to the political aesthetics promoted by Du Bois and his followers. Such objects allowed for a rewriting of the history of the development of Eurocentric civilization.

By drawing attention to “beautiful objects” of non-European art (which Helga Crane is attracted to and likes to surround herself with in *Quicksand*), Du Bois wanted to offer a polygenetic view of culture. Even more importantly, Du Bois aimed to abolish racial hierarchies based on the assumption that where one placed in the Eurocentric narrative of origin and civilization progression defined one’s human-ness. Therefore, Du Bois’ philosophy, like Washington’s, became associated with its own aesthetic code, its visual language, its *thingness*, which at least initially allowed for easy audience identification. If Washington privileged simple and utilitarian visual style, Du Bois favored artistic sophistication and an African art–inspired aesthetic. Significantly, in these examples race always trumped gender and issues of sexuality.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, his 1903 speech “Training Negroes for Social Power” (in Gottheimer 133-137) as well as his detailed instructions for organizing exhibits about African American culture in “How to Celebrate the Semicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation” (*Du Bois Speaks* 226-229).

<sup>34</sup> Weiner 33.

<sup>35</sup> For example, despite his support for suffrage, demonstrated in his 1912 speech “Disenfranchisement,” among many others. Most social problems of various kinds centered on black men’s needs. Similarly, even *Opportunity*, a rival publication to Du Bois’ *Crisis* perspective in the period between 1925 and 1927, covered in great detail Negro health, but not Negro women’s health, education for men but not women, and so on. Articles such as “Physique of Negro Woman” published in *Opportunity* in May 1923 (22) were an exception rather than a common trend.

Other practitioners of racial-uplift philosophy included entrepreneurs such as Madam C. J. Walker, a beauty-industry mogul who targeted primarily African American women with her ads and beauty products. I mention Walker because many publications devoted to racial uplift, *Chicago Defender*, *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, *Messenger* and so on, devoted little space to issues of black women's sexuality, physicality, and bodies in their articles. However, ads for Madam C. J. Walker's products visually filled that void. In some sense what was not *speakeable*, in many African American publications was present in the visuals, and Madam C. J. Walker's visual and beauty tips played an extremely important role in the construction of the visual rhetoric of racial uplift as it pertained specifically to women's bodies.

Madam C. J. Walker was less conservative than Washington but more pragmatic than Du Bois, although she borrowed equally from theories of consumerism and the practices of primitivist beautification. She built her beauty-culture empire on a simple idea of selling cosmetics that would allow African American female consumers to "wear their race on right" (Lutes 176) in order to transform their social and economic situation. Consumerist objects were then envisioned as tools; they could empower women of color by offering them a very simple means for visual management of race in sexist and racist American culture. Like her counterparts in mainstream publications such as *Vogue* (who argued that gender and class were performances), Walker constantly invoked the beauty of race but, at the same time, emphasized the ways in which race was a "drag" one could put on or off.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, consumerist as much as primitivist ideologies and aesthetics, though inflected differently, and transmitted in different venues in ethnic presses, were still incorporated

---

<sup>36</sup> Consider, for instance, the ads for Walker's Egyptian Face Powder in *Crisis* (January 1928) or her Hair Grower ad "Madam C.J. Walker Speaks Again to Women Everywhere" in the *Pittsburg Courier*, 7 Feb. 1931: 7.

into the African American discourse of political liberation. Things, if of a different kind, mattered profoundly in African American ideologies centered on increasing access to and protecting the human rights of marginalized national subjects. Material traces of Egyptian heritage (often advertised in the pages of *Crisis*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Opportunity*) were a crucial aspect of popularizing the polygenetic model of civilization through “Egyptomania” (Goeser 173). Engaging in productive labor by manufacturing “useful things” was to Booker T. Washington the only way for African Americans to move toward gradual enfranchisement. Application, display, purchase, exchange, or representation of different commodities could transform persons, help them pass for white or for upper-class, and so on. Narratives of things and persons, therefore, were always closely intertwined even in anticonsumerist discourses and publics. Yet, apart from Madam C. J. Walker’s philosophy of beautification, these uplift movements paid little attention to how gender, and even less to how nonnormative sexuality, could impede or affect one’s experience of personhood. These concerns, however, were of crucial importance to Nella Larsen and her examination of raced, gendered, sexed thingness and personhood in her modernist bildungsroman, *Quicksand*.

To fully understand the role of novels of formation in American modernism and Larsen’s particular deployment of the genre, we must first understand the bildungsroman’s engagement with historically situated debates about personhood and access to human and civil rights. Bildungsromans, after all, explore the possibilities of personal and social individuation, and often examine them in the context of limits and conditions of production of personhood. In the United States in the first part of the twentieth century, there was no ideological consensus about who persons really are or what separated a person from a thing, legally, economically, and culturally. Markers of difference such as race, gender, class, or nationality, immigration status, and

possession of commodities all had the power to move a person from a human to a thing category or from a thing to a person category. Even more paradoxical was the fact that various persons, in different sociopolitical contexts, could occupy positions of either thing or person, or both.

Modernist novels of formation, such as *Quicksand*, play an important role in this context, exploring the fabrication of personhood and thingness and their mutually dependent formation. They work as commentaries on the existing epistemologies of human-ness, but they also actively shape discourses of human and object rights. Much has been written about “truly” modernist novels’ focus on the examination of the inner lives and subjectivity of their protagonists. By such standards, narratives of formation such as Hurst’s *Back Street* or Larsen’s *Quicksand* seem still out of place within the modernist canon; they seem to belong to a different era with their narrative linearity, realism, and preoccupation with a chronological progression toward the personhood or death of main protagonists. However, they make important interventions into modernist literary culture not only because their “power of the copy,” the ability of “the stereotyped character, the sensational plot, the trite expression,” as Jane Tompkins would say, to “convey an enormous amount of cultural information in an extremely condensed form” (*Sensational Designs* xvi). Just as importantly, they employ such widely popular and legible tropes strategically to bring attention to the fabrication of women’s bodies and to the placement of female semisocial persons into the culture of early-twentieth-century America.

Therefore, such narratives, neglected in modernist studies for decades but very common in the first part of the twentieth century,<sup>37</sup> especially among socially marginalized groups, are

---

<sup>37</sup> Other similar novels are Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, and Fannie Hurst’s *Lummo*x and *Imitation of Life*.

extremely important modernist productions. Despite their seeming formal simplicity,<sup>38</sup> they often offer a radical critique of existing concepts of personhood and, in a mode of “female complaint,” explore the limits of existing practices of social identification- and personification-through-things as these practices apply to female subjects (Berlant, *The Female Complaint*). Modernist bildungsromans often revise the focus of narratives of formation away from the progressive socialization and individuation of the protagonist to the fabrication of object-thing subjects and the mutual socialization of things and persons. Larsen and Hurst are, then, interested precisely in the narrative making of things and unraveling of human identities: the inability of some social persons to fully “individuate” in oppressive political contexts in general and, in particular, to do so through engagement with objects. They are particularly interested in failures of mainstream and counterpublic cultural, economic, political, and religious fantasies promising full incorporation of female citizen-subjects. They take part in the debates about the concepts of human-ness and thingness at time when “the question of things and their thingness”<sup>39</sup> as well as the question of the nature of personhood were central preoccupations of modernist political, economic, and cultural life. The battle over these concepts was fought on several fronts. If we apply a structuralist view, we discover that large legal, economic, and political frameworks were instrumental to the identity formation of individuals and entire social groups in the first part of the twentieth century. For example, the ongoing project of the colonial civilizing mission and, specifically the Dawes Act, aimed at the deindigenization and Christianization of Native Americans in the United States prior to 1933, followed by the passage of the Wheeler–Howard

---

<sup>38</sup> As articulated by Richard Poirer in “The Difficulties of Modernism and the Modernism of Difficulty,” difficulty, in some critical accounts of modernism, is what distinguishes modernist from nonmodernist (popular, accessible, generic) productions (in Hoffman and Murphy 104-114).

<sup>39</sup> Bill Brown, *Sense of Things* 12-13.

Act in 1933 aimed at mass reindigenization of all Native Americans. Similarly, the use of poll taxes in several states disenfranchised blacks, Native Americans, and poor whites, effectively stripping them of American citizenship or state residency. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed women's right to vote, but local and state-imposed limits to their mobility, ability to own property, raise children, and select sexual or marital partners remained in place. Moreover, immigration quotas reshaped the cultural landscape of America for years to come, and various exclusion acts (the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1868, 1888, 1902, and the Immigration Act of 1924, for example) had a direct impact on the way semilegal, semipersons of, for example, Asian descent, could participate in public life.

In 1920s and 1930s America, various laws and social customs regulated the definition of citizenship and the degree of intimacy between certain humans and mobility of persons, through antimiscegenation laws, Jim Crow laws, the Production Code regulation of representations of sexuality, and so on. With the consumerist revolution, and despite the improvements in transportation and communication technologies, persons' intimacy with certain things was more attainable than persons' connectedness to other persons. Some commodities and certain persons belonged, so to speak, within the same sphere of circulation from which persons of different ethnic background, class, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality were automatically excluded. A variety of cultural trends, movements, and phenomena, from primitivism to consumerism to nationalism to religiosity, were actively striving to redefine the concept of personhood against rigidly imposed, "inherited" legal frameworks.

Yet this process of what Zygmunt Bauman calls imposed, social "order-building" (*Wasted Lives* 33), of separating and qualifying "different humanities" (Mike Davis 234), was neither fully coherent, nor accepted without contestation by marginalized groups. Social identity

of persons is produced not only by imposed top-to-bottom, inflexible frameworks. It can mutate as it is produced and performed at specific cultural sites. In other words, personhood can be produced, expanded to new members, and temporarily protected or withheld in specific geocultural spaces, and socially marginalized groups were quick to recognize the importance of not only laws, but of other cultural discourses and (counter)cultural social practices of identification in the construction of personal and social identity. In addition to absences of (positive) representation of social “others,” institutionalized and accepted discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities in the public sphere drastically affected the possibilities of socialization. Visible and enforced segregations laws, racist education, limited access to health care, obstacles to legal and political representations, limits to credit possibilities, not to mention the actual terror and physical violence aimed against them effectively restricted possibilities for public and transethnic socialization of entire social groups.

The African American “counterpublics” presented in *Quicksand* can in fact be viewed as “intimate publics,” which Lauren Berlant defines as publics that are based on “an expectation that the consumers of [such a public’s] particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly historical perspective . . .” (*The Female Complaint* viii). She argues that “consumer-participants” of intimate publics

are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, [an intimate public] promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging. (viii)

The diverse African American intimate publics that Larsen describes had, historically, a profound impact on the public redefinition of human-ness and civil rights discourse in America

by offering a space where marginalized subjects could contest existing models of personhood and produce new social identities (the New Negroes, Beautiful Blacks, etc.). However, Larsen presents them in great detail and with great irony in *Quicksand*, emphasizing their nonegalitarian character and predatory, consumptive force.

In early-twentieth-century American culture, such intimate publics intended to revise the “negative” or “nonperson” African American identity promoted in the national culture; counterpublics and their politico-aesthetic expressions (primitivism, consumerism, industrialism, Pan-Africanism, or beautification) provided conditions and models for new identity formation, both social and individual. In all of these trends and movements, various *things* operated as markers of social status and were often used successfully to traverse social, class, national, and racial boundaries at a time when policing access to certain things—modern commodities, food, keepsakes, and so forth—was a way of policing the boundaries of a “legal person” category in national culture and legal discourse. However, since social identity was often arbitrarily transposed onto certain things (fashion items, cars, cigarettes, etc.), marginalized communities could use inanimate objects to contest their exclusion, trespass economic barriers, produce new identities, or express communal unity and individual identity. African American counterpublics fought for even greater access to civil and human rights but also provided conditions and public spaces enabling the socialization of legal part-persons.<sup>40</sup> Consuming various products collectively made this process possible and politically effective at times.

---

<sup>40</sup> But it is also important to understand the role of incorporation of things and person in the discourses and practices of national publics and counterpublics in a specific historic context as well as within broader geopolitical frameworks. The struggle to produce new concepts of personhood through things was not solely the domain of African American uplift movements or nationalist consumerism in the first part of the twentieth century. Some scholars point out the decisive role of things in the contexts of human rights ideologies and movements. Benedict Anderson brings to our attention the importance of sharing a style to the unity of any “imagined community” (6). Lauren Berlant emphasizes the ways in which the

*Quicksand*, Nella Larsen's bildungsroman devoted to the life of Helga Crane, is in fact an exploration of the formation and preservation of communities with a progressive agenda of cultural, socioeconomic, and political liberation. More specifically, Larsen examines how African American female persons are affected by collective ideologies and the *things* and *thingness* that give these ideologies their public voice,<sup>41</sup> and that shape and sustain their public appeal and force. Larsen's main complaint is that intimate publics, which often promise to work across national boundaries to open cosmopolitan ways of being, as well as such publics' *things*, actually thwart the identity development of their female members, just as national legal frameworks do.

Unlike Ray Smith (the heroine of *Back Street*, discussed in chapter two), whose ties to most publics and even "women's culture" are gradually severed by her lover, Walter Saxel, Helga Crane rarely experiences moments of solitude.<sup>42</sup> She almost always is embedded within clearly identifiable social groups: proponents of vocational education à la Booker T. Washington or Harlem urbanites, Du Boisian activists or Dutch primitivists, religious followers or modern consumers, and so on. Hurst's heroine pursues fulfillment through a privatization and domestication of desires. Ray follows the rulebook of MacCannel's "differentiation" made

---

consumption of similar objects is indispensable, in fact, precedes and conditions, the formation of what she calls the "intimate public" (*The Female Complaint* viii). Such publics are communities of strangers unified not more by their common experience of oppression than by their common experience of consumption of similar kinds of things, which in turn invokes a feeling of shared experience of oppression. In other words, the presence of things in African American arts and human rights movements and communities was not simply a response to economic deprivation, or an attempt to recover lost or misrepresented heritage.

<sup>41</sup> Many scholars such as Michael Warner, Benedict Anderson, and Lauren Berlant emphasize the importance of style and stylization to the differentiation and operation of publics. See Warner (117-121); Anderson (6); and Berlant (*The Female Complaint* viii).

<sup>42</sup> As we can see in the opening passages of the novel, even when Helga wants to escape the hustle and bustle of her life, she is crowded by things and objects reminiscent of outside forces that oppress her. The scenes of her solitary transatlantic voyage and her reawakening in the South are the only ones in which readers are led to believe that she feels content and/or aware of her social situation.

possible by individual consumer choices, which promise “alternatives and feeling of freedom in modern society [but which are] also the primary ground of the contradiction, conflict, violence, fragmentation, discontinuity and alienation . . . ” (12). For Ray, individuation is supposed to take place between a semidomestic sphere and the Market, where she makes futile but seemingly free choices to acquire money.

Helga Crane’s life, on the other hand, is always communal, but no less miserable than that of Ray Smith. While Helga is not involved in a frantic pursuit of money and keepsakes, as Ray is, she is no less regulated by rules that define the circulation of objects and produce a sense of belonging by offering “lived models of being” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* viii) for African Americans in the first part of the twentieth century. As I noted before, in the American culture of the 1920s and 1930s specifically, many believed that while individual and social identities of persons are intertwined and inseparable, a sense of intimacy with strangers achieved by one’s collection and display of the right kinds of things could facilitate connectivity among strangers, and, as a result, empower individuals. Things, then, could connect persons, as much as oppress them, but, more importantly, things, it was believed and practiced, could transform and, most paradoxically, fully or partially humanize persons. Collective engagement with the same type of objects, for example, collection, display, consumption, purchase, exchange, and so forth, solidified identity-producing publics. As a result, it’s crucial for us to understand, despite our desire to categorize reification of persons as one of the worst models for human rights or definition of personhood, that in early-twentieth-century American culture, reification was a process embedded in, “intrinsic” to, the very personification process of marginalized social persons (Daniel Miller 68).

*Quicksand* demonstrates Nella Larsen's thorough understanding of this phenomenon. What she takes issue with is not necessarily the person-thing fusion itself, as in the arts or progressive movements, that redefines notions of twentieth-century personhood. In *Quicksand* (as much as in *Passing*), Larsen expresses her skepticism about the possibilities of collective production of female personhood in the dominant as well as minoritarian publics. In fact, Larsen's *Quicksand* is less explicitly concerned with the state legal, economic, and political apparatus that in the 1920s America *thingified* persons of African American descent. Instead, she devotes most of her time to liberatory, intimate counterpublics and their politico-aesthetic expressions of the first part of the twentieth century, which set out not only to empower and liberate African Americans, but also supposedly to expand the very concept of "person" and "subject," away from most regressive notions of a "thing."

Thus, the opening picture in Larsen's novel becomes a leitmotif and a master scene, resurfacing in all consecutive crises or "revolts" (H.R.W. 2) that make Helga Crane abandon publics she participates in. It serves to expose the true cost of the collective production of personhood for females of color in America and Europe during the first part of the twentieth century. Legal and social personhood, to be effective, must be produced collectively and publicly, or at least recognized collectively and publicly, and in Larsen's view, the heteronormative character of publics and their vertical power structure which she describes in her novel foreclose the possibility of social individuation and personification for black and biracial women because both provide conditions for regulating and normalizing their desires. While some of the collectivities are effective in producing transnational, cosmopolitan models of personhood, they also gender female bodies in the process in particular ways, and force these

bodies to comply with acceptable norms of sexual behavior (involving heterosexual sex and reproduction).

This might explain why Helga Crane prefers what she thinks are spontaneous crowds to organized publics. She feels that anonymous crowds can allow her at least a temporary reprieve, an opportunity to experience passion and to express desire in nonnormative ways. Unfortunately, she always realizes that what she takes for crowds (spontaneous assemblies of human bodies) are in fact modernist publics and counterpublics: masses of bodies in churches in New York and the South, or in Harlem clubs, are not presocial; they are organized, political, and no less hierarchical. Although Helga always feels unable to articulate her desires publicly, it would be a mistake to take her desires in *Quicksand* as simply private, in the sense of being simply an individual expression of “mommy-daddy” trauma, as Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze call it (*Desert Islands* 234). Her desires that clash with the “loves and lives of the pictures” (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*) point out the need for a different understanding of desire as it is woven into the social. For Larsen, and Helga, the heteronormativity required in most cosmopolitan publics breeds what Michel Foucault would term “the fascism in all of us, in our heads, in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.”<sup>43</sup>

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga Crane shuttles in and out of social collectivities that organize themselves around a very ambitious agenda: to counter the oppressive regime of the state-sanctioned “order-building” (Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 33) that reduces African Americans to the role of waste within American modernity. To accomplish that, these “intimate publics”

---

<sup>43</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* xiii.

articulate human rights in explicitly cosmopolitan, transnational terms, and rely on recognizable styles and modes of being, advertised by specific objects. In fact, all of the publics maintain their existence by insisting that their members engage with the right kinds of things in a right kind of way. Simultaneously, these liberatory publics all depend on framing and regulating desire to achieve political power.

Counterpublics<sup>44</sup> such as the ones Nella Larsen and the protagonist of her novel are members of are, in fact, examples of “intimate publics” held together by things. Lauren Berlant argues that what defines them is their being “constituted by strangers who consume common things and texts” (*Female Complaint* viii). Intimate publics depend on the assumption that their “consumer-participants . . . already share a world-view and emotional knowledge” and that the texts and objects they consume are an expression of that knowledge, of a shared experience of oppression, and of “embodied living in the world.” What’s most important is that publics offer both “models for living in the world” and a promise of “social belonging” through the consumption of objects.

The intimate publics in *Quicksand*, based on actual and historical communities of Larsen’s times, strive to participate in the struggle over the very concepts of and boundaries between “person” and “thing.” To be more exact, they explicitly want to redefine (the relationship between) categories of personhood in transnational and cosmopolitan terms. Larsen’s critique of the intimate publics available to African American women in the first part of the twentieth century is an important contribution to the revision of modernist fantasies of cosmopolitanism, as a new practice and theory of personhood<sup>45</sup> unbound from the constraints of

---

<sup>44</sup> Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* 64-124.

<sup>45</sup> As Sheldon Pollock et al. argue, “[c]osmopolitanism is not just . . . an idea. Cosmopolitanism is infinite ways of being” (588), and in the first part of the twentieth century, we see a resurgence of a variety of

national citizenship. Larsen's novel is particularly bitter as it examines the failure of "intimate publics"—which supposedly intended to correct the oppression enabled by national legal and economic frameworks and institutions (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii) and regulations of the Market and State (Chris A. Gregory, *Savage Money* 14-15).<sup>46</sup>

First of all, the passions Helga Crane seeks to fulfill, the identity she searches for and the freedom she craves, are always out of reach precisely because she always belongs to communities that frame, regulate, and "fix," that cannibalize her with their shared "objects of emancipation." These communities articulate their ideologies in ways that make them appear counter to corporate and state philosophies and institutions, but Larsen seems to argue that their very hierarchical structure and coercive power undermine their liberatory potential.

It is important to emphasize here that while it has taken several decades for critical theory to address different dimensions of cosmopolitanism,<sup>47</sup> to reveal particular circumstances under

---

movements representing marginalized social, transnational groups: the women's movement, the Pan-African movement, worker's movements, etc., that recognize their transnational and historical affiliations and use cosmopolitanism to demand local and transnational rights.

<sup>46</sup> Chris A. Gregory offers compelling reasons to look at different spheres of circulation, defined by the rules of Market, House, or State. He argues that, for example, a "material object such as silver is now a *commodity*, now a *gift*, now a *good*, depending on a specific context of a transaction. If *commodities* are those values that arise as things pass from House to Market, then *gifts* are those values that pass between Houses, and *goods* are the inalienable keepsakes that are stored with a single House" (*Savage Money* 14).

<sup>47</sup> In 2010, the theory of cosmopolitanism according to a traditional, Western, metropolitan, top-to-bottom, and more nuanced, what Pollock calls "minoritarian" (582), heterogeneous, grassroots view still struggles to account for particular conditions of cultural contact, migration, and inhabiting or participating in transnational cultures. It is additionally complicated by the dichotomy between its prescriptive (Appiah; Derrida) and descriptive dimensions (Appadurai; Chakrabarty; Mignolo), or what can be called "social imaginaries and global realities" (Arthurs). Modernity and modernism, characterized by accelerated and often violent movements of diverse peoples, goods, and ideas across geographical and national boundaries, seemed to thrive on fantasies of cosmopolitanism. For metropolitan audiences, cosmopolitanism often meant little more than a cultural (and economic) takeover of "other" traditions and spaces; the appropriation of the world's cultural or material capital. Despite its claim to universalistic humanism and grand pronouncements about a right of each and any human to the world, modernist cosmopolitanism often invoked a privilege of certain human bodies: white, male, upper-class, educated to crisscross and consume certain parts of the world.

which female and male bodies experienced modernity across and within national borders, female writers and activists of the modernist period, such as Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst, were astutely and acutely aware of how gender, sexuality, race, and class inflected women's experience of transnational exchanges and restricted their actual transnational participation. Written into national and state laws as partial legal persons, female modernists often exposed universalist fictions of cosmopolitanism. For many of them, the promise of transnational intimacy across the boundaries of gender, race, class, and religious difference seem unattainable because modernist cosmopolitanisms were often predicated on a political model of limited, partial national citizenship (defined by one's ethnic or racial origin and/or by consumerist or religious practices). Despite the fact that various cosmopolitanisms purported to expand human rights and promoted the need to apply these collectively, not individually, to entire social groups, they often conflated the term "citizen" or "participant" with that of "person." In other words, the achievement of full personhood again depended on an active participation in a particular public, which could be produced and thus altered. In practice, sharing a cosmopolitan public's "ways of being," engaging in a visually legible material practice of participation, was a requirement that, if fulfilled successfully, promised to "divert" or graduate a semilegal person to "person" status.

Nella Larsen recognized the power of historically situated cosmopolitanisms to shape the social identity of politically and economically marginalized groups in early-twentieth-century American culture. She also recognized the limitations of modernist cosmopolitan intimate publics, especially when it came to rearticulating the identity of females of color in the context of nonheteronormative sexuality. What was most important to Larsen was that under the guise of slogans about transitional equality for all, none of the publics in which the heroine of her novel participates in search of identity offered room for an expression of nonnormative sexuality and

desire. It could be argued, then, that seemingly counterhegemonic publics offered little reprieve to female subjects in the sphere of biologically nonreproductive sexuality.

Of course, as I argue in section two, “Novel Fabrications,” suppressed female desires were of crucial importance to the consumerist redefinition of American democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, and various architects of the new political order and modes of social participation quite expressly took into consideration female desires as a marketing and political tool. In other words, female sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s was already directly tackled in American public culture, but the sexual desires of women of color were not viewed as equally important and economically beneficial;<sup>48</sup> various measures enforcing spatial and economic separation limited the role of nonwhite females as modernist consumers. However, female desire was only acceptable as a component of women’s public and private identities when it was seen as productive, in a biologically reproductive or economically productive sense, that is, when desire and power could collide. In other words, public expression of female desire was acceptable only when it produced and reproduced hegemonic power.

*Quicksand* tackles key modernist cosmopolitanisms of the era—popular primitivism, consumerism, Pan-Africanism, and antiseccularism/religiosity—in separate vignettes from Helga Crane’s life. These trends represent separate, often oppositional, modernist publics as well as the mutually interconnected aesthetics and political ideologies that popularized and maintained them. To a common reader of modernism, they might appear to be an odd, if not random, collection of cultural trends. However, Larsen argues that these movements, and conflicting ideologies associated with them, shaped cultural, social, and economic life in early-twentieth-

---

<sup>48</sup> If anything, they were seen as a threat to the social and economic order, not a stimulating force for the American economy and politics.

century America. More importantly, they offered new possibilities for public participation to social persons either partially or completely excluded from the process of active public and political involvement. By articulating their own affiliations and solidarities in distinctly transnational terms, modernist cosmopolitan intimate publics organized around primitivism, consumerism, pan-Africanism, or religion aimed to overcome state-sanctioned exclusion of entire groups from the public sphere, intimate publics promised social belonging and new models for “embodied living” (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii).

For example, as an expression of perceived cultural crisis in the West, primitivism depended on transnational exchanges of art, epistemologies, and experiences. Primitivists trespassed national boundaries, made references to a foreign, exotic, mostly transhistorical “them,” in order to remake the familiar “us,” in order to revitalize “our” arts, and “our” society; or, as one character of *Quicksand*, Axel Olsen, would exclaim sarcastically: to make “us” “great. Immortal” (in Thadious Davis 88). In more progressive articulations of consumerist ideology, modern(ist) commodities, the “[n]ice things” Helga Crane loved so much, were to make women visible, connect women transnationally, and, eventually, produce a cosmopolitan female citizenship of the world (in Thadious Davis 10). Various racial uplift movements, from the Booker T. Washington kind to W. E. B. Du Bois’ Pan-Africanism and the New Negro, emphasized ways in which race trumped geopolitical boundaries. Finally, the “[p]ie in the sky” religions Larsen described in her novel (in her references to *Said the Fisherman*, Christian churches in Naxos, Alabama, and New York, or, finally, Christianity in “Procurator of Judea”) emphasized the unity of all believers across man-produced boundaries, even as they had to accept deferred access to human rights on earth; solidarity of all mankind was to be found not only in transnational, but also in otherworldly, spaces.

In early-twentieth-century America, such articulations of “cosmopolitan coexistence” (Pollock et al. 581) offered a much-needed critique of the state-imposed architecture of exclusion of entire social groups from the public sphere. As powerful movements of social uplift, counter- or intimate publics were instrumental in the transformation of American arts and their publics, to reforms of American legal and political systems. Additionally, they built foundations for the success of the social and political activism of the Civil Rights era. The primitivist art movement, “women’s culture,” “Pan-African culture,” and religious communities are examples of such “intimate publics” which the heroine at the center of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* finds herself to be a willing and unwilling member of. But, what is as striking as it is significant in *Quicksand* is that Nella Larsen also exposes the crippling impact of these historically important counterpublics, bigger pictures that are “a larger theatre of social conflict” (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want* 94). Larsen points out that such counterhegemonic publics fail to liberate desires of women of color. In fact they can only operate by normalizing them.

Larsen agrees that social collectivities do enable connectedness among strangers alienated by national and economic frameworks of oppression, but she also shows that they provide rigid, if not deadly, conditions of social participation for these publics’ female members (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii). As much as they invite participation, these “intimate publics,” in Larsen’s view, redraw their own borders with great precision, and various things are, again, instrumental to the process of identification of members and nonmembers of these groups. Defined in large part by ideologies and aesthetics of consumerism, primitivism, and religiosity, such publics depend on the recognition of the *similarity* of their members’ shared gender, racial, or spiritual *difference*. At the same time, all of these publics homogenize difference by forcing

their members to perform their social identity by adopting identical “styles of being.”<sup>49</sup> This usually involves, according to Larsen, engaging with things in a very specific fashion, and the “socializing and disciplining” of desire (Guattari, *Desert Islands* 216).

In other words, the publics Helga Crane belongs to at various points in her life do indeed forge cosmopolitan, transnational connections among strangers and produce their social identity. However, Larsen argues that the consensus-producing apparatus of publics, “the [desiring]machine” of it, as well as the “general idea behind the system,” deprives publics of truly transformative, regenerative potential (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 5; Larsen in Thadious Davis 8). In short, the demand for all members of such cosmopolitan publics to share an accepted style, to perform an accepted “mode of living,” creates a rift between a universalist cosmopolitan rhetoric of collective freedom and reciprocity, and the practice of living based on the collective uniformity and totalizing rejection of difference. Larsen argues that modernist collectivities predicated on transitional models of citizenship undermine the promise of autonomy and sovereignty for all subjects. Expanding human rights based on the legal-personhood models might be as flawed as applying the model of “things rights” to human persons. However, Larsen doesn’t entirely condemn the role of things and thingification. The real problem, according to Larsen, is the fact that the way intimate publics “subsume social desire” mirrors the oppressive technology of desire of the economic and state apparatus they purportedly try to undermine (Deleuze, *Desert Islands* 268).

Helga Crane, whose multiracial, -national, and -class heritage enables and complicates her identification with many social groups, is drawn to and repulsed by the ease with which these

---

<sup>49</sup> I’m thinking here of Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, and Benedict Anderson’s understanding of style as a defining characteristic of human communities. The style, if shared by all members, allows them to imagine their collectives as egalitarian (*Imagined Communities* 6).

intimate publics attract, transform, and consume individuals. For Larsen's protagonist, the forced, and often violent, public intimacy and imaginary cosmopolitan connectedness such publics rely on are not emancipatory to either individual or collective female bodies; nor do they mitigate the oppressions inflicted by the state. In fact, *Quicksand* argues that intimate publics simply fetishize oppression and translocate it beyond national borders. Simplistic ideologies of unity obscure ways in which they are themselves defined by local geopolitical, juridical, economic categories and practices of inclusion and exclusion based on one's race, sexuality, gender, and class, as well as the maintenance of disempowering hierarchies.<sup>50</sup>

Larsen is particularly interested in two especially popular, if seemingly oppositional, discourses of emancipation and cultural uplift: consumerism and primitivism. Theorists of consumerism such as Paul Mazur and Edward Bernays argued that (over)consumption, or accelerated consumption, was instrumental to American prosperity, to national, economic, and cultural well-being. They imbued the act of purchase of new commodities with liberatory meanings. In the late 1920s, Edward Bernays would, for example, advertise Lucky Strikes for women as "torches of freedom."<sup>51</sup> Buying and consumption were to "rejuvenate" American society and free women, who now could enter into the public sphere with the help of modern objects. In fact, Veblenian "conspicuous consumption" was a path that supposedly led from the department store to full citizenship of a nation to that of the world (in Lerner 111). Advertising, an executive arm of consumerism, was an extremely significant form of modernist affective

---

<sup>50</sup> Just as Du Bois believed in the importance of intellectual leadership of the best men of race, so did various other activists of the period. For example, Fannie Barrier Williams stressed in 1900 that the Colored Women Club Movement is similarly based on "the effort of the few competent on behalf of the many incompetent" women ("The Club Movement among Colored Women of America" in Gates and Jarret 54).

<sup>51</sup> For a longer overview of Bernays' ingenious PR campaigns, visit [http://www.prmuseum.com/bernays/bernays\\_1929.html](http://www.prmuseum.com/bernays/bernays_1929.html).

communication as its main audience was overwhelmingly composed of women (Marchand 66). Significantly, the rise of modernist periodicals opened a space where these contradictory discourses blended in visuals and text.

For example, *Vogue*, a leading fashion and urban culture magazine of the 1920s and 1930s, advertised tools, cars, cosmetics, and clothes as cosmopolitan objects of freedom that could liberate women. The nature of this liberation was not centered on the role of women within the heteronormative family or their social activism (as in, for example, *Ladies Home Journal*). The advertisers and writers of *Vogue* seemed to argue that clothes and fashion would allow women to perform themselves (rather than transform themselves), according to the requirements or norms of particular geopolitical contexts. The visual language of *Vogue* emphasized the constructedness of class and national identity, and provided tips on how to traverse national, geographical, and cultural boundaries, and to venture into exotic, foreign landscapes and locations by skillful application of makeup, or a strategic choice of clothes, hairstyle, cars, and so forth.

Such an understanding of fashion, style, and taste certainly influences Helga Crane's self-presentations in society, whether in Naxos, Chicago, Copenhagen, or a small town in Alabama. Yet, the logic and effectiveness of fashion as a practice of liberatory cross-dressing are put to the test in *Quicksand*. Helga Crane attempts to escape the confines of racism, nationalism, sexism, and religion; she wants to deterritorialize her existence, and "unrace" her body, using consumerist and primitivist objects: "startling green and gold negligee[s]" (Larsen in Thadious Davis 13), "queer-colored garments," "soft, luxurious woolens . . . heavy clinging silks" (20), "clothes and furs from Bendel's and Revillon Freres" (48). She hopes that the consumption and display of objects such as "Chinese tea-chests . . . lustrous Eastern rugs, . . . Japanese prints" can

have a transformative power (47). *Vogue's* fashion cartography of the world implied that the possession and application of commodities would empower women; it would increase their mobility and enable fulfillment of their desires. Assessment of the quality, texture, color, and possible use of fabrics, clothes, cosmetics was then an important sociopolitical skill, "integral to the pursuit of social equality [and] not a frivolous sideline" (Lutes 84).

Helga Crane, however, is shocked to find out in Copenhagen how little separates her and the consumerist-primitivist objects she adores; how, instead of being liberated by objects, she gets *thingified* by them. Constantly exoticized by the Dahls (her Scandinavian relatives), dressed in outfits in "screaming colors," "turban-like hats of metallic silks, feather and furs, strange jewelry," and wearing "nauseous Eastern perfume" (Larsen in Thadious Davis 76), Helga eventually notices that she is being transformed into an object for consumption. The primitivist portrait of Helga, representing her as "some disgusting sensual creature," she fears will eventually overtake her (91). Although Helga doesn't recognize herself in that primitivist image, "collectors, artists, and critics [are] unanimous in their praise" (91). Helga, displayed in *salons* of Copenhagen, and her portrait, displayed in a modern gallery, undergo further commodification, subject to "many tempting offers" (91).

In other words, despite the public claims that specific commodities or appropriation of certain styles would give women access to trans-state, or even cosmopolitan, citizenship in the world, in most cases, it was the objects, not female subjects, that enjoyed unrestricted cosmopolitan circulation. Larsen challenges, then, the consumerist and primitivist dreams of cosmopolitan belonging, arguing against the viability of transnational personhood based on

either the concept of national citizenship or free-market movement of thingness.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, since national magazines didn't include nonwhite Americans, and African American women in particular, in the fantasy of global equality and intimacy, global citizenship was available only to those who looked white and acted middle-class. Where middle-class whites could easily become cosmopolitan world-citizens and tourists with a cunning use of thermal underwear or brand-name makeup, blacks were relegated to the role of "curios," passive recipients of the Western gaze, props complementing foreign locations and exotic landscapes.

In response to such representations, black publications such as the *Messenger*, *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and *Fire!* embarked on a crusade to revise the vocabulary of nationalist consumerist primitivism. Illustrators such as Aaron Douglas, Charles Dawson, Laura Wheeler, and Gwendolyn Bennet sought to revise and popularize images of African Americans in American visual culture, to literally imprint new images of blackness onto the public consciousness.<sup>53</sup> Influenced by the "Egyptomania of urban culture," illustrators presented black characters as cultural connectors, transnational descendants of the Egyptian civilization who, like Euro-Americans, had a stake in the cultural heritage of the world (Goeser 173). In most of these popular Harlem Renaissance images, race was typically conflated with class, as mainly light-skinned, fashionably dressed, middle-class, educated women were icons of cosmopolitan modernity. Cosmopolitanism was again invoked as "global citizenship" in an all too familiar narrative of progress and achievement. Its proponents in Larsen's novel—black elites in Chicago

---

<sup>52</sup> It is important to note here that in the United States, objects in the early twentieth century still had more rights and enjoyed more legal protections than certain kinds of humans (women, nonwhites, immigrants, those with not fully-abled bodies, etc.), so consumerist rhetoric of liberation through objects appealed strongly to many audiences.

<sup>53</sup> Not less important were ads for beauty products by Madam C. J. Walker or Kashmir Chemical Company. Like their counterparts in national publications, these ads promised inclusion in the public sphere to women who learned how to use beauty products to travel the world. Those who knew how to modify their appearance could use it to pass, or, as Jean Marie Lutes says, "wear the race right" (98).

and Harlem (and Ann Grey and Mrs. Hayes-Rore, specifically)—are oblivious to the fact that their slogans of “social equality” and “opportunity for all” (Larsen in Thadious Davis 51), their very concept of cosmopolitan solidarity, are thoroughly underwritten by a Eurocentric value system. In other words, instead of promoting actual, unconditional equality for all human bodies, they advocate for the right of some black bodies to the “credit to create” themselves, as Maurizio Lazzarato calls it.<sup>54</sup> Such credit possibility was closely tied, again, to certain modernist objects; in this case, often well-displayed modernist commodities. Privatization of cosmopolitan rights seems to Helga and Larsen deeply inadequate if not politically dangerous. In other words, Larsen shuns identity politics that reify identity conceptually and/or through material practices of purchase, display, and consumption of objects (as in primitivism, consumerism, or cosmopolitan universalism<sup>55</sup>).

Interestingly, Nella Larsen frames Helga’s quest toward full personhood with experiences of participation in what might appear to be particularly unmodernist publics: religious communities. They are the first and last frames that immobilize and depersonify Helga in the novel. It is significant that Larsen sees religious thought and the church as powerful social forces dependant on cosmopolitan rhetoric; religiosity also seems to revise market-defined theory of personhood-through-acquisition-of-things. In theory, the Christian religion proposes a cosmopolitan worldview, oppositional to nationally imposed segregation and exploitation of nonwhite bodies. Yet Larsen argues that religious movements and thought should not be mistaken for “projects toward planetary conviviality” (Mignolo 721). Instead, Helga Crane

---

<sup>54</sup> See interview with Brian Massumi, “Grasping the Political.”

<sup>55</sup> Nancy Fraser sees the root of discrimination of difference in the “the cultural-valuation structure of society” rather than in political economy (“From Redistribution to Recognition”). In other words, misrecognition occurs in the symbolic sphere of culture, not economy, although they can be and are interrelated.

comes to realize that religious institutions should be viewed as powerful and dangerous “global designs” of worldly management, a transnational ideology that “manage[s] the world” and human diversity across national borders. More importantly, the religious publics, notorious for their disciplinary approach to human sexuality, do not just suppress female desire; they redirect it and normalize it to produce collective power.

During her teaching tenure at Naxos, Helga is discontented with how academic education and religious instruction there tolerate “no innovations, no individualism” (Larsen in Thadious Davis 8). “This great community,” she observes, “has grown into a machine.”

It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency . . . It was . . . now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern.  
(8)

Using such violent imagery, Larsen reminds her readers of the epistemic violence involved in the production of the Naxos community, where disagreement and difference is not tolerated and is considered “unladylike” (in Thadious Davis 8). The religious instruction the school offers provides ideological support to the school’s mission of manufacturing a subservient black labor force, indispensable to the proper functioning of American capitalist economy. Sermons warn black people to show “good taste,” “know their place,” and be “satisfied in the estate to which they had been called” (7). Larsen exposes how, despite religious claims to transracial and cosmopolitan egalitarianism, the church is in fact instrumental to the success of the state-sanctioned project of “colonization” and reproduction of a racialized and docile underclass.

Initially critical of the church as a site of reproduction of racism and of most violent consensus-making, Helga eventually is drawn to a different, all-black church in New York City. Discontented with her transatlantic voyage and life of leisure in urban centers, she longs for

meaning and purpose and *passion*. But what attracts her to Reverend Pleasant Green's church is its powerful performance of the unity of black bodies that at first seems to offer a promise of presocial, bodily sexuality. Helga quickly marries the pastor and converts to his faith, but after suffering from never-ending pregnancies and difficult childbirths, she grows even more disillusioned with religion.

Interestingly, it is precisely in a religious community where she finally loses her body as she regains her sharpness of vision. She realizes that “[r]eligion had . . . its uses. It blunted the perceptions. Robbed life of its crudest truths” (Larsen in Thadious Davis 134). Yet, as she cynically observes, it had uses mainly for “the poor—and the blacks,” and particularly black women who traded their physical, sexual, and financial autonomy in exchange for a sense of social belonging. In one of her harshest attacks on religious cosmopolitan publics, Larsen details how in the small community of Alabama, black women are told that they must give up their bodies to the “Lawd”; their bodies are meant for reproduction, and the unending pregnancies, childbirths, and illnesses are a “natural thing, an act of God (126). “In de nex’ worl’ we’s all recompense,” a fellow parishioner consoles Helga (126). Helga eventually comes to despise her husband’s “great love for all people regardless of race,” and the delayed promise of paradise after death (131; 136). Finally fully aware of her “situatedness” (Pollock et al. 585), Helga, however, ends up pregnant for a fourth time, and seems unable to carry out her escape plan.

It is significant that in the novel, Helga revolts against the power of cosmopolitan publics, and seems to leave them as if in the face of crisis, danger. In the end, we learn from *Quicksand* that the female body, always marked by national, sexual, economic difference, cannot be emancipated through transnational fictions that obscure “global designs” of inequality. All the publics Helga belongs to in hopes of finding acceptance, and social identity, and of sharing her

difference, eventually reify difference. The ideology of cosmopolitan solidarity and the structures that normalize her experiences of difference, either in the conservative Naxos, or among the liberal New Negro Harlem activists, or European primitivists, or religious followers in the South, work to sustain—not overcome—racial, gender, and class inequalities. Global connectivity, in Larsen’s view, is not a source of agency or empowerment for women, but is rather a result of mechanic conditions, of imposed social or economic structures. Intimate publics centered on fantasies of global citizenship and circulation of modernist objects, Helga learns, exclude nondiscriminatory reciprocity and mutuality and, as a result, default on their emancipatory promise. It’s no accident that Helga experiences the “feeling of happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race,” when in the ex-territorial space of the sea (Larsen in Thadious Davis 66).

And yet, I would argue that Larsen uncovers the transgressive potential of objects in one of the final scenes of the novel, Helga’s postpartum delirium.<sup>56</sup> Although critics have commonly come to interpret the final “picture” as Helga’s defeat,<sup>57</sup> it’s important to recognize that Helga’s delirium is actually an important moment of rupture that liberates the affect, repressed in other tableaux. Although I am far from suggesting that *Quicksand* has a happy ending, I would nevertheless suggest that it’s the delirium that interrupts the grip of public imaginaria on Helga and that, paradoxically, allows her to articulate systemic social oppression<sup>58</sup> with shocking lucidity. Rather than seeing Helga’s delirium through a pathologizing lens that forces us to assess

---

<sup>56</sup> I’m using the term in a Deleuzian and Guattarian sense, not only as a biophysical condition but also as a rupture that is always “social, historical . . . political, . . . and racial” (*Anti-Oedipus* vii; 84-106).

<sup>57</sup> See Deborah McDowell xxi-xxii; Thadious Davis says that in *Quicksand*, Helga is “silenced; she can neither voice her innermost reality to others nor express that reality in her own story” (“Introduction” xxvi).

<sup>58</sup> Deleuze argues that “[u]nderneath all [irrational] reason, lies delirium” (*Desert Islands* 262).

the bildungsroman's outcome in terms of the success or failure of the main protagonist, or her social achievement or social fall (often represented by madness or illness), it might be worthwhile to see Helga's delirium as a powerful component of Larsen's critique of systemic oppression. It is, in other words, not only a symbol of Helga's failure but a narrative expression of Helga's comprehension of the irrationality of the available social forms of expression and identification. Delirium is what lets Helga liberate desire,<sup>59</sup> if only temporarily; it's then that she is able to relax the control of pictures' "desire" on her own.

Unlike Ray Smith, the heroine of *Back Street* discussed in chapter two, who dies without being able to express herself or comprehend the conditions of her oppression, Helga, as a result of her bodily and political delirium, recognizes her own situatedness within social, political, and historical systems. Her delirium also, and perhaps most importantly, lets her understand how her desire was "invest[ed] in the economic and political spheres," as well as how she came to "desire [her] own repression" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 105). In other words, it's no accident that Larsen speaks of violence and desire together. After her kiss with Dr. Anderson, Helga feels that "[d]esire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence" (Larsen in Thadious Davis 110); toward the end of the novel she actually sees how the two are connected. As this suggests, I strongly disagree with Thadious Davis' reading that Helga "re-enacts her mother's story, but without the maturity to interpret its meaning" (xxvi).

While Helga might never be able to escape the South and her marriage to Reverend Green, Larsen's bildungsroman concludes with an exposure of the systemic violence and irrationality of the publics and counterpublics that trap Helga. But the novel also points to a

---

<sup>59</sup> Guattari refers to "liberated desire" as a "desire that escapes the impasse of individual private fantasy" (267).

space where Helga and nice things can be together, outside of the communal forces that oppress her. Helga's longing for things in that scene is often seen as the expression of longing for upper-class status. I would suggest, however, that the way in which, in her delirium, objects return to her with a promise of emancipation alludes to the ways that, in some spaces of twentieth-century visual culture, objects facilitated a homosocial, rather than a heteronormative, intimacy. Thus, on one level, Helga's body becomes absorbed into the various publics, depersonified by the things whose consumption produces and sustains publics and constitutes the identity of their more-or-less "competent members"<sup>60</sup> and eventually becomes consumed by never-ending pregnancies. In the language of Zygmunt Bauman, Helga has performed her social and cultural function of reproduction and eventually becomes social "waste." At a narrative level, however, her very body is the location of "chaotic turmoil" and prompts revelation (Larsen in Thadious Davis 130). Helga doesn't want to "get well too soon," precisely because it is only "[w]ithin her emaciated body"<sup>61</sup> that this revelatory "disillusion rage[s]." In this scene Larsen, I believe, alludes to the liberatory potential that objects allude to in consumerist visual culture, but only if they are disassociated from the consensus-enforcing publics of the church, European art circles, American racial-uplift societies, and conservative universities.

---

<sup>60</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams emphasizes the leading role "competent members" play in women's clubs (55).

<sup>61</sup> Emphasis mine.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The “Social Lives”<sup>1</sup> of Things and Persons in Fannie Hurst’s *Back Street*

*[P]ersons and things have multiple genealogies, and . . . their uses are too varied to be reduced to one single institutional architecture.*

—Alain Pottage<sup>2</sup>

*The proper study of mankind is man . . . but the proper study of markets is woman.*

—*Printers’ Ink*, 1929<sup>3</sup>

*the stereotyped character, the sensational plot, the trite expression . . . convey an enormous amount of cultural information in an extremely condensed form*

—Jane Tompkins<sup>4</sup>

Every time [Ray] wrapped an object in a bit of the Paris Herald and hurried through the streets with it to the shop of Anna and Anatole, she had the absurd feeling that under her arm, in the shape of an alarm-clock, for instance, she was carrying part of herself, detached for sale. Here’s my heart, ticking. Sell it, Anatole. Here’s my arm. It’s pure silk and has a sterling-silver handle. Sell it, Anatole. It should bring one hundred francs. It cost twelve dollars, American money, at Wanamaker’s. Translate that for him, Anna. Twelve dollars at Wanamaker’s. (*Back Street* 445-446)

This conventional-sounding but actually startling passage from *Back Street*,<sup>5</sup> Fannie Hurst’s famous and commercially successful Depression-era novel, reveals more than the anguish of the main protagonist, Ray Schmidt, at having to sell her few remaining possessions at

---

<sup>1</sup> I am alluding here to Arjun Appadurai’s theory and book title, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.

<sup>2</sup> In Mundy and Pottage 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Printer’s Ink*, 7 Nov. 1929: 133 in Marchand 66. *Printer’s Ink* was a trade magazine devoted to advertising.

<sup>4</sup> *Sensational Designs* xvi.

<sup>5</sup> I will be referring to Hurst’s novel as *BS* in parenthetical citations throughout this chapter.

the pawnbroker's in order to survive the mean streets of Aix, France. Ray's situation, of course, is desperate. Her lover, the married financier Walter Saxel, has recently died after a sumptuous dinner consisting of two helpings of Wienerschnitzel, red cabbage with bacon, and a cheese torte. He has left his entire estate to his legitimate family and not a penny to his devoted lover (*BS* 237-238). Overnight, Ray finds herself alone and destitute, a middle-aged woman stranded in France; within weeks, she is literally starving. With a reputation as a kept woman, she is unemployable, and she has to resort to selling her belongings to buy food. Eventually, she starves to death.

What Fannie Hurst captures so well in the first episode I quote, as throughout her novel, is the often brutal movement of things and persons: the circulation of things and persons so indicative of capitalist modernity. The process of parting with her belongings is—as her language of dismemberment and autopsy conveys—so painful to Ray because she has to sell, exchange as commodities for money, things that are keepsakes, gifts and goods, things that are not supposed to be commercially exchanged.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Ray must sell things that ought to be inalienable<sup>7</sup> from her. Ray understands very well, of course, that the worth of her treasured possessions is assessed differently and arbitrarily in different spheres of circulation, even as she clumsily attempts to bargain for a fairer market price. In fact, in her experience, as the worth of an object increases in one sphere, it often decreases in the other. The longer she owned a gift

---

<sup>6</sup> In another passage, Ray struggles with the decision to sell Walter's old shoes, "Of all the objects that one by one had gone to Anatole—the cuff-links, the watch, the wallet—the shoes continued to represent the peak of anguish" (*BS* 469). When she does sell them, because "one had to eat" (*BS* 470), Ray laments her loss, and the unfairness of the exchange that deprived her of the last keepsake that belonged to Walter and her: "Why, in God's Name for the sake of a cheese-bun, which made her ill, did she let go of these shoes!" (*BS* 477).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of inalienable (and alienable) possessions, objects that shouldn't and can be freely exchanged, consult Annette B. Weiner's "Introduction" and "Inalienable Possessions: The Forgotten Dimensions" in *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* 1-43.

from Walter, the dearer it became to her, but, also, and simultaneously, its cash value dropped drastically with each passing day.

In chapter one, I mentioned Chris A. Gregory's discussion of the importance of analyzing objects in the particular context of their circulation in the sphere of House, Market, and State; it might be useful to revisit some of his ideas here, as they shed light on how Ray's things transform. Gregory emphasizes that any "material object" can become "a commodity," "a gift," or a good," "depending on a specific context of a transaction" (*Savage Money* 14). The Market might have "emerged as the most significant institution of valuation," Gregory argues, but the "State and the House are still important" (*Savage Money* 16).<sup>8</sup> We can certainly see in the novel that for Ray, there are many valuation systems that assign the same object different value: monetary, bodily, and emotional.

The term Market, for Gregory, "refers to institutions of alienable commercial exchange, material and speculative" (*Savage Money* 16), and in this sphere as well as that of the State, Ray's clock is worth \$12, or at least 100 francs.

The distinguishing feature of the State is the token money it creates. These tokens are created by marking *commodities* such as gold, silver, copper, or paper with signs such as \$, £, ¥, Rs and recognizing the product so created as legal tender within clearly defined territory . . . The aim of the State is to create a single uniform standard of value but this objective quantitative standard often does not hold in the House, where state tokens might be re-marked in a multitude of visible and invisible ways as they become subject to the laws of the House. (Gregory, *Savage Money* 14)

The House, defined by Gregory "as a corporate body who owns an estate consisting of land, tools, livestock, and intangibles such as family stories, names, titles, religious powers, and character," can be a human formation such as a family or a kinship system that gives value and

---

<sup>8</sup> I would like to acknowledge here the work of Glenn Willmot, *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, Market, and the Gift*, through which I have discovered the work of Chris A. Gregory.

meaning to things in different ways than State and Market (*Savage Money* 13).<sup>9</sup> In this sphere, Ray's clock doesn't have a cash price but has a tremendous emotional value. In *Back Street*, Ray observes that as things flow across these spheres, they undergo significant re-valuations. However, despite her background as a smart businesswoman, an important financial adviser to her father and lover, Ray is devastated by her own efforts to negotiate market prices for things that, to her, belong to the House and not to the Market, a devastation intensified by what she perceives as an unfairness in the interspheres exchange rate.

By focusing on the circulation and conversion, or “diversion,”<sup>10</sup> of things *and* persons, a process that Jacques Maquet defines as a rapid, violent movement that transforms things' intended use and turns them into exchange commodities (qtd. in Appadurai 16),<sup>11</sup> Hurst transforms her bildungsroman. The novel of formation, a seemingly straightforward, classic, if not old-fashioned, genre centered on the formation of personhood—both individual, subjective and psychological, and social,<sup>12</sup> in Hurst's treatment of *Back Street* becomes equally a novel of formation of social personhood of human persons and material objects. Hurst is still certainly writing about private lives of people and about the large, public economic structures that shape these lives. Yet, Hurst's novel exposes how the circulation of things and persons, and the relationships they form with one another within the different, yet interconnected spheres of the State, Market, and House, produce, socially constitute, both things and persons. In other words,

---

<sup>9</sup> Gregory relies on prior articulations of the House such as Susan Rodgers' *The Power of Gold* and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Anthropology and Myth*.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss the theory of diversion of things in the introduction to this section. It was originally developed by Jacques Maquet (qtd. in Appadurai 16).

<sup>11</sup> Appadurai points out that Maquet provides a very complex taxonomy of commodities based on their use: there are commodities intended to be commodities, commodities that metamorphose gently into commodities, commodities that become commodities by violent diversions, and ex-commodities (*Social Life of Things* 16).

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maquet (qtd. in Appadurai 16).

Hurst centers her novel, and the main character's story, not on the protagonist's achievement of subjective consciousness (which significantly never takes place, as Ray dies short of liberating self-knowledge), but on the circulation and "diversion" of things and, just as importantly, of persons.

Often violent movements of, and intimacies between, things and persons in capitalist modernity, Hurst seems to argue, impede the formation of individual or collective female subjectivity, even as the proximity of modern commodities, fashion, cars, things, might be emancipatory to male social actors. By exploring the uneven ways in which some human subjects (men) can form emancipatory relationships with material objects while women cannot, Hurst critiques the gospel of both consumerism and primitivism that I discussed in section one, and specifically, their beliefs in the healing and liberatory power of thingness for female and ethnic subjects.

Contemporary anthropological theory with its nuanced articulations of different things—commodities, goods, and gifts, for instance—can help us understand the importance of distinctions between the different kinds of objects Ray has to trade and exchange, as well as the reasons why she feels fused with the objects, why she feels that they are an extension of her as much as she is a part of them. It can also help us define the clashing spheres of influence that control the value of things and regulate the circulation of things, and, as a result, regulate the value and movement of persons in Hurst's narrative. Chris Gregory defines goods as "inalienable keepsakes" (79), also called "inalienable possessions" (Weiner 10-12); that is, they are special kinds of things that are meant to be kept, used, and "guarded" rather than owned. Gifts, on the

other hand, are “inalienable detachables” (Willmott 15),<sup>13</sup> which means that they might be given away, separated from a person, but their role “is not to produce incremental wealth” (Gregory, *Savage Money* 14) but to “expand social relations” (Strathern 143). Furthermore, although persons can give gifts away, gifts are “inalienable” from the person who is the giver; they remain personified by the ownership and intentions of the donor and receiver. Unlike gifts and goods, commodities are both detachable and alienable.

As many scholars point out, things can change their function depending on the sphere of influence they fall under—the State, Market, or House—and it’s important to point out here that in Hurst’s novel these spheres are not only present but also differently gendered, that is, they offer different opportunities of “becoming” social persons to female and male subjects. Critics working in the tradition of cultural studies, Marxism, and anthropology emphasize the degree to which gifts, and goods, “are personified, as opposed to objectified . . .” (Willmott 14; Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* 41; 29-40). This is an important observation, as in *Back Street* the exchanges of things between men and women follow different patterns. While for Ray the commodities she receives from Walter are instantly personified, for Walter, Ray’s gifts to him, namely her own body, are commodified, in fact, purchased and maintained for the low price of \$200 a month (*BS* 408).

After Walter’s death, Ray feels that she is forced to part with things, gifts and goods, that belong to her in more than a commercial sense. The things she received from Walter as gifts, or that she bought to use for herself, possess her as much as she possesses them; Ray has a strong sense that they are “inalienable” from the person who owns or “guards” or who donated them.

---

<sup>13</sup> Willmott rephrases here Chris A. Gregory’s definitions from *Savage Money*, which were, in turn, inspired by Annette Weiner’s work on inalienable possessions in *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*.

Hence the act of sale for Ray is also an act of bodily violation, of detaching “part of herself,” an “arm” or “heart,” for eighteen francs (*BS* 446). This is an extremely significant moment in Hurst’s novel because the female body, and specifically Ray’s own body, is the only tradable commodity she has. Loss of integrity of this body, any sign of deterioration of her body,<sup>14</sup> alerts her to the imminent loss of value of the one commodity she can trade for money and food. At the same time, the novel is concerned with how male and female bodies circulate things, and how that relates to the ways in which they satisfy their basic hungers for food, sex, and social fulfillment.

Although Walter dies before Ray does, he does so after experiencing a life of pleasure, sex and food overconsumption, and power. He is a well-respected family man, an accomplished businessman, and an equally successful philanderer. As a man, he can overconsume goods, commodities, and people without worrying about fair exchange or bodily side effects. His body’s weight gain mirrors his accumulation of wealth; Ray, on the other hand, can never enjoy full satiety, and still pays in the flesh, for any attempt to fulfill her hunger, her desires. In fact, a quarter of the novel is devoted to her body’s starvation, aging, and deterioration.

Moreover, Ray’s existence in the novel is defined not only through her relations with other people—as someone’s daughter, stepdaughter, aunt, lover, friend, adviser, employee, and so forth—or even through her relation to things, the things she owns (clothes, furniture, apartment) or produces (food, hand-painted china, etc.). Like the objects she gives, receives, purchases, and sells, she “diverts,” transforms as a social person (and often from a person into a

---

<sup>14</sup> The final weeks of her life are replete with Ray’s obsessive examinations of the decline of her own body: her wrinkles, bad hair, poor teeth—described as “two sardonic horseshoes mounted on a very pink rubber” (*BS* 432), “flat” and “drying” breasts (433), numbing headaches, and Parkinsons-like uncontrollable tremors (477).

thing), depending on which sphere—Market, State, or House—she herself is controlled by. Even in her teenage years, when she still lived with her father, Adolph Schmidt, an endearing but ultimately unsuccessful merchant, she recognizes the different ways in which she belongs to the house (and House, in the anthropological sense) or a domestic space, as Adolph's beloved and seemingly well-protected child. Yet, as a quasi-legal person, to use Bruno Latour's language, she is a minor and a stepdaughter, and once her father dies, she is deprived of any possessions and protections of the House.

Similarly, she exists in the vibrant Cincinnati party scene as “fly” girl “men laid hands too readily on” (*BS* 5). Later on, when she decides to become Walter Saxel's lover, she becomes dependent on, but not protected by, the rules of the Market rather than of the domestic sphere, so to speak, especially given that Walter, a powerful and affluent banker—a specialist in accumulation, we could say—treats her as one of his treasured commodities; he carefully regulates her movements and restricts her social life outside of her relationship with him. He forces her to quit her job, estranges her from family and friends, and insists on her utter devotion to his life, his business, and his own family. Thus, Ray feeds and has sex with Walter, but is also required to provide business and public relations advice to him at no charge as well as help him manage his family affairs and select gifts for his children. Her job is to fulfill his sexual needs—she is to be available at all times in her “kennel,” as she calls her New York apartment (*BS* 162)—as well as his voracious appetite for traditional Jewish and German foods. Ray's job is to purchase and prepare extravagant meals for Walter, which she often does while starving herself, as Walter does not provide enough money to pay for enough food for both of them.

What's interesting in Ray's arrangement with Walter is that it complicates typical descriptions of modern commodities and female leisure. In advertisements of the period, women

were always urged to purchase more modern appliances to acquire more leisure, more freedom from domestic drudgery, and consumption was seen as a form of consumer “suffrage.” In Hurst’s articulation, Ray has a lot of time to herself when Walter is away on business or busy with his family, but her leisure is only partly a product of her engagement with consumer objects. In fact, her leisure is a form of labor—she must rest in order to be ready and available to meet Walter’s unending demands. Her forced leisure is also unmistakably a form of control and containment, not a path to greater participation in the public life of the nation. In a very significant scene, Walter deploys a famous modern “object of freedom,” the telephone, to further control, not liberate Ray. Walter installs the telephone in Ray’s apartment, not to make life easier for her but to keep her in the house. As he says, “I need you, dear, on call” (*BS* 165). Thus, the telephone, a new modernist commodity associated with greater freedom and connectivity between people, completely disempowers Ray and drastically reduces her mobility. As a woman, and a kept woman at that, Ray has very limited control of her life, and it’s quite ominous that toward the end of the novel (and her own life), she resorts to gambling and begging to support herself. These two activities seem antithetical to the cult of commodity, as in a way, Ray wants to get some things (goods) in an arbitrary exchange for nothing. The irony of her unsuccessful microscale attempts at generating wealth is that such highly speculative and haphazard activities worked for male financiers such as Walter—his job in finance, after all, relied on similar gambles—but not for a single middle-aged woman. In a sense Ray always gets valuation spheres wrong; she wants to play by the arbitrary rules of the Market to win provisions for the House or fails to see that what she takes to be rules of the House in her own relationship with Walter are in fact rules governing commercial exchanges within the Market. In the end, the 500-franc note she

receives from Arnold, Walter's son, whom she meets in one of the casinos, comes too late, and she starves to death with a "five-hundred-franc note plastered to her bosom" (*BS* 481).

It is not surprising that Hurst devoted so much attention to objects and persons in her novel. After all, modernists understood very well, perhaps even better than contemporary literary theorists, the tentativeness of "thing" categories and the fluid boundaries between different kinds of things and between things and persons. As I mentioned earlier, Robert Flaherty, William Carlos Williams, and W. E. B. Du Bois knew well that things "had a social life" of their own, that they could become gifts or commodities depending on how, and in what social, economic, or political contexts they circulated (Appadurai; Maquet), especially within those systematized in Chris A. Gregory's definition as the three main realms of social organization: Market, House, and State. Yet, what sets Hurst apart was that she was most interested in the gendering of these different realms. *Back Street* exposes the conditions under which women could circulate things, and the kinds of things they could exchange, as well as how they themselves could perform the role of objects in various spheres, and, finally, what they got out of their intimacy with objects of material culture. Hurst seems to argue that neither popular consumer culture advertising the liberation of women through objects, nor Depression-era primitivism, which proposed a disengagement with consumer objects and a return to a nurturing domesticity, offers a viable model for full (legal) personification<sup>15</sup> of female persons.

The sense that the forces of the Market can swallow up all kinds of "things" as well as persons into its inescapable vacuum-suction circuit of commodities fascinated and terrified most modernists. Many modernist primitivists (T. S. Eliot, Willa Cather, the Flahertys) rebelled

---

<sup>15</sup> I am alluding here to personification, not as humanization, per se, but as a cultural, political-economic process through which a person or a thing can become a "legal person" with social rights and privileges. I rely on the work of Gregory Mark.

against capitalist commodity culture and used objects they sometimes mistakenly and romantically associated with gift-exchange societies, or what Glenn Willmott calls “indigenous heritages.”<sup>16</sup> In their work, primitivist writers, filmmakers, musicians, and illustrators often relied on swapping circulation spheres, mixing where certain things “belonged” in order to promote a utopian vision of modernity, one that could ideally depend on gift rather than commodity exchange. Of course, in reality, the objects that interested primitivists were not immune to the forces of the State or the Market. The objects they idealized were as often bought and sold, stolen, or misappropriated as they were translated, offered as gifts, or exchanged in noncommercial ways. However, by decontextualizing the power structures of various Houses (among ethnic groups, racial systems of kinship, domestic spheres, sexual hierarchies), and by representing them as unaffected by, or asynchronous with, capitalist modernity, primitivists often idealized the organization of the House, offering an exoticist and romanticized view of noncapitalist socioeconomic organization. In other words, some primitivists, such as the earlier-mentioned Flahertys as well as the New Deal artists and writers of the Depression era, promoted the idyll of the House, not recognizing fully, or choosing not to represent adequately, the extent of the overlap of influence among the House, State, and Market.

Hurst, however, who challenged the fictions of women’s emancipation within the spheres of the Market and the State, first offered a scathing critique of the organization of the House in her description of the domestic spaces that Ray Schmidt came across: her father’s Tagenhorst/Schmidt, her sister’s, and, later, both households organized by Walter Saxel, as well.

---

<sup>16</sup> It’s important to note here that Willmott defines indigenous heritage and modernities as often intertwined yet oppositional to imperialist and capitalist social organizations. According to him the term aboriginal is not primarily a racial or geopolitical category but refers to “any cultural formations whose values and organization of power are primarily regulated by the institutions of the House,” whereas imperialist/capitalist economies are dominated, but not limited to, the institutions of the Market (17).

She insisted on the cross-influences between the House and Market. The stability of the family didn't depend on the relations within the House for Ray. Adolph Schmidt, Ray's father, might have been perceived by Ray as a loving and considerate patriarch, but after his death, Ray was stranded penniless, and the House, a "non-corporate estate" of the family, disintegrated. Adolph didn't manage his business well, as it turned out, and he didn't show much foresight, while alive, in making legal arrangements to provide for his family in the event of his death. What kept the family together, while he was alive, was not only his privileged position as a patriarch of the family but, just as important, as a businessman. It was important, then, for Hurst to shatter the primitivist fictions of the House's separateness, the belief that the House, and specifically the family, was impermeable to the other spheres. In her view, the fact that the House in American society of the first part of the twentieth century was affected by the financial fluctuations of the Market was of crucial importance to its female members.

Seemingly at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from the primitivists, the ideologues of consumerism, such as Henry Ford, Edward Bernays, and Paul Mazur, praised the power of the Market as a force of positive social and economic influence. Consumerist ideology, of course, aimed at promoting the increased and accelerated circulation of mass-produced commodities, the "alienable detachables" (Willmott 15), from manufacturers to distributors to consumers, from market to market, and so on. At the same time, consumerism, in its mainstream articulations (in, for instance, new forms of advertising) became associated with democratic and often nationalist, populist, and liberatory values, while simultaneously promoting the commercial interests of the Market, which were often antithetical to such values (since they represented that of the State and House). In the words of Annette Weiner, "capitalism [paradoxically] only heightened the dependency of the connections between alienable and inalienable possessions"

(35). In other words, while modern advertising promoted “alienable detachables,” useable, disposable modern commodities, it was the “[a]cquisition of symbolic markers [of status, heritage, wealth, such as gifts and goods that] not only acknowledged an intimacy with the latest fashions but claimed the honor and renown generated by the ownership of inalienable possessions” (35).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in some cases, in order to appeal to consumers who were often not comfortable with overt expressions of capitalist exchanges, things (commodities) were marketed as keepsakes and gifts, objects that in a sense should not be circulating within the sphere of the Market. Roland Marchand discusses, for example, the “soft focus” family images deployed by many advertisers of the era (248-254). In soft-focus images, advertised commodities were presented as domestic keepsakes.

By the early twentieth century, this arbitrary logic, the language of symbolic exaggeration, in short, the powerful rhetoric of modern advertising, was widely known and popular among readers of the popular press: dailies, magazines, and journals. It was also extremely important to writers, more and less mainstream, whose presence in the literary marketplace depended on how well their work could complement the ads generating profit for popular presses and publishing houses. Moreover, the role of publication editors and literary agents in the fashioning and promotion of writing as a new modern commodity cannot be overestimated. In fact, as a result of this process of the commodification and the branding of literary works, most popular writers had the power to sell magazine issues and generate additional advertising revenue for popular publication, not the other way around.

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, soft-focus ads such as Ford Motor Company ads in the *Saturday Evening Post* (10, 15 Jan. 1925: 82-83) or an ad in *Printer's Ink* for Coldwell paper (30 Aug. 1930: 2).

Not surprising, then, modernist writing across the ideological and stylistic spectra betrayed not only a familiarity but a deep engagement with the vernacular of advertising and consumerism. Fannie Hurst was no exception here. Top-selling publications such as *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Metropolitan*, and *Everybody's* were precisely the venues where she chose to publish and/or advertise her short stories and serials.<sup>18</sup> Hurst, like scores of other modernist writers and artists at the time, navigated the complex world of the popular press, publishing in niche and small publications to generate critical acclaim and signing long-term lucrative deals with mass-selling periodicals to pay bills. Better than her contemporaries (and certainly better than some of the heroines of her own novels), Fannie Hurst, however, managed to harness the forces of the market, and to use them to her benefit. Although she complained that “[m]oney can make life so complex” and said she “care[d] so little [about it],”<sup>19</sup> she understood that she “must earn it if [she] would live.” Money could become “a task master,” confided Hurst to “Stef” Stefansson, the lover to whom she frequently loaned money, “unless one kn[ew] the secret of being perpetually debonair with [it]. Spending it—giving it—being wise with it—never canny.” Money earned with her writing brought Hurst unprecedented wealth, power, and freedom, yet as a sharp cultural critic Fannie Hurst recognized the uniqueness of her own situation. Few women of her time could be equally “debonair” with money; few women could resist the controlling flow of capital and direct it instead. In other words, immersed in the consumerist

---

<sup>18</sup> For an extensive bibliography of short stores and serials published by Fannie Hurst in the popular press, consult Brooke Kroeger’s index of publications in *Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst* 354-360.

<sup>19</sup> Fannie made these comments in a letter to her lover, Vilhjalmur Stefansson “Stef,” beginning with “Things are Difficult . . . .” Dart, Stef correspondence, Box 111 (addendum Box 2), Gretchen-Wright, Fannie Hurst to Stef, 16 Jan. 1924 (qtd. in Kroeger 99).

logic of the marketplace, Hurst still recognized its dangerous fictions and limitations as they applied to women.

*Back Street* dissects those fictions and exposes the limits of the consumerist dream of public participation, and we must take a closer look at the characteristics and practices of modern advertising if we are to fully understand Hurst's formal narrative choices in her novel.

Advertising in the 1920s' visual culture homogenized the oppositional ideologies of primitivism and consumerism in an optimistic discourse of progress and uplift that targeted women. Hurst's interjection in *Back Street*, her argument concerning the nature of gendered personhood and commodity exchange, is deeply influenced by the primitivist and consumerist discourses of the late 1920s. The unmaking of narrative progress, as much as of the bildungsroman narrative of progress in *Back Street*, has much to do with Fannie Hurst's critique of the axioms of primitivism and consumerism, key early-twentieth-century trends that offered women new recipes for social participation.

The 1920s and 1930s were a crucial era in modern advertising, which, as Roland Marchand suggests, increasingly sold products by promoting feelings, ideals, and "social aspirations" associated with the ownership of new commodities, rather than by promoting the actual qualities of said commodities (167). After World War I, modern advertisers wanted to dissociate their discipline from the "Barnum image"<sup>20</sup> of an unprofessional, unethical promotion practice driven purely by economic profit. The ads of the 1920s and 1930s promoted technological innovations, industrial transformations, and ever-changing, disposable, consumer products, but they also claimed to perform a valuable civic role. They aimed to offer advice to help consumers navigate the difficulties of the radically transforming modern world. The job of

---

<sup>20</sup> Marchand 7.

ads, in the words of President Calvin Coolidge, was not simply to sell commodities but to carry out the “work of the regeneration and redemption of mankind.”<sup>21</sup>

Although the primitivists and President Coolidge couldn't have disagreed more on what the problem with mankind was or on the means through which “the regeneration of mankind” could be achieved, both factions engaged with material culture to promote the social and economic transformation of American society. But while both engaged with things, the actual materiality of objects, they also presented things in highly edited, fictitious contexts. Some of the ads' “social tableaux”<sup>22</sup> recycled iconic images of American pasts (agricultural, prefeminist, exclusively white, etc.) that had little to do with the more diverse, and racially, ethnically, and class-stratified American society of the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, advertising often produced ideologically conservative primitivist fictions of nationhood, of static gender roles, and racial homogeneity or racial stratification. But it also transformed consumption into a civic obligation of sorts. And it promoted the circulation of things (commodities) by emphasizing the importance of such circulation in larger cultural narratives. New things sold because of how well ads argued that new objects could make and unmake social persons. To participate in American modernity without new things was to forfeit an opportunity to be fully incorporated into that experience and to forfeit the opportunity to effect social change.

Needless to say, primitivism and consumerism became intertwined in the most surprising and conflicting ways in advertising. Both relied on arbitrary articulations of thingness and

---

<sup>21</sup> *Printers' Ink*, 4 Nov. 1926: 4-6.

<sup>22</sup> Marchand defines the concept of “social tableaux” in advertising as a category of ads “in which persons [and I would add things] are depicted in such a way as to suggest their relationship to each other or to a larger social structure. The depiction of a single person may qualify if that person is placed in a setting suggestive of social relationships with others” (165). It's safe to argue, then, that widespread use of “social tableaux” in modern advertising promoted the flow of capital and commodities through skillful integration of references to State and House. Thus, an ad for a dishwasher operated as, for example, a promotion of the nuclear family, and as legible endorsement of conservative gender roles.

personhood for their respective rhetorical, political, and economic effectiveness. Paradoxically, in visual and print mass culture, each reinforced the other's popular appeal despite their ideological differences. Advertising made primitivism and consumerism visually inseparable (in magazines, newspapers, or journals) and instantly recognizable. The circulation of *Cosmopolitan* oscillated between 1,500,000 and 2,000,000 before World War II; *The Ladies Home Journal*, the "undisputed giant among women's magazines," had reached a million readers by 1905 (Drowne and Huber 176), and its circulation climbed steadily to 4,000,000. By World War II, the semi-elite *Saturday Evening Post*, *Literary Digest*, *Everybody's*, and *Vogue* were distributed in millions of copies together, whereas pulps or "fiction-magazines" could sell between 500,000 and 1,000,000 million copies each (Earle 63).

In these contexts, advertisements promoting more consumption and those promoting utopian primitivism often complemented one other by reinforcing each others' rhetorical power, despite the fact that they represented oppositional ideologies (pro and anticapitalist, feminist and patriarchal, etc.). For example, *Everybody's*, a popular literary magazine devoted to travel and adventure, and not-too-highly disguised erotica, regularly featured ads for products by Wrigley's, Procter and Gamble, Topkis, Listerine, and Ivory, making it seem that such modern commodities as brand-name chewing gum, mouthwashes, thermal underwear, and others were indispensable if one were to partake in such exotic and forbidden adventures as those described in many of *Everybody's* primitivist stories, novelettes, and serials.<sup>23</sup> New consumer products would facilitate

---

<sup>23</sup> Consider some of the exoticist and self-explanatory titles in the publication: "Cholera at Bukit Batu: A Clash of Purpose on a Rubber Plantation" (Jan. 1927); "Ways that Are Dark: The Kidnapping of a Newspaper Man in China" (Mar. 1927); "A Thief of Tinian Time: The Delightful Yarn of a Little Tattooed Brown Brother" (Aug. 1928); "Black River: The Story of a Grim Quest for a Jungle-Hidden Treasure" (Sep. 1928); "Devil Drums: When the Voodoo Terror Rises in the Haitian Hills" (Jan. 1928); "The Pirates of Pindoro: The Odyssey of a Man of Iron in the Flaming South Sea Islands" (June 1928);

the primitivist experience of cosmopolitan tourism. In other words, modernist tourist-consumers could traverse or transcend national boundaries, ads argued, but they needed modern commodities to enable and mediate their experience of those regions and peoples existing away from the centers of industrial modernity. Similarly, publications such as *Collier's* invoked primitivism in their ads for mechanical equipment in order to argue that new technology could at once return Americans to a past where nature could be freely experienced, and transform both nature and the experience of it.<sup>24</sup>

For all of that, what makes advertising especially significant to the study of modernist women writers, and of Hurst's novels and short stories in particular, is that advertising as female-oriented mass communication transformed the publics of mass magazines and brought female consumers to the forefront of public culture. In other words, one of the most important aspects of modern advertising as mass communications was its dependence on women as its target audience, which, of course, had a profound impact on how commodities were presented and advertised. The advertising industry, of course, not unlike film, radio, and publishing, offered few leadership opportunities for women<sup>25</sup> but relied on women as consumers. Despite their limited role as income earners, women composed an overwhelming majority of the American consumer base.<sup>26</sup> They were the ones responsible for purchasing new commodities, and the

---

“In the Manner of Lipstick: When a Woman is Chief of Her Tribe, the Sons of Empire Walk Warily” (Mar. 1929).

<sup>24</sup> For example, ads for the Lockwood Division of Outboard Motors Corporation advertised their engines with slogans such as “Today on the Waters of America Rides a New ‘CHIEF’” (*Collier's*, June 1929: 41). The ad overlapped images of a Native American in a feathered headdress paddling a canoe with that of a modern American man in a Lockwood motor-powered boat. “No ‘Chief’ of any Tribe was ever more entitled to leadership than this great ‘Chief’ of the Outboards,” the ad boasted.

<sup>25</sup> Marchand is quick to point out that the role of women in advertising as a profession was perhaps still better than in other (creative) industries; nonetheless, the focus on women in advertising didn't translate into gender parity at the management level.

<sup>26</sup> Marchand 66.

industry's male leaders, often hostile to and dismissive of their target audience, had to develop a language to *communicate* with and appeal to female consumers.

Moreover, as Roland Marchand shows,

[a]dvertisements functioned as efficient mass communications that rationalized and lubricated an impersonal marketplace of vast scale. They facilitated an exchange of goods and services between multitudes of strangers on a (national) and international level. (9)

Like primitivism, advertising consolidated disparate and anonymous audiences. The ads strove to produce a sense of shared connection among women, just as primitivist productions strove to produce a sense of intimacy across racial, class, and geopolitical boundaries sharpened by capitalist modernity. What I'm trying to say here is that if we look at primitivism and consumerism in the 1920s and 1930s from a communications perspective, both appear to be "affective arts" using elements of material culture in surprisingly similar ways, if to different political ends. However, here the similarities end. The flow of things facilitated and encouraged by ads was to benefit persons, and the advertisers argued sinisterly that female persons would be the true benefactors of consumerism. For example, Listerine and Lucky Strike ads often advertised their products as tools of suffrage. Popular primitivism, to risk a generalization, was less concerned with women as a target audience, and most mainstream articulations didn't develop a language sensitive to the anxieties of modern female audiences. Instead, they carried strong anticorporate sentiments, often, but not always, tied to calls for racial and cultural pluralism.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The earlier mentioned documentaries by the Flahertys as well as New Deal visual arts are good examples of this trend.

Female modernist writers, especially white ones—and again, I’m using the term to denote a modern legal category, not an essentialist one<sup>28</sup>—concerned with social and economic inequities exacerbated by capitalist modernity, often gravitated toward primitivism. Even in its least radical manifestations, primitivism offered a critique of industrialization, Taylorism and Fordism, corporate management, exploitation of natural and human resources, racism, and more. At the same time, to say that the consumerist discourse of suffrage and freedom permeating modern ads had an appeal for female modernists would be an understatement. Consumerist promises of incorporation of women into the public sphere were overall more progressive than the representation of women in primitivist dreams of either sexual liberation (in avant-garde arts) or the return to nurturing patriarchy (in corporate and national arts<sup>29</sup>).

Popular magazines, and ads in those magazines, are of particular importance to the study of women’s writing, and of Fannie Hurst’s works particularly, not only because the beginnings of her career as a writer, public intellectual, celebrity, and women’s rights advocate can be traced precisely to modernist mass-circulated periodicals of the first part of the twentieth century. Research in the vast archive of texts and visuals in mass periodicals offers an insight into the ideological corner in which women such as Fannie Hurst found themselves, particularly in the late 1920s. Urged to transform society by serving as muses and sex objects in primitivist “porno-tropical” works, enticed to buy commodities to free themselves from unjust gender roles and “assignments,” promised incorporation into the national public sphere in exchange for increased

---

<sup>28</sup> In fact, as a Jewish American writer, Fannie Hurst often spoke and wrote about anti-Semitism in American society. She returned to the subject in *Back Street*, where she spends considerable time describing the overt and covert racism that forces Walter Saxel and both of his families to stay at certain hotels and inns and not others while on vacation in America. In a sense, widespread anti-Semitism pushes Saxel to agree to a marriage of convenience with a daughter of a powerful Jewish financier. However, in modern advertising and legal discourse, whiteness appears to be a more capacious category, defined as, for example, nonblackness or non-Indian-ness.

<sup>29</sup> I discuss national arts of the Depression-era culture in more detail in section two.

consumption of new consumer goods, and yet attacked often as agents of the degeneration of culture, women were the target of ads as well as their target audience (McClintock 21-244; Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 161).

The visual language of popular magazines was, of course, not uniform, and depended on the perception of magazines' specific publics' needs, the individual preferences of chief editors, and the needs of advertisers, and it might be useful here to look at a few specific instances of such conflicting arguments about women, things, and society. And yet, despite the diversity of publication profiles, ads fabricated women and objects in consistently contradictory ways. For example, leading national magazines of the period, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Collier's*, *Vogue*, *Ladies' Home Journal (LHJ)*, *Everybody's Magazine*, and *Literary Digest* recognized the importance of their female readers and appealed to them directly through ads for both household and cosmetics products as much as cars, travel services, and a selection and illustration of stories. For instance, two extreme examples of primitivism and consumerism in print visual culture, *Vogue* and *LHJ*, in terms of intended readers couldn't be farther apart: the former appealed to independent, often single, middle- and upper-class women; the latter focused on homemakers and housewives. Both, however, could be seen as indexes of a trend to promote variously conceived women's rights by promotion of things.

*LHJ*, one of the most popular women-oriented magazines, was a voluminous publication; each issue included often more than two hundred pages. With its almost Victorian emphasis on homemaking and civic participation, it was replete with ads for household items: cleaning agents, canned foods, soap, dishwashing equipment, cosmetics (mainly of the kind that could be used by the entire family). Articles tackling large social issues of the day, temperance or religious tolerance, for example, were laced with ads for new commodities. The implicit

argument presented in the pages of *LHJ* was that with the help of new commodities, women could, first, find more satisfaction in the new “active” motherhood. Instead of devoting all their time to housework, now completed by machines, they could spend more active time with their families. Second, they could devote more leisure time to social activism outside of the domestic sphere. In other words, the investment in a refrigerator or a washing machine, according to the visual logic of *LHJ*, had the power not only to transform the structure of domestic labor within a family but could be perceived as an intervention into the national public sphere. With the help of household objects, women could leave the domestic and enter into the public sphere, ready for the inclusion of active, “new,” modern, women. In other words, new consumer items would transform women from domestic caretakers to national caretakers.

A more radical view of commodities and women, at least in terms of gender politics, was presented in the pages of *Vogue*, a leading fashion and urban culture magazine of the 1920s and 1930s. As in *LHJ*, things, cosmetics, cars, and clothes were advertised as tools that could liberate women, yet the nature of this liberation was far less centered on women’s role within the heteronormative family or their social activism. Clothes and fashion, the advertiser and writers of *Vogue* seemed to argue, would allow women to perform themselves (rather than transform themselves), according to the requirements or norms of particular geopolitical contexts. The visual language of *Vogue* emphasized the constructedness of class and national identity and provided tips on how to traverse national, geographical, and cultural boundaries, and venture into exotic, foreign landscapes and locations by skillful application of makeup, or a strategic choice of clothes, hairstyle, cars, and so forth. In a sense, *Vogue* created a fashion cartography of the world and implied that the possession and application of commodities would increase the mobility of white women.

Moreover, unlike in other publications, women in *Vogue* were often presented actively engaging in outdoor activities; and when they were presented indoors, the surrounding architecture connoted desire and freedom, rather than the confines of the domestic space. *Vogue* often blurred the lines between different kinds of objects (commodities, goods, and gifts) by presenting them as art objects; but even more importantly, it blurred the lines between commodities presented as artwork and women aestheticized as art objects. Moreover, what was most unprecedented in *Vogue*'s articulation of things and persons was the degree to which things facilitated same-sex physical intimacy among women.<sup>30</sup> Whereas a Chrysler or a Buick in *LHJ* or *Literary Digest* would be advertised as a family car, in *Vogue* cars were advertised as commodities that would facilitate women's escape from the tedious and oppressive confines of the heterosexual family. Women were encouraged to expertly assess the quality, texture, color, and possible use of fabrics and clothes, and the process of assessment of their quality was often presented as an opportunity for women to get intimately close to each other.

*Back Street* interrogates such confluences of objects and persons in the private and public spheres affected equally by Market, House, and State forces. Hurst emphasizes the connectedness of things and persons but strays from completely endorsing primitivist and consumerist faith in the transformative power of things. In fact, *Back Street* intervenes in public debates about economy, power, and gender by highlighting the schizophrenic predicament (of being an object-subject, or a semiperson and a semiobject) that trapped many modernist women, and that was so thoroughly illustrated in popular consumer culture and primitivist productions. *Back Street* ironically recreates primitivist-consumerist possibilities as it narrates the life of Ray Schmidt. It tempts its protagonist with multiple choices as if straight from consumerist and

---

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the ad for Skinner's silk in the 15 July 1920 issue of the magazine.

primitivist manuals: for middle-class marriage (Ray's childhood friend, Kurt Shendler, proposes to Ray after her father's death), for the pursuit of business careers and financial independence in New York, for same-sex friendship (with fellow "kept women"), and for fulfillment of sexual desires (as a concubine to Walter Saxel). But while modernist ads boasted optimistically that one could be a "flapper" but "keep house" too<sup>31</sup> with the help of modern commodities, Hurst exposed in her novel the inadequacy of the consumerist "therapeutics of advertising" (Marchand 335) and the therapeutics of primitivism at the same time. If, as Lauren Berlant claims, women's culture is an example of "[i]ntimate publics [that] elaborate themselves through commodity culture . . . and are organized by fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacle of their historical condition" (*The Female Complaint* 8), then Hurst's job in the 1930s was to expose such fantasies and dreams. Importantly, she decided to achieve this through a narrative undoing of primitivist and consumerist political dreams and affective strategies. In other words, in *Back Street*, a bildungsroman that was partly grim romance, marriage plot, soft pornography, and partly an ethnography of things, she didn't simply reject the rhetoric of liberation-through-things. Instead, Hurst chose to expose the actual fabrication of female persons into things, including the built and physical environment, and oppressive legal, economic, and social structures. These, she argued, disabled women's participation in the public sphere, despite the fact that on the surface, such participation seemed within reach. To *defetishize* things in her novel, for Hurst, meant to *defetishize* female persons, as well.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ad for S.O.S. scouring pads featuring Mary Dale Anthony in the March 1927 *Ladies Home Journal* (182).

Surprisingly, her utterly depressing and uneventful novel was a commercial success from the start, first as a serial appearing in *Cosmopolitan*,<sup>32</sup> then as an actual novel (1931), and, finally, as a Hollywood film (1932).<sup>33</sup> Hurst knew that popular magazines, with their consumerist and primitivist propaganda, offered white women more visibility and more leisure, and with them an illusion of increased mobility, power, and even sexual agency. But she refused to express much faith in commodity and consumer culture. Although her novel focuses on an earlier period, the turn of the century through the mid-twentieth century, *Back Street* is drenched in cultural anxieties reflective of the economic troubles of the late 1920s and 1930s: overconsumption, unequal distribution of wealth, the economic instability of the post-1929 market crash economy, the feminization of poverty, hunger, and so on. Hurst's novel was commissioned by Ray Long of *Cosmopolitan* and written in a particularly difficult moment in American history—after the 1929 collapse of the stock market. It certainly questions the liberatory rhetoric of overconsumption, which by the late 1920s seems to have lost most of its appeal and public support. At the same time, when, in the grim economic climate of the Depression, primitivism returned in a mutated form and with new force in narratives of cultural uplift and romantic visions of different and better pasts, its articulation of liberatory and decontextualized *thingness* appeared deeply inadequate to Hurst, and dangerous, if not deadly, to her *Back Street* heroine, Ray.

In other words, despite the reemergence of escapist primitivism in popular writing and in the public national art of the period, and the continued advertising of the consumer-citizen

---

<sup>32</sup> The series appeared in *Cosmopolitan* under several titles: *Grand Passion*, *Back Streets*, and *Back Street*.

<sup>33</sup> The novel was also adapted for the screen in 1932, 1941, and 1962. The last two Production Code-era remakes bore little resemblance to Hurst's original story. Sanitized of any radical content, they included little of Hurst's critique of the gendered politics of the American economy.

fantasy, Hurst seems equally skeptical of the power of both consumerism and primitivism to transform social reality through the engagement of things and persons, especially female persons. In her novel, Hurst reveals the fictions underlying much of the gendered consumerist dream that promised women greater participation in the public sphere but left its “back streets” full of starved female bodies (especially those of persons who were disabled, uneducated, old, or unmarried). Similarly, her novel shatters primitivist faith in both the possibility of sexual liberation (promoted as a return to a more primitive, primal state unconstrained by modernity), or, on the other hand, the return to the bourgeois ethos of heteronormative marriage and protective patriarchy (promoted as a return to a more recent and “natural” Euro-American past).

In Hurst’s narrative of formation, then, the life of Ray Schmidt is emblematic of the interconnectedness of things and persons in the golden days of the American capitalist economy. An aspiring businesswoman, Ray Schmidt witnesses the industrial boom in the Midwest and the financial one in New York. Yet, despite the amazing technological inventions and transformations within American heavy industries and the financial sector, women in the novel do not participate in or benefit from this revolution. This gives *Back Street* some of its peculiarity as a novel of formation, since it is as concerned with Ray’s life, unfolding and folding up, so to speak, as it is with the birth and social life of different things (the car, financial instruments, artisan objects). And while things “metamorphose,” to use Macquet’s and Appadurai’s<sup>34</sup> language, that is, gently transform themselves and, as a result, transform male subjects in that they generate incremental wealth for them, the novel argues that that female persons’ main development is their transformation into quasi-objects or “social waste,”<sup>35</sup> not into

---

<sup>34</sup> In Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* 16.

<sup>35</sup> In the articulation of Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 6, 13.

fully incorporated national subjects. Unable to achieve subjective and collective consciousness, women—not only Ray—in the novel do not consume their way to freedom; they are consumed themselves by poverty, the demands of their families, the sexual appetites of others, in short, equally by forces of the House, State, and Market.

*Back Street* was advertised in *Cosmopolitan* as a story about a “[w]oman who loved not wisely,”<sup>36</sup> but reviewers, most very critical of the novel, were quick to notice that it was, in fact, a story about Ray’s desires, about “illicit passion,”<sup>37</sup> as much as it was about what they perceived as the redundant and “constant reiteration of things.” Ray Long, the editor of *Cosmopolitan*, changed Hurst’s title, *The Grand Passion*, to *Back Street*, because he didn’t think the original one was dignified enough (Kroeger 163). Yet readers and critics alike saw *Back Street* as a novel about desires and things, key components of primitivist and consumerist discourses. And although the series and the book were promoted as an individual narrative of formation based on the life of Ray Schmidt, *Back Street* clearly presented Ray’s story as symbolic of larger problems with the American society, family, and economy.

In fact, the novel follows the lives of many women in their engagement with things. Ray is referred to in the novel as Walter Saxel’s family’s “shadow” (*BS* 249); readers are constantly reminded that Ray’s life, brought to the forefront by Hurst, in fact *shadows* that of Saxel’s legitimate family. The novel’s title, *Back Street*, is an allusion to the secondary position Ray occupies in Walter’s life and in the public life of her country; just as there are real wives and their shadows, there are also economic, cultural, political main streets and back streets.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Cosmopolitan*, Mar. 1931: 68.

<sup>37</sup> *The New Republic*, 11 Feb. 1931: 362.

But there are, in fact, multiple instances of such *shadowing*, of such asymmetrical, unequal parallelisms, presented throughout the narrative. *Back Street* offers an almost kaleidoscopic opportunity to look at multiple women's and men's engagements with things in the spheres of the House, Market, and State in the context of American capitalist modernity. Ray, the "fly" girl with plenty of business acumen who fails to secure her finances through her job or through her involvement with her lover, is shadowed herself by her stepsister, Freda, who wants to make money by blackmailing her fiancé into marriage. Like Ray's, Freda's plan fails: marriage makes her neither happy nor rich. There are several mothers, stepmothers, and wives in the book: Ray's late mother Lena; her stepmother, Cora Goebel Tagenhorst; Walter Saxel's wife, Corinna; and Ray herself (although childless, Ray ends up mothering Walter, his children with Corinne, and later, her dog, Bebe). None of these women, despite differences in their class and status, their life choices, or the environments they inhabit, become agents of their own lives within their families or actors on the stages of national economy, politics, or civic life.

As if mocking the possibilities for female-self actualization advertised by primitivists and consumerists, Hurst allows readers to rearrange her narrative puzzle in a myriad of ways. We can connect all types of women with all kinds of lifestyles and choices, and all kinds of things. And yet, none of these women—the prostitutes, concubines, stately mothers, wives, and daughters—develop collective or individual subjectivity or participate in the public sphere.<sup>38</sup> Men, on the other hand, can trade, make or invent, appropriate, and give things successfully.

---

<sup>38</sup> Of course, Mrs. Saxel is a member of the upper class, received in the salons in Europe and America. However, we should not confuse her presence in upper-class circles with actual active engagements in public life. Like Ray, she is primarily a facilitator of Walter's life. She enables his career through family money and sexual reproduction, but by the end of the novel, Hurst presents her as primarily occupied with Veblenian "conspicuous consumption": an obsessive and unending process of renovation, redecorating, and the purchasing of commodities.

For example, while Ray's skills as a china painter barely help her to make ends meet, her friend Kurt Shendler's hobby of fixing bikes is transformed into a job making cars, which then catapults him into national prominence as an auto industry mogul. Ray's talent for cooking feeds Walter's insatiable appetites, but fails to satisfy Ray's own hunger. Her skills as a financial adviser advance the financial careers of several merchants in the Midwest, and are instrumental to the financial success of Walter Saxel, and yet she starves to death, unable to *make* money. Unlike Hurst herself, Ray is not very "debonair" with money and cannot produce and sustain all-liberating wealth for herself.

Hurst's negative representation of financiers involved in high-stakes financial gambles<sup>39</sup> might have been influenced by a wave of public criticism surrounding the financial dealings of economic elites in pre-Depression America; they were, after all, blamed for the collapse of the stock market. But what is quite telling about this novel, published after the stock market crash, is that neither gambling, nor other financial operations (such as acquisitions and sales, held in high regard by consumerists), nor invention, nor creative work (held in high regard by primitivists) are presented as viable ways for women to produce "self," to make money and/or to achieve autonomy. In other words, Hurst argues that women and men equally produce, exchange, and gift things, commodities, keepsakes, and financial instruments, but women cannot benefit from their engagement with things in the spheres of Market, State, or House. It's no accident that none of the female characters in the novel can produce capital directly.<sup>40</sup> None of them has much

---

<sup>39</sup> The fact that Hurst fashioned her main character, Walter Saxel, after the actual Walter Sachs of Goldman Sachs makes her Depression story eerily prophetic.

<sup>40</sup> While *Back Street* suggests that neither primitivism nor consumerism offers opportunities and effective strategies for female emancipation, it does hint at some possibilities in the text in Hurst's description of Ray Schmidt's niece, Emma. Although Emma is a marginal figure in the story and we never learn much about her future, the way Hurst depicts her stands in stark contrast to descriptions of other females in the book. She is disengaged from things and consumption; money for her health care, clothes, and surgeries

reflective self-awareness, and their intimacy with other females is replaced by a false and dangerous sense of connection with men and things. Ray is consumed by her delusions of “oneness” with Walter as well as a “sense of intimacy [with him] that transcended one’s intimacy with one’s self” (*BS* 203). She is equally obsessed with her keepsakes and gifts, especially toward the end of her life. For Ray, the deterioration of her wardrobe and disintegration of her own body go hand in hand.

“The foundation of manners is economic,” writes Richard Godden, and the relationship between the economy and productions of social behavior has often been the subject of literary analysis (12). Maurizio Lazzarato extends this argument, stressing that there is a great connection between “the production of subjectivity and economy” (1). In consumerist ethos, finance is considered a model, a technique of individuation. But finance in the first part of the twentieth century is a strange creature, in that it operates whimsically and yet is state-regulated by legal provisions that exclude social groups from being actors of their own financial metamorphosis (Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* 16). With regard to the novel, we clearly see finance working to produce men and women differently; men’s individual career decisions translate into ownership or invention of more things, which, in turn, means more capital. And more capital transforms them as individuals: it lets them traverse social classes, participate in professional groups, change marital status, shed their ethnic identity, and experience sexual liberation. As Hurst puts it, capital transforms Walter Saxel, a poor and traditional Jewish man, into an American businessman, a “conspicuous citizen and a high type of Jew” (*BS* 238), “[n]ot only a wolf in Wall Street, but a wolf who prowls up the forbidden lanes” (*BS* 248).

---

comes from Ray; and she pursues education, not marriage or a business career; finally, she doesn’t use her sexuality as a way into the public sphere.

Hurst very carefully weaves financial vocabulary into passages describing major events of Ray's personal life. The gravity of her father's death is magnified by the fact that it is described as a financial cataclysm for Ray that precipitated the loss of her home and the dissolution of House. Ray's marriage proposal from Kurt Shendler sounds, in fact, like the pitch of a business plan. "I want to take you . . . and get myself in some sort of position to marry you," Kurt begins his proposal (*BS* 47), only to continue in the following way.

The shop isn't yielding yet, Ray. Won't be until I've cleared the debt to Osterlitz for backing me. But next year I expect to begin drawing out. This is the makings of a real going concern, Ray, and our future is ahead of us. The bicycle is here to stay! I'll be riding you around in a landaulet, one of these days, on bicycle money, Mrs. Shendler. (*BS* 47)

Ray turns Kurt down, arguing that she longs for real passion in her relationship, but as if modifying her answer, she quickly adds that she has received another, parallel, offer from Pogue's, a New York department store, and that she is going to take it. Both, in other words, are business proposals. Similarly, Ray's cooking and shopping for Walter is described in excruciating detail. Hurst explicitly puts a price tag on Ray's affair with Walter: \$200 a month.<sup>41</sup> Ray sells Walters' keepsakes and the presents from him, in fact sells her memories for a fraction of the actual market price of the commodities. Finally, we learn that less than 500 francs could have prevented Ray's death from malnutrition.

Hurst uses the language of the Market to emphasize the encroachment of rules governing capital flows into the sphere of the House and State. Transactions involving humans are as common in the novel as transactions involving things. Marriage is a financial contract. A love

---

<sup>41</sup> This seemed like an extremely direct description of the financial transactions involved in prostitution. Because of Production Code censorship, the novel's cinematic remakes in the 1940s and 1960s had to avoid any description of money being exchanged for sexual favors.

affair is a financial contract. Death or illness are financial losses, and so on. And yet, Ray's failure is caused by her confusing the financial Market system and the House value system. Nowhere is that more evident than in the passages describing Ray's selfless devotion to and desire for Walter. Starved and unable to pay her rent during one of Walter's extended absences, she still refuses the advances and potential material support of her former friends. Unlike her fellow "kept woman," Hattie, Ray is unable to apply "bookkeeping," or a "give-and-take philosophy," to her relationships (*BS* 252). She is baffled by why "Debit. Credit. All you can get" principles govern the interactions within the House. Even Corinne, the stately wife of Walter, "traffic[s] in reciprocity and demand[s] of her husband in return for what she g[ives]" (252). Ray, however, suffers from "incalculable passion" (253), which makes her *gift*, rather than trade herself, makes her give instead of selling. Hurst quickly contrasts Ray's giving with Walter's. His philanthropy has nothing to do with empathy or concern, it is a

luxury [he] permit[s] himself," just like the "luxury of the new four-story home in Fifty-third Street . . . , [t]he luxury of a wife who wore chinchilla in her box at the opera [, and] the luxury of a summer home called Castle View. (235)

For men like Walter, giving is a highly calculated social activity aimed at increasing one's social status. It must occur in the sphere of Market and State, and as a symbol of status it must take place in the open and be legible to other cultural and economic actors. Walter gives large sums of money to charities regularly but shortchanges Ray on basic expenses for rent, food, clothes, transportation, and so on.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Hurst was a famous philanthropist herself, but as a staunch FDR supporter, she believed the State, and not individual philanthropists, would best serve the public good. In *Back Street*, she developed her critique of the social benefits of philanthropy by always contrasting Walter's philanthropic deeds with his miserly treatment of his lover.

According to Lazzarato, finance “transform[s] human rights into debts” and individual obligations, and it produces subjectivity that is individual in the sense that one’s position in a society is determined not by one’s collective rights but by one’s individual access to credit “for consummation [which is] credit to be able to create oneself” (2). In other words, Market and State not only direct the flow of things but also shape the subjectivity of persons, and, in the first part of the twentieth century, protectionist laws create the possibility for male actors to use their individual credits (which are shared widely across the spectrum of the American population) as collective and natural laws. At the same time, women, such as Ray, not protected by laws are unable to produce similar credit possibilities. Despite the optimistic advertising of the 1920s and 1930s, they cannot gain the “credit to create” themselves. This I believe explains why in *Back Street* Hurst forecloses the possibility of the development of self-awareness for its female subjects. Triply marginalized in the pre–New Deal America by rules of the House, State, and Market, women, trapped by forces that prevent collective female intimacy, cannot individuate or fully socialize. Each is estranged by debit-credit national economic structures or oppressed and contained by the rules of the House.

Paul Mazur insisted that American prosperity in the first part of the twentieth century depended on increased consumption and accelerated overproduction of things people desired but didn’t need (*American Prosperity* 24-25). In order to avoid the dangers of overproduction and market saturation, Mazur argued, “newness and style” must dictate the accelerated distribution of things (25). In other words, the desire for new commodities had to be produced at a faster rate than the length of the actual “depreciation and wear” (54). And making things more desirable by emphasizing their style and newness, not their utilitarian qualities, became a “more active agency of demand” (54). These new processes aimed at the stimulation of desires, the acceleration of

consumption and production, and relied on what Mazur called “obsolescence” (54). Accepting that new things would be discarded as soon as their newness wears off and their style becomes all too familiar meant that obsolescence was an integral part of economic and cultural processes in pre-Depression America. American prosperity, the emancipation of workers, and female persons in particular, depended as much on the production of arbitrary desires as on the accelerated transformation of new things into obsolete waste, argued consumerists. Or, to put it differently, stylistic obsolescence, not actual depreciation, defined what waste was and what it was not. And if the “social life of objects,” their *thingness* and style, were to become not only the panacea for American economic, social, and cultural ills but also a model for female emancipation, some women, inadvertently, would turn into “human waste” (Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 6, 13).

Hurst comments on these processes by modeling Ray’s life, her narrative of formation, on the life of modern(ist) objects. Consequently, it is not only that as Ray’s newness wanes she becomes obsolete, relegated to the “back streets” of national, economic, and cultural life, despite the fact that readers can easily see her as capable of achieving success. According to Hurst, what is even more important is that Ray’s becoming obsolete is the foundation, is the condition that enables the gendered national and individual prosperity of men. This powerful logic controls how Ray and other women in the novel can live their lives.

Hurst critiques such marginalization of women in the main spheres of circulation by restricting the narrative flow and resorting to often static and excruciatingly detailed descriptions. This, I believe, “defetishizes” things and persons and their relationship in Hurst’s novel; it also brings to the attention of the book’s readers the actual costs of the binary logic of overconsumption and waste. If Ray is human waste that produces Walter’s well-being, Hurst lets

us see his success in the context of the true conditions of Ray's forced containment and marginalization, and, eventually, the gruesome rotting of her body.

Finally, there is also another way in which Fannie Hurst (one of the most popular, widely read, and best-paid authors of the first part of the twentieth century) exposes the paradoxes of American capitalist modernity in her novel. It's ominous that the consumerists and the primitivist avant-gardes (who often presented themselves as oppositional to mainstream culture) held style and newness in similarly high esteem. Pound's "make it new" dictum sounds exactly like Mazur's paeans for newness and style.<sup>43</sup> Hurst, beloved by her audience, was notoriously attacked by critics for the poverty and old-fashioned-ness of her style. But I think it might be useful to think about her narrative choices in *Back Street* as a strategy of confrontation. By using a genre considered obsolete, Hurst in a sense resists the powerful demands of the market and literary trends. Her critique of primitivism and consumerism is then taking place as much at the level of content as at the level of narrative.

Of course, Hurst unashamedly treated her novels, scripts, and short stories as commodities. As Brooke Kroeger emphasizes, Hurst's writing represented a powerful and instantly recognizable brand that had actual cash value to her and her publishers. Hurst's name was the brand that, if included on the cover of a magazine, would easily sell out an issue.<sup>44</sup> Hurst was also an avid consumer of popular print culture, and a savvy businesswoman who understood

---

<sup>43</sup> It might be important to note here that like avant-garde artists of the modernist period, theoreticians of consumerism, such as Paul Mazur, viewed standardization as a problem. Mazur believed that standardization endangered the production of new desires and that it must "become increasingly subordinate to style" (*American Prosperity* 25).

<sup>44</sup> Susan Koppelman, *The Stories of Fannie Hurst* x-xi.

the ramifications of good advertising better than most.<sup>45</sup> Yet, at the structural level, *Back Street* offers a narrative of things and female persons, of overconsumption and deprivation in an “obsolete” novel format. Hurst, in a sense, worked within two genre parameters: the novel of formation, with its emphasis on the process of “individuation and socialization” of the main protagonist, and the serialized novel (with its length requirements and its emphasis on episodic structure defined by the magazine). In other words, *Back Street* owes its size to predetermined, if not automatic, (over)production and contractual obligation.<sup>46</sup> At close to five hundred pages, the novel was indebted for its shape (for example, its division into chapters) and length to Fannie Hurst’s contract with Ray Long, the editor of *Cosmopolitan* who ran *Back Street* as a serial in *Cosmopolitan* for seven months.

The novel, then, reflects and exposes the very paradoxes of sexual, economic, and food overconsumption and overproduction of things and desires, and of the shortage of things that marked much of the 1920s and 1930s, in its retelling of Ray Schmidt’s life story. Consumption of things and persons, as much as hunger and starvation for things and persons, function in *Back Street* as narrative tools. As if to contradict Bakhtinian understanding of the novel as a capacious genre, Hurst’s narrative seems to shrink; to work against its own chronological development, by depriving the plot of the expected self-revelation on the part of Ray Schmidt. Once Ray enters into an unequal contract with Walter Saxel, her story slows down and doesn’t progress toward full individuation or achievement of subjectivity. Instead, it is filled with detailed descriptions of Ray’s search for food, its preparation and consumption. Her love affair with Walter is just as

---

<sup>45</sup> Her biographer, Brooke Kroeger, points out that busy Hurst left her finances in the hands of her husband. At the same time, it was Fannie Hurst who carefully managed her celebrity writer persona and negotiated lucrative deals with book and magazine publishers and film-industry representatives.

<sup>46</sup> Hurst, like any other popular writer, was no stranger to writing on commission and was comfortable working within specific length requirements.

static. Ray's life in her New York "kennel" and her waiting for her paramour in subpar pensions in Europe are just as monotonous as her actual meetings with him (*BS* 162). It is as if the inequality written into Walter and Ray's informal contract in her personal life, and the inequality written into the social contract between female subjects and the state, undercut the possibility of narrative progression for her and other women in the novel.

In other words, the reduction of Ray's waist size, and the deterioration of her body and things she owns, is mirrored in the narrative reduction of plot. As the novel's numerous things get invented, as they expand, transform, metamorphose, and become personified by their relationship with persons, Ray deteriorates. She tells her niece, Emma, that "[k]nowledge is power" (*BS* 334) and often seems to be on the brink of self-revelation, on the brink of understanding the true conditions of her situation, but the narrative doesn't enable that revelation, and Ray dies short of the liberating self-knowledge she literally starved for during her life.

Nevertheless, Hurst's bildungsroman is most radical in how perceptively it records and conventionalizes the process of "social structural representation" and identifies it as a cause of the inability of women not only to grow, develop, and discover their subjectivity, but also to recognize collective patterns that restrict their socialization (MacCannel 11). In his seminal work, *The Tourist*, MacCannel argues that "differentiation," by which he means "the totality of differences between social classes, life-styles, racial and ethnic groups, age grades . . . political and professional groups and the mythical representation of the past to the present," replaces "simple duality (owners vs. workers)"(11). And while differentiation is "the origin of alternatives and feeling of freedom in modern society[, i]t is also the primary ground of the contradiction, conflict, violence, fragmentation, discontinuity and alienation . . . ." Differentiation, in his view,

prevents group consciousness “[from] coordinat[ing] itself into a progressive, revolutionary force” (12). In capitalist modernism, women produce their social identity by becoming intimate with things. Yet this process of individuation, so dependent on the unequally distributed “credit to create,” individuates them in fetishistic, fragmented, and fictional ways, Hurst seems to say. In *Back Street*, they never form a public, other than the one involved in the consumption of modern commodities. MacCannel would stress that it’s not necessarily women’s class status or ethnicity, but too much differentiation, that occurs in the sphere of leisure:<sup>47</sup> Ray and Freda’s fixation on decorative things, clothes, such as Corinne’s chinchilla fashion, disengages them from one another and divorces their understanding of self from the social processes, structures, and laws that produce them. Women in Hurst’s novel, who differentiate themselves through their relationship with objects, do not recognize the commonality of their experiences and social position and are thus unable to truly individuate. While Ray, like her voiceless mother, literally dies in the novel, other women exist as “social waste” (Veblen), “redundant or wasted humans” who die social deaths (Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 6; 13).

However, in her novel of formation Hurst doesn’t attack all forms of incremental humanization/personification through things. After all, things transform Walter Saxel, a poor and traditional Jewish man subject to anti-Semitic prejudice throughout his life, into an American businessman. Similarly, Kurt Shendler, Ray’s first suitor, also achieves the status of legal person through his relationship with the new things “that made America,” that is, cars (Patton). *Back Street*, undoubtedly critical of how consumer culture and primitivism betray collective women’s rights, especially of those women who were single, poor, old, and disabled, still recognizes the significance of material things to the formation of personhood. In the presence of unfairly

---

<sup>47</sup> Again, I’m using the term “leisure” here in a Veblenian sense, as labor, and as a “conspicuous” activity.

gendered systems of market exchange, Hurst seems to suggest, Ray could have still maneuvered things to her advantage if she played by the rules of the Market rather than deluded herself with the fictions of the House.

## SECTION TWO:

### National (Non)Fictions of Collective Subjects and Scarce Things

*The modernist strand of documentary is characterized by frequent and extravagant violations of authenticity . . .*

—Jeff Allred<sup>1</sup>

*The camera's function [i]s less to produce images ( . . . ) than to manipulate and falsify dimensions.*

—Paul Virilio<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapters, I discussed a seemingly unmodernist genre, the bildungsroman, hoping to demonstrate its importance to the aesthetics and politics of American modernism. Fannie Hurst and Nella Larsen, modernist bildungsroman writers, produced literary “female complaints” (Berlant) attacking the main tenets of popular primitivism and consumerism of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the process, they entered into modernist debates about the boundaries between things and raced and ethnic (female) persons in American culture and questioned liberatory fictions that promised national-incorporation-through-things to female persons. Hurst, like Larsen, revealed that primitivist and consumerist “things” failed to “personify” (to use the word in a sense employed by Gregory Mark), their novels’ protagonists, but both alluded to different modes of humanizing, personifying, reification.

This section focuses on nonfiction writing of Depression-era culture, which because of its widespread popularity conventionalized new relations between people and things. With the collapse of the American economy in the late 1920s and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s

---

<sup>1</sup> *American Modernism* 11.

<sup>2</sup> *War and Cinema* 16.

promoting of an alternative vision of the political and economic integration of marginalized social subjects, the debate over the incorporation of “new” political actors gained new momentum. It was clear that even the best-intentioned primitivism, in European avant-garde visual arts and in the popular films of the Flahertys, failed to produce an interracial, cross-cultural national paradise. Consumerism, widely advertised in the 1920s, not only failed to produce “new” national persons but was in the 1930s widely accused of actually impoverishing “one-third of a nation.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, national agencies, corporate publishers of mass magazines, as well as more-or-less independent documentarians, worked to rearticulate the possibilities of “legal personification” through things other than modern commodities (for instance, modern technology or mineral and natural resources) or through new forms of engagement with such material objects. As a result, New Deal–era documentary forms, federally and privately sponsored alike, problematized narrative subjecthood and personhood. By shifting the collective gaze toward the collective subjects—the poor—New Deal–era art introduced the collective, mass subjects themselves to diverse mass audiences across the nation.

Thus, modernist-era documentaries of the most diverse kinds (pamphlets, state travel guides, or photo-reportage about Native Americans, the poor, or country folk) were crucial players in such new debates about people and things. They explicitly related humans and objects, by focusing on “collective subjects,” the modernist masses, entire classes of people (Allred 7, 22). This time, however, the main characteristic of those “collective subjects” was precisely their shared relationship to material objects. And, in most cases, what made the Depression-era people into “narrative subjects” was the fact that they didn’t have enough things. By focusing primarily on people who lacked materials things, financial means, and the capacity to enter into the market

---

<sup>3</sup> As described by Roosevelt described in his second Inaugural Address, in 1937.

to exchange goods and acquire keepsakes, New Deal–era arts consistently probed the deep interconstitution of human subjects and modernists objects. In other words, the material scarcity of objects produced the human abundance of the poor. Thus, shortages of things not only generated masses of people; in the modernist culture of the 1930s there was an awareness that, paradoxically, a specific kind of relation to the things people *don't* have defined what kind of people they collectively were (ethnic Americans, workers, American youth, or women).

Before I turn to the discussion of two specific instances of such nonfictional articulation of the human–thing interconstitution in James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and John Joseph Mathews' *Talking to the Moon* (1945), I would like to provide an overview of the cultural, economic, and political changes that made the documentary one of the most popular genres in 1930s' and 1940s' America and to ponder the relationship of these widely popular, accessible, and legible nonfictions about human incorporations to what is considered modernist culture. Jeff Allred points out in his *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* that modernism and documentary seem to occupy opposite ends of a scale within literary history; one marked by extreme reflexivity, and the other, supposedly, by unproblematic realism.<sup>4</sup> In his 2001 essay, Bill Nichols attempts to recover the affinities and intertwined histories of documentaries and avant-garde films, cinematic productions separated in critical film and modernism theory for decades. His research uncovers a similar predicament in film studies. He wonders “[h]ow [it is] that the most formal and, often, the most abstract of films and the most political, and sometimes, didactic of films arise, fruitfully intermingle, and then separate in a common historical moment” (580).

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Allred offers a very compelling overview of the debates about the boundaries between modernism and documentary in his introduction (5-13).

The questions Nichols poses in reference to films can be easily applied to American documentary productions of the 1930s and 1940s that were successfully exorcised from the modernist literary canon<sup>5</sup> by scholarship informed by New Criticism.<sup>6</sup> Literary documentaries and ethnographies popular in the first part of the twentieth century, and particularly during the New Deal, occupy a peculiar nonspace in American modernist studies. Like modernist bildungsromans, they are often misunderstood as antimodernist projects; aesthetically transparent, ideologically straightforward if not altogether supportive of the hegemonic order, and naively devoted to documenting “reality.”

And yet, Depression-era documentaries, and not only those considered exceptional and generously allowed into the literary canon,<sup>7</sup> treat modern things and persons with great complexity but, most importantly, conventionalize new narratives, new concepts of personhood. Far from expressing absolute faith in the power of new technologies to record reality, documentary productions struggle with the quandary of “modernist opacity,” so crucial to the properly modernist avant-garde arts (Bishop and Phillips). In the words of Jeff Allred, modernist documentary relies on extremely complex narratives that “interrupt, rather than confirm, dominant ideologies” (7). And it is their “interruptive aesthetic [that] addresses, [and not remedies] a widespread crisis of representation” (7), the disturbing sense that the “more we watch, the less we see” (Bishop and Phillips 158).

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however, that documentary and realist writing of early-twentieth-century American culture was not always ontologically separated from modernist writing. Overviews of American literature of this period such as such as Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, published in 1941, or David Peck’s “The Orgy of Apology,” published in 1968, as well as countless articles in mass magazines from the period, from *Cosmopolitan* to *Time*, demonstrate that early-twentieth-century readers were not obsessed with the dilemma of the “great divide” between popular and high modernist art or between avant-garde and realist prose.

<sup>6</sup> David Peck would perhaps blame McCarthyism in equal measure for such exclusions.

<sup>7</sup> Works by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, and James Agee are good examples here.

I certainly agree with Allred's diagnosis of Depression-era nonfiction as a proudly complex genre, even if I disagree with his genealogy. Modernist nonfiction writing doesn't, in my view, invent "interruptive aesthetics," that is, a style that complicates "rather than [simply] confirm[s] dominant ideologies" as scholars of colonial and proletarian documentary writing would confirm,<sup>8</sup> but it certainly exposes and popularizes this quality of documentary work. Nonetheless, it is obvious that state-sponsored visual and literary arts of the Depression era were at the inception's end of things a nationalist project, a public relations experiment aimed at popularizing a Rooseveltian vision of progress and modernization, as well as economic and cultural policies. In contrast, conservative pro-business publications such as *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Life*, for example, mounted an ideological counterattack on the New Deal policies, through the circulation of documentary projects that placed progress and modernization more squarely in the context of laissez-faire econopolitical theory. Thus, the complexity of sponsorship and management of art production in the first part of the twentieth century, the "collectivization" of authorship, as much as the transformation of the conditions under which audiences consumed art, undermine simple generalizations about the supposedly uniform purpose or ideology of Depression-era documentaries.

Moreover, even early theorists of cinema in the first part of the twentieth century disagreed about the exact relationship between documentary and reality. First, it might be useful to note here that the term "documentary" was coined by the filmmaker John Grierson<sup>9</sup> to describe the work of Robert Flaherty, the director of such documentary classics as *Nanook*

---

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here of diverse projects such as Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* and Paula Rabinowitz's *They Must Be Represented*.

<sup>9</sup> He first elaborated on the term in his 1926 review of Flaherty's *Moana*, published in the *New York Sun*. See also Forsyth Hardy's *Grierson on Documentary* 13.

(1922), *Moana* (1926), *The Land* (1942), and *Louisiana Story* (1956). Although Flaherty used nonprofessional actors and local settings, he was notorious for manipulating and staging historical events; he was also quite frank about his desire to produce important cultural narratives, rather than simply to represent facts with great historical accuracy.<sup>10</sup> Grierson saw documentary art as depending on “creative shapings”<sup>11</sup> and as “creative treatment of reality.”<sup>12</sup> But, whereas for Flaherty the camera was a “healer,” for Walter Benjamin it was a scalpel,<sup>13</sup> and this sharp, interventionist aspect of documentary work has been recently emphasized by scholars such as Paul Virilio. Moreover, besides the auteur documentary tradition championed by Flaherty, several strands of documentary coexisted simultaneously (for example, *actualities*, corporate and state instructional films, avant-garde documentaries, etc.), each with its own diverse philosophies, target audiences, and purposes. In other words, modernist documentaries, visual and literary, had many agendas disguised as documenting; in the process, they produced “plausible fictions of the real”<sup>14</sup> as they responded to the fragmentariness of American modernity (Allred 3).

---

<sup>10</sup> His long-time editor, Helen van Dongen, often complained that despite his reputation as a documentary (that is, supposedly realist) filmmaker, Flaherty had little respect and patience for accuracy, and took creative liberties constantly. See her “Robert J. Flaherty: 1884-1951” 4. According to Frances Flaherty, Robert’s wife, and the co-director and co-screenwriter of many of his films, the camera for him was not simply a recorder but a “healer” of reality. Therefore, my point is that Robert Flaherty was never particularly interested in the authenticity controversy surrounding his and Frances’ work, even though he was adamant about retaining creative control over the writing and shooting process. He viewed himself primarily as a storyteller. Since his work grew in response, or in opposition, to travelogues, *actualities*, and Hollywood films, his intent was to provide the audience with great stories and coherent narratives. See the interview with Frances Flaherty included in the DVD edition of *Nanook*.

<sup>11</sup> “First Principles of Documentary,” in Forsyth Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary* 146.

<sup>12</sup> See Forsyth Hardy 13.

<sup>13</sup> In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin interprets the cameramen’s assembling of modern fragments as an expression or an imposition of a “new law” and not simply an innocent recording of reality (in Arendt 233).

<sup>14</sup> Although I borrow this phrase directly from Jeff Allred’s work, and Allred, in turn, relied on Alan Trachtenberg’s phrase “fictions of the real” (182-207), many recent works in cultural studies emphasize

Moreover, nonfiction writing underwent many changes because of the profound economic, political, and cultural transformation that made documentary work popular in the 1930s and 1940s. In the grim economic climate that followed the stock market crash and lasted a decade, both corporate and state arts shifted focus to address American audiences with documentary narratives of woe and uplift at the same time. While the popular print culture of the 1910s and 1920s had offered upbeat messages promising readers that their consumption of commodities would liberate—in fact, fully Americanize and personify—them, popular visual and print culture of the 1930s had a different focus. Many American writers, not only those working for the New Deal, as well as entire popular publications such as *Time*, *Fortune*, *Look*, *U.S. Camera*, *Survey Graphic*, and *Collier's*,<sup>15</sup> offered “picture stories” of crisis and poverty (Finnegan xii; xxi). As I noted before, it was the lack, rather than the surplus or excess of things that determined whether a story and its people were to be represented, and made publicly visible and legible. Second, modernist documentaries focused on “collective subjects”:<sup>16</sup> the poor, farmers, indigenous peoples, and, to a lesser degree, African Americans, who were particularly hard hit by the economic crisis, but who also even prior to the Great Depression couldn't easily claim personhood and citizenship through overconsumption of modernist goods.<sup>17</sup> Even when New Deal photos or paintings featured individual subjects, such images were fragments of larger series; they also used legible representational codes to make audiences “read” the signs that linked represented individuals to larger human collectivities.

---

the fictitious character of legal and documentary discourses. See, for example, John Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.*, or Alain Pottage and Marcia Mundy's collection *Law, Anthropology, and the Constitution of the Social*, which offers a set of compelling readings of legal fictions.

<sup>15</sup> Cara Finnegan points out that popular periodicals often ran photographs that had originally been produced by the FSA, and then reproduced with the FSA's permission (xx-xxi).

<sup>16</sup> Allred 7.

<sup>17</sup> Their very presence in, and access to, consumer culture and their financial means had been limited even in the 1910s and 1920s.

Moreover, state sponsorship of the arts in the 1930s had a profound impact on the aesthetics and popularity of American modernist documentary. Apart from the well-known Works Progress Administration,<sup>18</sup> devoted specifically to the arts, scores of federal agencies at the time, such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Youth Administration (NYA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Farm Security Administration (FSA),<sup>19</sup> operated their own visual arts or PR divisions. To provide the rationale for their own existence and to secure funding, such agencies had several interconnected responsibilities: to document, make visible the “people” affected by the economic crisis; to inventory resources and persons receiving or needing public help; to educate the general public about their programs; and to emphasize the benefits and highlight actual or prospective successes of each program. Apart from providing employment to more or less professional artists (writers, photographers, painters, dancers), such national support for the arts radically changed the American cultural landscape in the 1930s and beyond. Similarly, commercial newspapers and magazines commissioned pieces from staff writers (often famous literary figures who would be otherwise completely impoverished during the Depression<sup>20</sup>), who often worked with visual artist from the New Deal agencies, to document the effects of the Depression on the common men or, in the words of Roosevelt, popularized by Busby Berkeley’s musical hit, “forgotten men.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The beginning of the WPA can be traced to the Public Works Art Project (PWAP), active from 1933-1934. The Works Progress Administration, later renamed the Work Projects Administration (WPA), was launched in 1935 and folded in 1943. It was divided into Fine Arts, Practical Arts, and Arts Education.

<sup>19</sup> Originally, it was called the Resettlement Administration. The RA was founded in 1935.

<sup>20</sup> James Agee or Dwight McDonald, for example.

<sup>21</sup> The term was often used to denote victims of the economic crisis. “Remember My Forgotten Men” was the key musical number in a highly successful Depression-era musical, *Gold Diggers of 1933*.

However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the documentary impulse of the above-listed institutions and agencies cannot be explained by their fairly straightforward mission statements alone. To document, in the language of the 1930s and 1940s, meant several things: to wield and question the power to look; to complicate the very act of looking and seeing through the mediation of new technologies; to make visible those who had been absent from public discourse or national visual culture prior to 1930;<sup>22</sup> to equally “capture,” target, and objectify persons as well as to humanize objects;<sup>23</sup> to distort the distance and dimensions between things, or as Giovanni Pastrone demonstrated, not “to produce images . . . [but] to falsify dimensions” (in Virilio 16): to unify and nationalize fragmentary reality and to defamiliarize the commonplace; to explore and revel in American culture. Moreover, with the introduction of new visual and audio-recording devices, the act of documenting, increasingly mediated by modern technology, became a more and more multifaceted process. As Walter Benjamin famously put it, “the human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence,” and we can see in the 1930s’ and 1940s’ documentaries the awareness of the extreme complexity of modern perception and documentation (in Arendt, “Work of Art” 222).

---

<sup>22</sup> In fact, for some of those who were the focus of New Deal art, the main problem was not the control of their representation (as in the case of African Americans) but rather the inability to control the conditions and degree of their own invisibility.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Virilio makes an important point about the interdependence of visual and war technology when he plays with the words welfare and warfare. He argues that “the magic of arms directly revived the magic of the market, as total war succeeded the economic warfare of the thirties” (10). It seems important to remember the similarities between the works of the above-mentioned New Deal economic-recovery and arts agencies and the Office of War Information (OWI). Created by Roosevelt’s executive order in 1942, the OWI collaborated closely with Hollywood with the help of the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP). David A. Cook suggests that throughout World War II as well as immediately after the war, the US Army contributed significantly to the budget of Hollywood films ‘by providing . . . free historical research, and, at cost, heavy equipment and armaments, large casts of uniformed extras, and authentic locations for shooting (footnote, 442). Cook believes that such ““technical assistance”” of the armed forces . . . can be worth up to 50 percent of a motion picture’s budget in free production values” (442).

Moreover, documentary narratives in the 1930s and 1940s exposed the uneasy relationship between the circulation of things and persons; this time around, however, the force with which the lives of persons could transform and degrade because of either overproduction or shortage of things was a cause for great anxiety, and not hope for prosperity and positive social transformations. New Deal–era films, texts, photo essays, murals, paintings, and posters offered narratives about American subjects and objects, American citizens and noncitizens, and the things that regulated their belonging and incorporation into the national culture and national imagination.

Interestingly, despite their proclamations about the documentary authenticity of their work, federal agencies, such as the WPA, CCC, and FSA, produced complicated fictions of the “real people,” “the Depression,” “the American family,” “the poor,” and so on. These sophisticated “fabrications,” involving material and mythical cultural traces, marked the revival of primitivist rhetoric in 1930s’ art. In other words, after the stock market crash, faith in the cultural power of national overconsumption dwindled, but fictions of primitivist exoticism with their nostalgia for a lost agrarian arcadia and its patriarchal social order, and even the distinctly Native American beginnings of American culture, found new followers in the national arts promoted by the New Deal and in those that were funded by industrial or media corporations.<sup>24</sup>

For example, many images produced by the FSA promoted the idea of America as a farmer economy, even when, well before the 1930s, the country had already transformed into, first, an industrial and then a consumer economy. Alluding to an agrarian arcadia, New Deal art

---

<sup>24</sup> Sponsorship films, or industrial documentaries, were extremely common in the first part of the twentieth century. Some of the most famous films in the history of American “independent” documentary, the Flahertys’ *Nanook* (1922), funded by Revillon Frère, and *Louisiana Story* (1948), funded by Standard Oil, were in fact sponsored and/or commissioned by corporations.

not only falsified the actual role of agriculture in the American economy but placed it in the “natural” rather than “industrial” realm, while also completely ignoring its roots in colonial economy.<sup>25</sup> The New Deal certainly didn’t bring Jeffersonian agricultural democracy back, but it did try to revive the myth of it.

Similarly, the gendering of New Deal images represented a nostalgia for a world without 1920s’ feminism. Its visuals promoted a collective amnesia of not only the flapper Twenties but also of the role of the women’s movement and its achievements in general. New Deal murals and paintings conveyed the reassuring management of women’s power by visually placing them in the background of the political transformations of the 1930s. Women were represented in the context of “family harmony and shared labor” (Melosh 54). Women’s labor, however, was most often of the domestic, maternal kind.<sup>26</sup> When women were shown laboring together with men in the same image, they were literally either placed in the background of the image or framed by children.

The racial diversity of 1930s<sup>27</sup> America was also tackled in particular ways in Depression-era documentaries. Although references to American indigenous culture were very common in many New Deal media and arts, this had more to do with the romanticized visions of the “noble yet vanishing savage” than with contemporary Native Americans or the reservation culture. Finally, the presence of African American was most closely regulated, especially in images with interracial subjects. While the NYA was exceptional in producing images of

---

<sup>25</sup> In other words, agriculture was a colonial industry, which certainly wasn’t democratic for the millions of enslaved African Americans, nor for the Native American men who were forced to give up occupations they considered masculine (such as hunting) and to farm instead.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Joseph Coletti’s relief *Farmers and Geese* (in Melosh 53), Ted Gilien’s *Pastoral* (in Melosh 59), Arthur Getz’s *Harvest* (in Melosh 59), or Seymour Fogel’s *People of the Soil* (in Melosh 62).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Xavier Gonzalez’s *Pioneer Saga* (in Melosh 44) or Ward Lockwood’s *Opening the West* (in Melosh 46) or *Settling the West* (in Melosh 47).

interracial harmony,<sup>28</sup> other agencies explicitly shied away from representing blacks alongside whites. Through careful staging and framing of subjects (even when blacks and whites were documented in photographs), the racist economic, political, and cultural barriers that separated them were naturalized within the images.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the efforts of these agencies focused on documenting a certain “political dream,” a corrective vision of American society. Jeff Allred and Bill Nichols agree here that New Deal documentary efforts had little to do with the preservation of authenticity, or direct representation of actual social or economic relations. At its core then, the New Deal documented reality in ways similar to those with which high modernists archived culture, that is, with “frequent and extravagant violations of authenticity” (Allred 14).

But there is also another, more important way, in which the New Deal transformed the genre of documentary by conventionalizing it, by making it popular and widely accessible. Walter Benjamin points out that “[m]echanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art” (in Arendt, “Work of Art” 234). As a result, “[t]he reactionary attitude to a Picasso painting changes into a progressive reaction to a Chaplin movie.” In that sense, New Deal art could influence audiences’ reactions either by mechanically reproducing literary documentaries and or by making them widely available in local settings (as posters and murals in museums and governmental buildings across the nation). Moreover, by transforming the conditions under which documentary art was produced and consumed, the New Deal reshaped the very role of art in society. Documentary writing and visual arts of the period were

---

<sup>28</sup> In fact, even the work promoted by Mary McLeod Bethune, the head of the Negro Division, bore the mark of optimistic propaganda of racial progress in that it offered documentary images that were staged to emphasize productive interracial cooperation. For more details, see Sally Stein’s “Figures of the Future” in *Official Images* 92-147.

<sup>29</sup> Walker Evans’ FSA and *Fortune* work incorporated into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a case in point. In the first edition of the book, Evans didn’t include any images of blacks. The version of the book published in the 1960s included images of African Americans, but they were pictured occupying a space in front of a black barber shop, and there were no images of interracial mixing.

collectively produced by bureaucrats and artists at the federal, state, and local levels, as much as by the local audiences who had some influence over what was to be shown and in what venues.<sup>30</sup> In other words, while Depression-era documentary productions might have failed at exposing the systemic inequalities that divided people into “different humanities” (Mike Davis 234)—into those subjects with things who had more power to look, record, and judge, and those quasi-persons without modern commodities who couldn’t fully participate in the national show-and-tell as agents of their own representation—the New Deal practices of art production, display, and circulation counteracted some of these shortcomings. As a result, the very definition of artwork, the meaning of cultural texts—paintings, pamphlets, articles, films—expanded to include the cultural fabric that produced and sustained them. Similarly, the notion of the art producer as opposed to the artist emerged, and audiences began to recognize not simply individual genius but also collective or anonymous efforts.<sup>31</sup> It’s not only that the very focus of nationalized art programs made some of their artists practitioners “who have never thought of that . . . [become] conscious that culture came [also] from the grassroots, not from the top” (Meridel Le Sueur, *New Deal for Writers*), but that consumers of culture recognized their own role in art production, evaluation, and consumption.

Therefore, it’s important not to interpret Depression-era documentary writing and primitivism simply as a hegemonic project that involved powerful documentarians and their powerless subjects. The production and reception of New Deal–era visual and print culture was

---

<sup>30</sup> This is why, as Barbara Melosh points out in her book, explicit sexism and misogyny in New Deal art were to some degree assuaged by the high rate of female participation in the process of assessing, selecting, displaying, and consuming such art. Prior to that moment, the role of women, particularly in the assessment of such art, was much more limited.

<sup>31</sup> In other words, artists and politicians, such as Roosevelt himself, and art-consuming audiences were more fully aware of the process than were the New Critics, who ignored this important development in the history of American arts, and set the course for the practice of literary interpretation for decades to come.

always more complicated and more fragmented than that, involving overlapping and self-cancelling power structures, multiple narrative negotiations at the production, display, and consumption ends. As mentioned before, the very process of commissioning one mural or painting, theatre piece, or text by most of the federal agencies involved sophisticated management. The process was simultaneously controlled by agencies, institutions, and social organizations in different states and regions, as well as by people living in the country and in large metropolitan centers, by individuals separated by class, ethnicity, and geographical location. Even the commercially published documentary works that appeared in popular magazines embodied such paradoxes. For example, the pro-business *Fortune* and *Time* employed several left-leaning writers, James Agee being one of them. They were compelled to produce journalist pieces that were at least in part sympathetic to the policies of the New Deal, while at the same time placating the anxieties of business readers, allergic to any form of populism.<sup>32</sup>

This diffused model of art production and its fragmentation of artistic authority are what some critics could see as descriptive of mass, not modernist works, such as those produced by John Joseph Mathews and James Agee. After all, in some accounts of modernism, the mechanical and managed (re)production was seen by some critics as a characteristic of mass culture, not high or avant-garde art. The two chapters that follow challenge the efficacy of further separating modernism from popular culture. While Mathews and Agee clearly designed their projects as rejoinders to commercial and New Deal primitivist representations of poverty and otherness, their projects depended on the existing channels of distribution, audiences, and narrative methods employed by widely popular New Deal-era documentaries.

---

<sup>32</sup> In his introduction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, John Hersey documents several instances of such more-or-less civil negotiations between the editors, writers, and readers of *Fortune* and *Time* that alternatively provided James Agee with paid assignments or deprived him of work (in Agee xiii-xv).

In a 1999 cinematic adaptation of the Federal Art Project's play *The Cradle Will Rock*,<sup>33</sup> viewers can watch the amusing brainstorming exchange between some of the most important cultural powerbrokers of Depression America: publisher William Hearst and two industrialists and philanthropists, Nelson Rockefeller (John Cusack) and Grey Mathers (Philip Baker Hall), as they offer an alternative genealogy of the birth of American abstract art. Having just sacked Diego Rivera, a Mexican painter, commissioned to paint the mural and who who refused to remove the image of Lenin from the mural adorning Rockefeller Center in New York, Nelson Rockefeller complains that “[he] wouldn’t have had this problem with Picasso or Matisse.” William Hearst responds that since powerful men like himself “control the future of art because [they] pay for the future of art,” Rockefeller should “[a]ppoint people to your museum boards that detest the Riveras of this world.” “Celebrate the Matisses. Create the new wave of art,” he advises, “[y]ou have the purse strings. It’s quite obvious that you have the power . . . to celebrate the colors [and] countrysides.” In Hearst’s view Rockefeller should “fund the new wave of art. A travelling exhibit throughout Europe. Highlighting American artists.” The steel magnate, Grey Mathers, agrees and adds enthusiastically that such art would be great because it would be “Nonpolitical.—Yes, abstract. Colors and form, no politics.”

While certainly exaggerated, this humorous scene makes an important point: that by the 1930s, the primitivism associated in the 1910s and 1920s with a more (racially and economically) progressive social, and not only aesthetic, agenda, had lost most of its political edge. Because primitivism involves an aesthetic and narrative fetishization of people and things viewed as foreign, distant, and past, its aesthetics oftentimes obliterated its politics. Mathews and Agee were certainly aware of this and wanted to make some people and some things visible

---

<sup>33</sup> The movie title is *Cradle Will Rock*.

again in their narratives, as much as they wanted to examine the relations between persons, objects, and environment, between global movements of capital and commodities and the displaced local people. In that, their intention didn't always overlap with that of the powerful cultural powerbrokers of the 1930s, and yet their narratives didn't operate outside the existing documentary frameworks, either.

The next two chapters, “‘The Lowest Trash You Can Find?’ Abundance and Shortage in James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*” and “‘Biology of America’: John Joseph Mathews’ ‘Human-nonhuman Assemblages’ in *Talking to the Moon*,” examine how Agee and Evans and John Joseph Mathews simultaneously undermine and extend the politics and aesthetics of 1930s’ mass-produced documentary (non)fictions. John Joseph Mathews’ autobiographical nature study, set on the Osage reservation in Oklahoma, and James Agee and Walker Evans’ memoirlike photo-ethnography about sharecropper families in Alabama, blend in a variety of literary, scientific, and oral discourses, closing up the gap between literary and visual media. What makes their projects interesting is how, despite their insistence on authorial autonomy, Mathews and Agee and Evans embrace the documentary and experimental<sup>34</sup> or avant-garde impulses of American culture of the 1930s and 1940s. In responding to national and commercial representations of the American poor, American indigenous cultures, and the environment in Depression-era art, Mathews and Agee reexamine economic and cultural

---

<sup>34</sup> I strongly disagree with the tendency among literary critics to associate modernist experimentation primarily with (high modernist) avant-garde movements. Scholars in cultural studies point out that the corporate and industrial culture of the first part of the twentieth century was an important source of aesthetic experimentation, and recent works by Rick Prelinger and Bill Nichols, for example, begin to reexamine long-held assumptions about the mass and modernist arts. Others, from Apollinaire to Marinetti futurists to Walter Benjamin to Paul Virilio, are interested in the creative potential of war and visual technologies, and their impact on the arts and culture of the twentieth century. See, for example, Benjamin’s “Work of Art” (in Arendt 217-251) or Virilio’s comments on the topic in *War and Cinema* 27.

fabrications of things and persons in American public discourse of the first part of the twentieth century. Their achievement lies in how they complicate the political and aesthetic projects of corporate- and state-funded arts of the 1930s, construing alternative concepts of political identities, and of social personhood. Their works blur the line between mass and modernist not only by complicating the relationship between the state- or corporation-commissioned and individually produced arts,<sup>35</sup> but also, most importantly, by exploring new possibilities of narrative and legal personification.

Significantly, both *Talking to the Moon* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have only recently begun to generate critical interest,<sup>36</sup> and only as exceptional documentaries. In the chapters that follow, I want to emphasize that Mathews and Agee's productions are "repartees"<sup>37</sup> to national and commercial documentary projects as much as they are their continuation. I also want to show how their works handle the prescription of their time, which is to document the "people," by examining the relationship between the people and objects, and by tracing the transformation of environment into the object of a new economic order that produces peoples and social groups (Mathews) and by examining the parallels between human and material trash (Agee).

---

<sup>35</sup> *Talking to the Moon* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were inspired by the New Deal and corporate documentary arts. Agee worked with Walker on an FSA- and *Fortune*-assigned project about the sharecroppers in the South, while Mathews' book responds to the work of WPA artists on the Osage reservation in the 1930s. Therefore, *Talking to the Moon* deals with the impact of the WPA arts program on the Osage culture. Both writers emphasize their works as individual and masculinist projects, but both books are also ostensibly collaborative productions and work within the parameter of several literary genres—journals, diaries, ethnography, autobiography—as well as mixing media pieces, combining visual (photos and drawings) as well as oral narratives.

<sup>36</sup> While Agee's work has been excluded from literary study because of its placement in the category of the utilitarian or journalistic, the reason for the absence of Matthews' oeuvre is far more complicated. It has as much to do with the fact that Matthews' work was classified as history, nature writing, or memoir, as with his ethnic background.

<sup>37</sup> Mathews uses the word to describe the wit with which Osage tribesmen respond to the efforts of the well-meaning WPA painters (*Talking to the Moon* 1981 130).

CHAPTER THREE:

“The Lowest Trash You Can Find?”

Abundance and Shortage in James Agee and Walker Evans’

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

*Above all else: In God’s name don’t think of it as Art.*

—James Agee<sup>1</sup>

*. . . the sociological implication of rubbish is apparent, for only with its help can we make this connection between micro and macro levels of social life. An understanding of rubbish is essential . . .*

—Michael Thompson<sup>2</sup>

*We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country’s interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous.*

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Second Inaugural Address”

*. . . debt [and] therefore credit, is . . . at once an economic technique and a technique for the production or the control of subjectivity.*

—Maurizio Lazzarato<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans travelled to Alabama on assignment from *Fortune* magazine.<sup>4</sup> Their job was to produce a photo article about cotton

---

<sup>1</sup> *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 14. The book will be referred throughout this chapter as either *Famous Men* in text, or *FM* in citations.

<sup>2</sup> *Rubbish Theory* 93.

<sup>3</sup> In Brian Massumi and Erin Manning.

<sup>4</sup> Evans was working for FSA but, as Agee put it, “was on loan from the Federal Government” during this summer (*FM* xlv).

tenants in the South (*FM* xlv). That summer, Agee and Evans spent almost four weeks with three tenant families, the Gudgers, the Woodses, and the Rickettses, living among them, observing them, photographing them, and documenting their daily lives. The resulting article was rejected by *Fortune*,<sup>5</sup> and after years of negotiation with the magazine and several publishing houses, it appeared in 1941 as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a photo-book of almost five hundred pages. Before achieving cult status in the 1960s, *Famous Men* had remained relatively unknown, selling little more than a thousand copies<sup>6</sup> upon its publication. *Time* named it “the most distinguished failure of the season,”<sup>7</sup> not a surprising comment given the conservative publication’s discomfort with the New Deal. But the review writer, John Jessup, also recognized the intentions of the creators of *Famous Men* to humanize the American poor.<sup>8</sup> In Jessup’s words, Agee’s

real aim is to enforce the realization that the Gudgers, the Ricketts and the Woods, whose hopeless, subhuman lives he reverently exposes, are now alive, human brothers of the reader . . . . (“Experiment in Communication”)

The claim that *Famous Men* resurrected its subjects, so to speak, was precisely the kind of comment Agee, already anxious about how his position as an observer overshadowed the actual lives of tenant farmers, feared and expected from his Madison Avenue readers. And yet, *Famous Men* was indeed as much a project about the system of cotton tenancy as it was about human-ness and inhuman-ness. Both Agee and Evans explored how human status in 1930s America was

---

<sup>5</sup> Agee and Walker’s piece was rejected for several reasons. Agee’s draft didn’t meet the magazine’s requirements for length and form. More importantly, it didn’t fit the new direction *Fortune* was heading toward under Henry Luce, who, according to John Hersey, “decided that *Fortune* must set a more fittingly Republican course” (in Agee, *FM* xix).

<sup>6</sup> Hersey (in Agee, *FM* xxxiii).

<sup>7</sup> John Jessup, “Experiment in Communication” (13 Oct. 1941).

<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, Ralph Thompson’s review in the *New York Times* was even less kind, calling Agee’s writing “the choicest recent example of how to write self-inspired, self-conscious, and self-indulgent prose” (19).

a privilege enjoyed by those who had the right kinds of things, sufficient amounts of those things, and the right kind of relationships to them. Instead of emphasizing the biological basis of people's shared humanity, as the reviewer thinks, Agee and Evans expose the Gudgers, Rickettses, and Woodses as the "human waste" of American economic, political, and social systems.

Therefore, *Famous Men*, a project that originated as an assignment about an agricultural system of economic production,<sup>9</sup> became a project about the system of humanization and dehumanization of some people working within it. In American consumerist culture of the 1910s and 1920s, the accumulation of consumer objects had been presented as a certain path to full cultural citizenship, to humanization for many disenfranchised social groups. Yet, during the Depression, many critics of capitalism questioned the emancipatory power of commodities. At the same time, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's economic recovery plans<sup>10</sup> emphasized redistribution and collectivization of material resources as a new way to rehumanize, and incorporate politically, the impoverished "two-thirds of the nation."<sup>11</sup> In the national arts of the period, agrarian democracy and its material symbols were often featured as the alternative to the brutal industrialization (associated with the powerful and with individual wealth) and the

---

<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that Agee's project was commissioned by a conservative pro-business publication, and not a New Deal agency. Therefore, the aim of the assignment was to "cover" the system, not to demonstrate the need for New Deal relief or to glorify the benefits of economic rescue methods implemented in the 1930s. As the Depression raged on, Henry Luce, the man behind the media empire consisting of *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Life*, allowed more people-focused material in his publications in the late 1930s. See, for example, Ann Sass' "Picturing Business" for an interesting overview of *Fortune*'s changing coverage of the American economy. But in 1936 Agee and Evans were to focus on the system of cotton tenancy in a way that would make this topic accessible to *Fortune*'s audience of anti-New Deal businessmen.

<sup>10</sup> As in the previous chapters, I want to make clear that I make Roosevelt an emblem of certain political trends, a public face of national ideologies concerning the redistribution of wealth and incorporation of new citizens. This should not imply that I view Roosevelt, the person, as a most progressive champion of wealth distribution and social justice in America, which he undoubtedly was not.

<sup>11</sup> This famous statement comes from Roosevelt's second "Inaugural Address," delivered in 1937.

competitive and frenetic consumer culture of the 1920s. Thus, things, albeit not simply consumer commodities, were in the 1930s still viewed as indispensable to the incorporation of new political subjects, and certain objects' humanizing power remained unquestioned.

Walker Evans and James Agee, not unlike scores of other artists employed by federal agencies or for-profit institutions at the time, wrestled in their project with the conflicting ways objects and humans were "fabricated" through economic and discursive practices in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> In the context of the great economic collapse of the 1930s, they paid special attention to how spaces of accumulation and shortage of material things impinge on and produce the social status of humans. Their account of 1930s Alabama examines systemic processes that generate abundance (of cotton, of garbage, of poor people) and lack (of commodities, food, or shelter). Agee and Evans also observe how the same processes and the same sites of excess and shortage simultaneously produce social persons, landlords, credit merchants, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers. What they find is that the cotton tenancy system has little to do with romanticized visions of agrarian democracy popularized by New Deal visual arts, as the agrarian system produces human-ness of its participants unequally. For human rights to be politically effective, they must be not only recognized, but also shared collectively.<sup>13</sup> However, the cotton tenancy system, Agee and Evans discover, depends on the maintenance of the human underclass. Yet, the system paradoxically *produces* such collective poor by regulating relationships between individual cotton farmers (or individual families) and material things (houses, land, crops, food, clothes, and so on), and by regulating where and how such human-generating material

---

<sup>12</sup> The phrase comes from Alain Pottage's "Introduction: Fabrication of Persons and Things" in *Law, Anthropology, and the Constitution of the Social* 1.

<sup>13</sup> Several scholars have argued this point, from Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* to Maurizio Lazzarato (in an interview with Brian Massumi and Erin Manning) to Joseph Slaughter in *Human Rights, Inc.*, to Nancy Fraser in *Scales of Justice*.

accumulation can take place. Most importantly, they find that the system is made operative by the specific econolegal mechanism of the credit-debt economy and the “alienation of labor laws.”<sup>14</sup> Both of them enable, if not enforce, a particular mode of human–thing intimacy. The mode or form of human–thing connections, conducted under oppressive legal, economic, and cultural conditions, “humanizes” different people participating in cotton tenancy differently. The tenants Agee and Evans meet, like other farmers in the South, are caught up a system that depends on the never-ending reproduction of a social underclass.

Agee and Evans decide to turn their attention to “collective subjects,”<sup>15</sup> which, in their view, are the “human waste” of American society, and, specifically, of its agricultural tenancy system. Paula Rabinowitz argues that [t]he subject produced and provoked by documentary . . . is a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history” (8). Yet, Agee and Evans represent the rural poor in *Famous Men* as human subjects reduced to the perpetual role of waste. In other words, Evans and Agee do not turn the Rickettses into “human brothers” of upper-class New Yorkers but rather focus on how some material objects and Alabama families, and not New Yorkers and Alabamans, share the same social position; how material waste and cotton tenants might be viewed as “inhuman brothers.” And since local and global forces producing geospaces of abundance and shortage define where one is placed on the social ladder of humanity, the tenant farmers, removed from modern commodities, occupy the position of social trash.

Focus on human waste or on random accumulation as a narrative strategy was nothing new in modernist culture. Dadaists and Surrealists, for one, wanted to rescue art and culture from the bourgeoisie’s grip through their poetics of random, supposedly nonhierarchical selection.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Pietra Rivoli 20. I will discuss both in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Allred, 7, 22. Also, see Paula Rabinowitz’s “Pictures of Poverty,” in *They Must be Represented* 35-107.

Agee, however, decides to make the lowest human trash the subject of his humanizing journalism and to adopt trash collection as a narrative method, despite the fact that Agee and Evans both worked for a conservative publication, and both had to pre-segregate their narrative “trash” to incorporate the human refuse that their audiences would accept, that is, white poor families. While Agee and Evans’ audiences would certainly feel outrage that white families *like* them could become “human waste,” they certainly would not feel equal outrage if Agee and Evans’ human dump consisted of black or female bodies. Second, narrative garbage collection, so closely tied to the excesses of the consumer capitalism Agee was critical of, constantly undercut what Agee saw as its egalitarian all-inclusivity. Thus, I would argue that his narrative method of waste accumulation is neither wholly egalitarian, nor possible to implement consistently, especially as Agee’s waste-collecting project in the prose section of *Famous Men* constantly grinds against Evans’ staged and highly aestheticized images of the Alabama poor. However, the attention they pay to the accumulation of people and things in the system of cotton tenancy, in 1930s American culture, in prose and in photography, reveals the tremendous role that material debris plays in the personification and dehumanization of people. Just as importantly, what human and material waste Agee and Evans *make* the waste of *Famous Men* reveals for us the processes that regulated social value, and thus human value in 1930s’ and 1940s’ America.

Interestingly, shortage and abundance, Agee and Evans realize, signify differently not only in various spheres of economic circulations; they also mean different things in the visual and literary representation codes of early-twentieth-century culture. The popular visual culture of mass magazines, billboards, cinema, and New Deal art depends on the abundance and visual juxtapositions of things. Visual excess, in a sense, is the mainstream vernacular. In literary arts,

however, verbal (or descriptive) excess doesn't automatically signify the popular. Thus, Agee and Evans decide to explore how absence and abundance of things generate human-ness in Depression-era culture through a collaboration that combines a visual aesthetics of shortage in Evans' photos with a poetics of abundance in Agee's prose. Their two very different articulations of the constitutive power of "human-nonhuman assemblages," however, hinge on how they both integrate, situate, represent, and mystify objects vis à vis their human subjects, the space they secure for objects (Bennett xvii).

In the context of all of that, it is an understatement to say that things are central to James Agee and Walker Evans' work, the "documentary book written to end all documentary books."<sup>16</sup> In fact, this well-known book celebrating impoverished tenant farmers and sharecroppers as "famous men" of the American Depression is just as much, if not more, a book about material objects. From the beginning of his collaboration with Walker Evans, Agee agonized over the importance of different "stuff": first, his narrative tools, the shape of the book, things that must be "captured," that must become the focus of his collaboration with Evans, the very tenant families he calls "the object of our travelling," human and yet like material waste; and, last but not least, the material possessions of the three tenant families Agee and Evans spent two weeks observing (*FM* xlvi). Like John Joseph Mathews, Agee devotes a lot of time to a meta-analysis of his own craft and of old and new communication technologies, the pen, paper, and the camera, that make his storytelling possible, if still unreliable. Agee feels that the very material format of his project betrays his subjects, the three families of the Gudgers, the Woodses, and the Rickettses; it's just a "book," he laments.<sup>17</sup> He wants it to be more, a film or a musical piece

---

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* 495.

<sup>17</sup> Even the content of the book, that is, the material produced by Agee and Walker for *Fortune*, was the subject of an ownership/copyright fight between James Agee and *Fortune*. The magazine didn't publish

perhaps, as he urges his “reader to attend with his ears to what he takes off the page . . .” (*FM* xlvi). According to Agee, the “variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics are,” in the book, “particularly unavailable to the eye alone, and with their loss, a good deal of meaning escapes” (*FM* xlvii). “[F]orget that it is a book,”<sup>18</sup> Agee demands; he envisions *Famous Men* as a pile of debris, not a piece of art.

“Photographs are elusive objects, capable of an epistemological multiplicity that belies their seemingly nonchalant offer to index the material world,” says Elspeth H. Brown (14). The photographs in *Famous Men* are a prime example of how images viewed as documentary make use of and interpret the material world in unexpected ways. Walker Evans’ section of *Famous Men* includes a collection of photographs of poor Alabamans<sup>19</sup> but seems less self-referential than Agee’s project. Walker provides several portraits of individual family members, two group family portraits, as well as photographs of their houses, individual rooms, furniture, clothes, tools, and fields. To the 1961 edition, Walker Evans added nineteen more photographs of town buildings, roads, local townspeople, and even one photo featuring black men in front of a barber

---

Agee’s original forty-page article material (Blinder 1), and wanted to stop Agee from publishing *Famous Men* as a book (James Hersey in Agee xix). Prior to its publication by the Houghton Mifflin Company, Agee published sections of *Famous Men* in *Common Sense*, *New Directions*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* (Agee, *FM* iv).

<sup>18</sup> *FM* 246.

<sup>19</sup> The book has two different editions, 1941 and 1960, and images play slightly different roles in each. The first edition, published before Agee’s death, contains fewer images and focuses mainly on the families and their very immediate surroundings. The 1960 edition, published after Agee’s death, includes thirty-one more photos and also makes changes to the organization, order, and cropping of images. The most important addition, on Walker Evans’ part, is the incorporation of images that “widen . . . the horizon” beyond Hobe’s Hill, and point to “the elsewheres” of global modernism: cars and roads leading somewhere, the railway station, or shops plastered with 7-Up and Coca-Cola logos (Trachtenberg 72 in Blinder). For a detailed discussion of these two editions, see Allan Trachtenberg’s “Walker Evans’ Contrapuntal Design” in Blinder (71-79) and Jeff Allred’s chapter, “Moving Violations,” devoted to *Famous Men* (93-131).

shop. I focus, however, on the original edition, which zooms in on the three tenant families, and seems to leave out the wider world.

Recent scholarship on Evans' photos and writing suggests that he, too, experimented with the format of his images in radical ways. Unlike Agee, who celebrated the excess of his prose, Evans significantly purified, "decluttered," his images (Allred 110-117).<sup>20</sup> Although Evans was commissioned to visually record the specific material conditions of the tenant families' lives, in his photos material objects serve to give the images a universal, abstract, and "deterritorial" quality. In other words, the simplicity of Evans' photographic aesthetic should not be taken for granted. His other photos from this same period, taken in Alabama for the FSA, show Evans' fascination with the visual excess of popular culture of the time,<sup>21</sup> and the images added to the book in the 1960s reveal more of the visually complex and more-diverse Alabama cultural landscape, "in which contrast and connection with outside institutions and forces became visible, palpable" (Trachtenberg in Blinder 74). The "famous men" of Agee's book in the new edition inhabit a visual world that is marked equally by the presence of posters (one of them of a minstrel show), photos, Coca-Cola commercials, the train station, and the post office, and by the presence of cotton, farming tools, wooden cabins, and homemade clothes. New images also

---

<sup>20</sup> For a good overview of Walker Evans' diverse photographic work for *Fortune*, consult the recent exhibit presented by the International Center of Photography, which together with a curatorial essay by Ann Sass, "Picturing Business: The Photography of *Fortune*, 1930-1965," is available at <http://museum.icp.org/museum/exhibitions/fortune/index.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Jeff Allred offers a nuanced reading of Evans' images from the 1930s that were not included in *Famous Men*. He suggests that growing up with a father who was an advertising executive must have inflected his perception. According to Allred, in his images, "Evans was obsessed with things that move laterally across the landscape and with objects, like roadside billboards and hand-painted signs, meant to be seen while moving" (113). In *Famous Men*, however, Evans privileges static images. I believe that just like Agee in his text, Evans wants to arrest what Walter Benjamin sees as the wind of destruction and progress, the unstable economic and cultural processes that push the tenants further to the fringes of society (Walter Benjamin in Arendt 257-258). On the other hand, he makes his 1941 collection of images "safe" for his and Agee's conservative audiences, by removing all references to race and industry that could prove too controversial for them.

feature men in town socializing, some of them black, as well as images of diverse transportation technologies: cars, trains, railroad tracks, and horse-drawn buggies. Thus, in the updated edition, Evans actually alludes to how all these “bear . . . on the lives of the three tenant families” (Trachtenberg in Blinder 74).

However, Evans’ fascination with the visual incongruities and material excess of 1930s Southern culture seems absent in the ascetic work he published in *Famous Men* in 1941. Traces of global consumer culture, or even local town culture, as well as racism are also doubly cleansed in the 1941 edition, again by Agee’s moralizing comments (*FM* 321), comments that force readers and viewers to see *Famous Men*’s portraits of tenants as portraits of their transcendent humanity (Allred 113). Agee urges viewers of Evans’ work to look through, if not past, the objects to see the humans. My point here is that, interestingly, Evans almost completely purges “the vulgar materials of an emergent modernity” (ads for widely recognized consumer products, modern technology) from his portraits (Allred 113). But Evans and Agee, if through different means, are preoccupied with how shortages of objects and their abundance constitute social meanings in Depression-era culture. Both are perplexed by the complexity of modern(ist) abundance: aesthetic excess, human masses, material richness, material waste, and clutter, as well as by modern(ist) shortages: aesthetic simplicity, material poverty, hunger, physical emptiness and desolation. The material scarcity of the Depression era’s economy produces a mass underclass of the impoverished, a process Agee and Evans see as inhuman and inhumane. On the other hand, neither supports the idea that material wealth is a measure of one’s humanity. They both grapple with the fact that sites of excessive accumulation and extreme scarcity of things are also stages where actual people’s humanization and dehumanization take place, both Depression-era American society, and in their own image- and word-based work. What matters

in their view is not simply the proximity, or access of people, to material goods, but the sheer volume of things as well as the means and rules of generating that volume. Their attention to large volumes of material things matters because the meaning of the abundance of material “stuff” and of human crowds changed in 1930s culture. Prior to the New Deal, an abundance of things was often represented in association to wealth, while large numbers of people, masses of workers, nonwhite bodies, or female bodies were viewed as a threat to the social order, a nonindividuated force to be feared and regulated. However, during the Depression, the human mass gained the meaning of collective humanity, while a large volume of material things was often identified with the “dump.” Agee and Evans explore such paradoxical modes and instances of material and human accumulation.

In the next chapter, I examine John Joseph Mathews’ discussion of ethnic conflicts and (post)colonial crisis on the Osage reservation. In his *Talking to the Moon*, Mathews considers the “human question” from a very specific vantage point. Osages might be “losing culture,” Mathews fears, because of the encroachment of new settlers and exploiters of their wealth. At the same time, their oil royalties still generate annual payments to tribal members of between \$13,200 (in the 1920s) and \$715<sup>22</sup> (in the 1930s), at the time of the most catastrophic economic crisis in twentieth-century US history (Glasscock 147). For their part, Agee and Walker examine the interrelation between material wealth and social personhood in 1930s’ Alabama, where white families of six must sustain themselves on less than \$10 a month, which rounds up to less than \$19.50 a year per person<sup>23</sup> (*FM* 117). What does it mean to be human, Agee and Evans wonder,

---

<sup>22</sup> John Joseph Mathews gives similar figures in *The Osages*. According to him, the estimates for oil royalties were \$13,000 in 1925, and \$715 in 1932 (775).

<sup>23</sup> Money is at the same time a very concrete and an almost abstract category for Hobe’s Hill tenants and sharecroppers. While everything they do, consume, and produce has a dollar equivalent, they rarely see, or physically exchange, money, and use credit and forms of barter to meet their basic needs.

with such a price tag? How can we see humanity in those whose presence is not only far removed from metropolitan culture, but whose actual biological existence depends on such things as clothes made of fertilizer bags, on vermin-infested bedding, or on food scraps, things the metropolitan audiences for whom Agee and Walker write would consider trash? Refuse is, at once, a marker of accumulation and of shortage, and in *Famous Men* and in the sociopolitical life of Depression-era America, it becomes a figure that signifies human and material identity equally. And thus, debris and trash emerges as a powerful trope, a “knot”<sup>24</sup> tying humans and objects into one epistemic category in their text.

Agee states early on that if it were possible, he would “do no writing at all” (*FM* 13).

*Famous Men* would just embody matter; it

would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, record of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odor, plates of food and of excrement. (*FM* 13)

This passage is not simply a disclaimer that would indemnify him from charges of ethnographic or journalistic inaccuracy. The subject and the tools used to access it are of crucial importance; they control what is seen and what is read, and how the subject is interpreted. Therefore, Agee would like to use different tools than pen and paper—the camera and a sound-recording device—to fulfill the task. In his fantasy, the camera and the sound-recording device are not merely more accurate<sup>25</sup> than the pen. They are more useful in reducing the spatial and temporal distance<sup>26</sup> of

---

<sup>24</sup> The trope of the “knot” appears in Jeff Allred’s *American Modernism* as a crucial metaphor in his reading of Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices*, not a tie that connects but rather something uneven that “disrupts” the cultural fabric (199-205). My use of the term echoes Allred’s insistence on “messy” connections.

<sup>25</sup> For example, earlier in the book, Agee blames the widespread “misuse” of the camera for a “corruption of sight” (11).

writing, both the distance between the subjects and authors, and that between authors and new audiences, even if these new tools, at the same time, create the illusion of the author's disappearance, veiling his or her presence, intentions, and biases.<sup>27</sup> More importantly for my purposes, *Famous Men*, in Agee's view, should focus on trash, debris, leftovers, "lumps of earth" and "excrement" (*FM* 13). Though not presented in the ideal, unmediated manner Agee hopes for, waste and debris are everywhere in his section of *Famous Men*.

In contrast, the book<sup>28</sup> opens up with Walker Evans' photographic portraits of the three families, and not their refuse, even if those Evans and Agee try to humanize in their work are in fact *the* social waste of the 1930s. At the same time, even though the portraits capture some of the meager possessions of these families, their dirty clothes, pitiful furniture, or few utensils, there is no doubt that it is the people who dominate Evans' images. Women, men, and children in Evans' photos are placed at the center, visually and literally; they often occupy almost the entire frame, and they seem to control the image. The people who stare out at viewers from Evans' photographic images obviously matter. They are the ones who should become the "country's"

---

<sup>26</sup> It could be said that Agee was right about this, as it took several years to write and publish his work. When the book did appear in 1941, in a way, it missed the opportunity to influence the lives of those it described at the time of the greatest economic need.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin would say that it is the "hand" that Agee wants to eradicate from his documentary process. Benjamin states that with the arrival of new information technology,

[t]he role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the places it filled in storytelling lies waste. (After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained work.) . . . In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his materials, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. ("The Storyteller," in Arendt 108)

<sup>28</sup> I am referring here to the 1941 edition.

and viewers' "interest and concern."<sup>29</sup> The manner of presentation—Evans' framing, straight-on camera angles, and careful composition of objects in each image—adds to the sense of intimacy, the closeness to the photographed families that the viewer is supposed to feel. All the photographs are also oddly placed before the title page of the book. They are at once a prelude to Agee's introduction and a preface, and a stand-alone chapter, extraneous to the rest of the book. They are followed by Agee's confirmation that *Famous Men* indeed "is about sharecroppers" (*FM* 14) and humanity. And yet, for the book to be most accurate, according to Agee, it would have to contain not only no writing, but also only what David Miller calls "stuff," and, specifically, the kind of transformative and mutable stuff that is waste.

These contradictory foci of *Famous Men*, the validation of humanity and a simultaneous attention to things and to refuse specifically, its visual asceticism, on the one hand, and a textual profusion, on the other, place the book firmly in the conflicting political and economic discourses as well as their aesthetic articulations of the Depression era. The Roosevelt brand of nationalism calls for the incorporation for the first time in American history on such a scale of new political subjects, that is, of "those who have little."<sup>30</sup> We know that owning property has traditionally been viewed as a precondition for cultural, economic, and political participation,<sup>31</sup> and that the laissez faire theory-inspired consumerism of the modern era promotes the owning of very specific kinds of things, modern commodities (cars, cigarettes for women, beauty products

---

<sup>29</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Second Inaugural Address," 20 Jan. 1937.

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that despite the universal language of his speech, it is primarily white males who benefitted from such a rearticulation of national citizenship.

<sup>31</sup> I discussed, for example, in chapter four, how owning property was viewed as a means to "civilize" Native American subhumans. Also, in chapter two, I covered the importance of property in Booker T. Washington's vision of racial uplift.

and household items, for example) as a prerequisite or a prelude to full cultural and political participation as social persons.<sup>32</sup>

But having and not having things affects social participation and representations in diverse ways. The 1930s, despite the New Deal, were still an era of poll taxes that severely restricted political participation of the poor (and racial minorities), and those restrictive requirements were upheld as constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1937 (*Breedlove v. Suttles*).<sup>33</sup> Thus, ownership and the social lives of persons were tightly intertwined. In the arts, WPA-era primitivism often presented human subjects who owned little or no modern commodities as noble, quite in line with Roosevelt's directives. At the same time, however, pro-business publications of the time saw poverty as a sign of individual weakness and, therefore, as proof of one's failure as a social person, as a citizen, and as a human.<sup>34</sup> Having or not having things therefore produced or undermined social personhood of people in different discourses and in political and cultural practices of the time, albeit in conflicting ways. Simultaneously, in the sponsored arts of the 1930s, there was a push toward the rediscovery of "collective subjects" (Allred 7, 8), that is, of those who were poor (but also predominantly male and white).

In a sense, for Evans and Agee's Alabama subjects, the shortage of things, the absence of objects, produces the public presence of people. It's this "negative value" that produces the tenants and sharecroppers as national subjects in the American imagination. It is the shortage of available material goods and money, in other words, that, paradoxically, produces the abundance

---

<sup>32</sup> I have discussed the importance of modernist commodities to women's political rights in chapters one and two.

<sup>33</sup> Poll taxes were widely used in the South from the nineteenth century until 1966. They were deemed unconstitutional by the Twenty-fourth Amendment, which abolished poll taxes in federal elections, and in 1966, when they were banned in state elections as well in the case of *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*.

<sup>34</sup> Especially in the first stages of the Depression. As I mentioned earlier, even Henry Luce of *Fortune* had to include more empathetic stories about the victims of the Depression in the late 1930s.

of the impoverished underclass, but also the collective poor as narrative and narrating subjects of Agee and Evans' collaboration.

Agee and Evans, like other writers I have discussed in my dissertation (Nella Larsen, Fannie Hurst, and John Joseph Mathews), object to some kinds of human reification and yet see empowering potential in others. Agee and Evans examine the processes that in the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt deprived one-third of the nation of the basic "necessities of life" and, simultaneously, their political voice<sup>35</sup> and their humanity.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, things, especially for Agee, are the best means of telling the tenants' stories and humanizing them for his reading audiences. Agee fears that in order for his storytelling to retain "the ability to exchange experience,"<sup>37</sup> to reveal the "[i]mmeasurable weight of existence" (*FM* 12), *Famous Men* should be told through material objects, and their fragments, scraps, and traces. Thus, Agee doesn't see reification as uniformly, universally dehumanizing or disempowering. Rather, for him and for Evans, it's the convergence of certain things and certain processes of accumulation that affect people in what they view as deeply degrading ways. For example, the capitalist accumulation of wealth benefits the Alabama landlords and landowners whose incomes grow consistently. However, their arrangement with sharecroppers and tenants is based on the "asymmetries" of an economic contract that keeps tenants who constantly produce material wealth in a state of perpetual and inescapable indebtedness and poverty (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 223).

In addition to the processes of capitalist accumulation he is so critical of, Agee also deplores the patronizing vocabulary of new primitivism and nationalism that postulates that those

---

<sup>35</sup> It could be argued, of course, that some of them never had a political voice, and that the economic crisis only intensified their disenfranchisement.

<sup>36</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, second "Inaugural Address."

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin (in Arendt 93).

who “have not” should automatically become the “subjects” of history. The 1930s’ well-intentioned primitivism often aestheticizes and decontextualizes people’s destitution, and it invokes the feeling of empathy. Agee finds very troubling the power of Depression-era arts to produce the humanity of the people for the consumption of metropolitan audiences.<sup>38</sup> Agee is painfully aware of how closely journalistic, literary, and even photographic narrative techniques mirror economic and political techniques of accumulation and thus exploitation and disenfranchisement. Journalism depends on the aggregation of facts and seemingly transparent description of things, yet for Agee, “[t]he very blood and semen of journalism . . . is a broad and successful form of lying” (*FM* 235). According to Agee, literary styles viewed as attentive to the material conditions of being, realism and naturalism for example, fare no better.

[W]ords . . . are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication, and . . . they come at many of the things . . . by such a Rube Goldberg<sup>39</sup> articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would flatten any other art into apoplexy . . . . (*FM* 236)

Even the camera, for all its great potential as “. . . the central instrument of our time . . . next to the unassisted and weaponless consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands,” fails (*FM* 11).

Agee feels that the camera’s “misuse . . . has spread [a] nearly universal . . . corruption of sight”

(*FM* 11). Yet, alongside such indiscriminate accumulation, which works as a narrative principle

in *Famous Men*, Agee displays a primitivist fascination with basic objects, objects that seem, in a

---

<sup>38</sup> Agee is also extremely critical of a particular brand of 1930s’ documentary and, in particular, the kind that made money. His disdain for Margaret Bourke-White’s work is well documented. In fact, Agee includes excerpts of interviews and articles about her in *Famous Men* (452-454), mocking her easy transition from being a chief photographer-apologist of industrial progress to being interested in “just a man’s place in the whole setup of today” (*FM* 453). To emphasize the insincerity of Bourke-White’s attention, he cites the *New York Post*’s description of Bourke-White as a girl all too comfortable with consumer culture: “[a]side from photographer’s interests, she just likes the damn things” (*FM* 454).

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Agee and Mathews use Rube Goldberg’s mechanism as a metaphor for excessively complicated and decorative literary styles.

sense, premodern, such as the tenant families' simple hand-made or repurposed clothes or beds. While Agee does not fetishize or exoticize simple(r) objects in his text,<sup>40</sup> he also avoids describing and valorizing modernist commodities, or traces of popular culture, which are found on the Alabama farms but which he chooses to skim over, attempting to repress, resist their flow, just as Walker Evans removes them from the first edition of *Famous Men*.

The metacritical passage cited at the beginning of my chapter in which Agee hopes for his book not to be a book, but a “thing” with “no writing at all” and only photos, “fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth,” as well as “food and excrement” (*FM* 13), is just one of many instances woven into Agee’s descriptions of the tenants and their environments, instances that reiterate the inadequacy of Agee’s documentary efforts. They are the reason why *Famous Men* is often viewed as the ultimate experiment in self-conscious documentary-making and as an exceptional work of nonfiction.<sup>41</sup> But I agree with Jeff Allred’s and Paula Rabinowitz’s readings of the book<sup>42</sup> as representative of, rather than an exception to, the genre of modernist documentary popular during the Depression. Modernist documentary writers, who were often privileged members of society, literally had to go out of their way, as Agee would put it, to “spy” on their subjects. Thus, like other documentaries from the period, *Famous Men* records characteristically difficult encounters between the metropolitan “us” and the nonmetropolitan “them” at a time when “writers were pushed to deal with folk” (Meridel La Sueur, *New Deal for Writers*). As Paula Rabinowitz says, [o]ne [must go] somewhere as a documentarian—Polynesia,

---

<sup>40</sup> His almost primitivist fascination with “simple things” is often complicated by his business writer’s training, which provides the economic and political context for the circulation of such objects. In other words, Agee places “simple objects” that belong to the Rickettses, the Woodses, and the Gudgers squarely in the context of Market and State forces.

<sup>41</sup> Kazin 495; Jessup; Hersey.

<sup>42</sup> Allred 22, 93-131; Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented* 35-55.

Alabama, Poland, downtown; the documentarian is drawn elsewhere by an other” (*They Must Be Represented* 6). Such actual, physical encounters, in unfamiliar geocultural spaces, with unfamiliar people, and material debris, always produce narrative tensions.

Agee and Evans struggled to find a new idiom to represent the complex forces that produced the poor, and to account for their own often uncomfortable encounters with the Gudgers, Woodses and Rickettses, just as other documentarians of the period did. Thus, the preoccupation with the limits of representation in Agee and Evans’ project is not unique. It is as common among high modernists worldwide as among American documentarians at the time. The end result was not a “book written to end all documentary books”<sup>43</sup> but rather a project “which celebrates, exposes, perpetuates, and challenges the gendered, classed, (and at points) racial disparities organizing not only vision and narrative, but political and economic relations in Depression America . . . .”<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, how one is to tell a story not just in “ideas, but in things” is one of the crucial dilemmas for modernists across genres and disciplines.<sup>45</sup> But Agee is influenced not only by this widespread crisis of representation, but also by the practice of collective authorship that puts him, Walker Evans, and *Fortune*’s editors and sponsors in, if not the same, a similar category. Agee, faced with his subjects quite literally, is also forced to deal with the generic constraints that make the project legible to some audiences and not to others. As I mentioned earlier, Agee received an assignment from *Fortune*, a conservative, pro-business, anti–New Deal publication.

---

<sup>43</sup> Kazin 495.

<sup>44</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented* 40.

<sup>45</sup> The phrase comes from William Carlos Williams’ poem, but there are scores of others modernists who are equally preoccupied with the role of objects in their aesthetics. Take, for example, Ezra Pound and imagism, or T. S. Eliot and his theory of the “objective correlative.” The issue of meaning of objects was just as important to anthropologists and writers influenced by modernist anthropology (Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston) and filmmakers (the Flahertys).

In his work, he had to appease Henry Luce and *Fortune*'s conservative and predominantly white readers. More importantly still, Agee, like other American writers of the period, grappled in his work with social and economic processes that simultaneously valorized objects and constituted the humanity of persons. His metacritical tiptoeing, therefore, was not all or mainly about art, or about his aesthetic choices and the sensibilities of readers he might insult. In fact, it was just as much about the politics (of *Fortune*, and of his literary audience), and Agee needed to negotiate between what he saw, what he wanted to say about people living in "a criminal economy" (*FM* 100), and what he could write about it, keeping in mind the realities of the publishing industry and its audiences.

One way of handling this dilemma was to experiment with the sheer size of his text, which literally grew out of a short article assignment for *Fortune*. Despite his pronouncements that "[w]ords cannot embody; they can only describe" (*FM* 238), with Evans, Agee worked on an idiom that would reveal the humanity of their human subjects through objects, even if neither Evans nor Agee found it possible to step completely outside of available discourses that define the mutual and constitutive relationship between objects and people in early-twentieth-century America. And since Agee and Evans worked in different media, they both articulated their aesthetics of shortage and excess not only against the political and economic modes of humanization of persons through objects, but also against the aesthetic modes dominating their own distinct media and genres.

For Evans, this means turning common images of poverty into strikingly beautiful, ascetic, yet lyrical, portraits of persons as well as equally sparse and lyrical portraits of their material things and the physical environment around them. Evans allows his human subjects to arrange themselves comfortably for his photos, and then immortalizes them in the static, timeless

portraits in which Gudgers, Woodses, and Rickettses do what they almost never do, which is pose and rest. Evans is praised for his realism,<sup>46</sup> yet the actual things and people in his *Famous Men* series, especially in the 1941 edition, seem both familiar and abstract at the same time. Evans emphasizes the corporeality of objects and spaces, yet the photos present their subject in the nondescript, semiabstract environment of “anywhere America.” To put it differently, Evans does not limit the plausible location of his subjects to the area of Hobe’s Hill. The Gudgers or Woodses could be any tenant family, anywhere, in the post-1929 United States. His images have an odd, still-life quality, whether they represent family members or buildings, household items or knickknacks. Evans is careful not to harvest his human subjects for metropolitan audiences. In a way, he doesn’t want the presence of objects to bear on the humanity of the persons in his pictures. Unlike Agee’s almost five-hundred-page-long prose section of *Famous Men*, Evans’ images are free of clutter and strike viewers with their utter simplicity. The tenant families of Evans’ pictures are human, he seems to argue, because they are simple and beautiful in their isolation from the hustle and bustle of modern cities and consumer culture. They are human despite, not because of, being poor. Evans also “praises famous men” by making them look “pretty,” which in the language of the Alabama tenants means not glamour, but dignity.<sup>47</sup> Evans further humanizes members of the three families by presenting each either in individual or still sparse family portraits, but never as the Depression’s indistinguishable mass, so common in the

---

<sup>46</sup> His interesting relationship with Roy Stryker of the FSA involved conflicts over the aesthetics of his photography. Evans insisted on an apolitical, not recognizably social realistic, propagandist look for his photographic compositions. See, for example, his comments in *Walker Evans at Work* 112.

<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Gudger uses this term. Agee repeats it in his description of her house to explain that the families are ashamed not only of their poverty, but of the fact that things do not look “pretty” (*FM* 210). Yet, at the same time, the association of visual simplicity, beauty, and order betray the ways in which Walker Evans and Mrs. Gudger interpret it as superior.

visual culture of the day.<sup>48</sup> Yet the irony of these pictures is obvious, because those whom Evans presents as the “noble poor,” the viewers know, are the modern masses; they are those not-so-forgotten men whom twentieth-century consumers of popular images see as social waste.

Agee’s strategy for humanizing his collective poor is very different from Evans.’ He accepts the inevitable failure of words as a departure point of the literary section of *Famous Men*, yet keeps piling words upon words, sometimes in short chunks, at other times, in rambling, unpunctuated, page-long sentences. He constantly struggles to rearticulate his subjects, sometimes pausing as if to arrest the flow of his words, as in the passage where he finally announces, “Here then he is, or is she: here is this tender and helpless human life” (*FM* 108), only to continue weaving a two-page string of words separated by commas, colons, and semicolons, constantly modifying his subject’s description. The tenant, this “helpless human life,”<sup>49</sup> Agee seems to say, is trapped by “a criminal economy” (*FM* 100), but appears to escape Agee’s writerly grip, the immobilizing force of Agee’s portraiture. And so the description continues, with Agee’s subject

surrounded already, with further pressures, impingements: the sorrow, weariness, and nescience of its parents in their closures above and round it: the ghastly influence of their lovelessness, their lack of knowledge hope or chance, how to love, what is joy, why they are locked together here: his repeated witness of the primal act . . . : their hopeless innocence hot to “raise” him, an ignorance no less enormous than in the parents of the rest of the world, yet not less relevant nor less horrifying on that account: the food which is drawn out of his mother distilled of the garbage she must eat; and the garbage to which he graduates: the further structures of psychological violence, strangling, crippling . . . . (*FM* 108, 109)

---

<sup>48</sup> For example, consider some of the fascinating covers of *Fortune*, which rarely presented humans and featured “wonders of modern civilization” instead: engines, airplanes, ships, factories, industrial environments, bridges, or skyscrapers. Soon after the market collapse in 1929, however, the magazine ran interesting covers filled with masses of people. See the following issues: September 1930, December 1930, and April 1931. The University of Virginia offers a good overview of *Fortune* covers from the 1930s and 1940s at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/print/fortune/fortunethumbs.html>.

<sup>49</sup> This description is included in a section titled “COLON Curtain Speech” (*FM* 97-111).

To avoid closure, Agee changes layout, spacing, and uses punctuation marks in unconventional way, giving his work an oral, performative quality. The fear of failure doesn't halt his narrative accumulation; it intensifies it. He also keeps describing things, more than persons, regardless of how small, poor in quality, or perishable the objects of his descriptions are. In fact, he pays special attention to things that in other social contexts would be considered (and ignored as) trash.

Agee, however, doesn't want his readers to look past these "unimportant" objects. He purposefully slows down the process of reading<sup>50</sup> by inserting the excruciating details of many seemingly insignificant objects: old shoes, vermin-infested bedding, the contents of drawers, pictures, and food scraps. Such seemingly useless objects, Agee discovers, are not unimportant at all. In fact, the revelation that occurs to Agee during his stay with the tenant families is this: objects mean different things to people from different social classes. What most of Agee's Madison Avenue readers would consider useless things, unindividuated masses of trash, are for the tenant families tools, furniture, and clothes they cannot do without. In fact, "[t]he garbage" the tenant mother "must eat" becomes her child, who, in turn, throughout his life "graduates" only to the position of trash (*FM* 109).

Moreover, these seemingly unimportant objects occupy the same social position of economic social waste as the tenant families themselves, Agee finds. Both, therefore, occupy the

---

<sup>50</sup> In her fascinating discussion of matter in literary works delivered on 8 Jan. 2011, during the annual MLA conference, Ellen C. Freedgood observed the paradoxical role that concrete, specific textual descriptions of very tangible objects play in the actual process of reading and interpretation. She pointed out in her reading of sea novels how concrete descriptions of nautical apparatuses, boats, and equipment, instead of concretizing reality in the eyes of readers, alienate it, make it less figurative because of their specificity. Objects, as well as their names and shapes, are not legible to diverse audiences equally, and often, despite the common belief otherwise, make the prose more abstract and less figurative (as specialized vocabulary words become empty signs). The so-called realistic descriptions of things readers are not familiar with also slow down the very process of reading, and I believe, in Agee, descriptions of things serve that purpose very well. Agee wants his readers to literally dwell in, not on, his prose.

same space within the 1930s' social hierarchy. And to look past material trash, Agee seems to say, would encourage his audiences to look past the human waste of American modernity. And if, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, “[w]aste is the dark, shameful secret of all production,” constantly covered up, Agee wants to collect and display it, not remove it from sight (*Wasted Lives* 2004, 27). Yet, while doing this he risks perpetuating voyeuristic narrative strategies that assign his human subjects a subordinate position.

But despite the metacritical disclaimers, Agee, in the manner of a pious anthropologist, devotes a major portion of the book to the most commonsense account of the most obvious material things the three families use or produce (their shelter, furniture, clothes, things they collect, and crops they grow). Agee assigns greater weight and emphasis to the material world, first by giving more priority and space to his descriptions of the physical environments, and then by placing the families within the context of their material possessions. In other words, the Gudgers, Woodses, and Rickettses are first introduced to readers through Evans' photos, then briefly in Agee's "Preface" (*FM* xlii), and are next alluded to as "poor naked wretches (*FM* xx), catalogued in "Persons and Places," and then discussed in Book Two as an "appallingly damaged group of human beings" (*FM* 7). Yet, the first intimate introduction to the tenant families takes place relatively late, after the physical environment they inhabit has been thoroughly described, catalogued,<sup>51</sup> and investigated. The intimate introduction to actual people is preceded by more than two hundred and thirty pages in Part Two of Book Two that are almost exclusively devoted to things that define the tenant families' existence (*FM* 113-349). Despite his outrage at the way the tenants' material poverty constitutes them as "social refuse" in Depression culture, Agee uses precisely the depictions of the families' possessions to humanize them for the reader.

---

<sup>51</sup> For example, *FM* 360; for a more intimate description of the Gudgers, see *FM* 417-420.

Moreover, the sections in Agee's "Some Findings and Comments" in Part Two of Book Two mostly use standard categories, those typically employed in social science study of humans. Agee covers shelter, clothes, food, education, and working conditions, spending so much time on these descriptions that the "famous men" of his narrative appear obstructed by the volume of information about the size of their houses, the leaks in their roofs, or the dirt on their dishes. Of course, in one way, the paltry houses, furniture, food, clothes, cotton, and corn constitute the tenant and sharecropper families of Gudger, Ricketts, and Woods, and of millions of other impoverished rural workers. But what's fascinating about the descriptions of the three families' possessions is that even the things classed as the belongings that define how they live—where they have sex, what they eat, how they work and play, and who they are—are technically not theirs. Moreover, not only are their things not theirs, they are not even made or used "properly." The families use objects in ways that violate the codes governing their social use, insofar as those codes are legible to Agee and Evans' metropolitan audiences. Agee's readers surely notice that the things Woodses or Gudgers take for shelter, or clothes, or beds, are not "really" these things; they are repurposed waste.

Agee begins his introduction to the robust section describing the tenants' houses by stating dryly that "Gudger has no home, no land, no mule; none of the more important farming implements" (*FM* 115). He then moves on to the other families: "Woods and Ricketts own no home and no land, but Woods owns a mule and Ricketts owns two . . . (*FM* 116). Throughout this section of *Famous Men*, Agee presents his descriptions in emphatic negatives. The Gudgers' house, with certain physical features, is first presented in this inverted, negative relation to its inhabitants. In other words, Agee reveals what Mr. Gudger takes for his home, not what he thinks it is, and yet this owned, non-owned house defines how he and his family live. Gudger

(and Woods) really “has no home” (*FM* 115), and yet this home he doesn’t have defines who he is within its walls and within the larger community of Hobe’s Hill. Thus, this peculiar state of having and not-having, owning and not-owning, has a profound impact on the social identities of the farmer families.

The next subsection after “Some Findings and Comments,” following “Money” and “Shelter,” is “Clothing.”<sup>52</sup> In this section, which is supposed to be devoted to clothing, we find out that the children often have no clothes or shoes, that adults walk and work barefoot or share the same pair of old shoes among several people (*FM* 280, 261). Clothes, sheets, and bedding are made not of new fabrics, or even of old material intended for such purposes, but of old pillow sacks or fertilizer bags (*FM* 364). This is, of course, doubly ironic because cotton is the crop they harvest but can’t buy; it has no immediate use to them<sup>53</sup> (the families use mostly linen and straw). Gudgers and Rickettses might stage daily “performances” of having a house—a center of their families’ lives—but their houses do not belong to them.

In Agee’s view, tenants’ houses are, at once, living beings and human skeletons (*FM* 129, 159), much like the families who inhabit them. Their houses are also “shells,”<sup>54</sup> that through their irrational layout, small size, and poor roofing encase humans and enforce their behavior (*FM* 207). “The tenant house as a shell is, then, a thing to itself, created by the tenant system, but having much in common with southern company houses in general,” Agee says, dismantling any

---

<sup>52</sup> It is announced by the subheading “(ON THE PORCH: 2)” (*FM* 221).

<sup>53</sup> Agee is also quick to notice the gendering of tenants’ clothes, according to which “men’s clothes are ready made” and “women’s and girl’s clothes and those of children are [mostly] made at home” (*FM* 275). Also, men’s decent clothes and shoes go through a process of “social degradation”; as they become completely worn out, “they become the inheritance of a wife” (*FM* 270).

<sup>54</sup> Agee compares uniformly miserable and cramped rural housing to “company housing” of large corporations of his time. This, again, is a very interesting point to make, as American agricultural industry at the time is not represented as an industry in many New Deal visual works but as a pastoral, proto-American agrarian utopia.

preconceptions his readers might have about the uniqueness of American agrarian culture as somehow natural (*FM* 207). The agricultural system, much like the industrial system, has the power to “produce” its farmers through many means, not the least of which is its built environment, such as housing.

Agee, not unlike social scientists of the period, wants to reveal the humanity of people through the totality of their material and physical surroundings, but he constantly stumbles upon material objects he can’t really describe or comprehend fully. What happens when the material objects, supposedly tangible and very present, have such a negative, absent, yet generative quality? As he puts it, “[m]uch of this land that lay out around [them] had been taken over by human beings, who were under and who will perhaps always remain under the infantile delusion that they own it” (*FM* 246).

Such material objects, things that are not what they are supposed to be, things that are used as owned homes, beds, dresses, or pillows, but which seem rubbish to urban readers, are instances of what Jane Bennet calls “vibrant matter” and “power-things” (xvi). They certainly have a measurable force, and they exercise it upon the people who use them, but what Agee captures so perceptively is that the terrifying power of these non-owned belongings, clothes/nonclothes, or food/nonfood, exposes “social hegemonies,” economies of value that fortify these objects’ strength (Bennet xiii). In other words, we might praise the inventiveness of Mrs. Gudger, Woods, or Ricketts for producing their families’ clothing from industrial and agricultural scraps, but the fact that fertilizer bags, instead of being discarded as trash, land on the tenants’ backs, reveals large-scale patterns of valuation and circulation of objects, and of persons. In my understanding, the attention Agee pays to objects that are not what they are supposed to be, and that are used in a way they “shouldn’t be,” suggests his interest in how the

negative value, or the absence-presence, of material objects can be productive within the tenants' households, but also beyond the scope of Hobe's Hill. What I mean is that these observations of material presences and absences lead Agee to explore other instances of paradoxical accumulation that generate shortage and abundance and that, simultaneously, constitute persons entangled in its processes. This is visible in Agee's discussion of the constitutive power of work; that is, the process of making things, and also, in his attention to debt, as social "technique" producing things and people out of, in a sense, nothing.

For instance, in another section of "Some Findings and Comments" devoted to the unending, grueling labor performed by members of the three families and titled "Work," Agee observes processes that, like objects, selectively generate wealth and social personhood for some (landlords) but not others (farmers, women). The labor of tenants and sharecroppers produces volume but not value, so to speak. It results in an abundance of crops and clothes, but also in a simultaneous shortage. The Woodses, Rickettses, and Gudgers toil continuously, often getting up before sunrise and working in the fields past midnight during the summer. Their ceaseless work, however, doesn't even produce enough wealth to cover their families' bodies with clothes, to provide enough food, or to pay for decent shelter, even though "[i]t is for the clothing, and for the food, and for the shelter . . . to sustain their lives, that they toil" (*FM* 319).

"[T]he ends of this work are all but entirely into the work itself," Agee observes, because despite the abundance of corn and cotton, "nearly nothing is obtainable" from it (*FM* 320). Agee believes that "work as a means to other ends might have some favor in it . . . but the ends of [the tenants'] work are absorbed all but entirely into the work itself" (*FM* 320), which captures the paradoxes of the 1930s' cotton economy; the labor itself, not the people, is the commodity landowners are after.

In *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (1935), Charles Johnson et al. note that landlords went out of their way to find “industrious and thrifty tenant[s]” (8). Yet, “the very qualities which normally might lead a tenant to attain the position of renter, and eventually of owner, are just the ones which make him a permanent asset as a cropper” (8). Maharidge and Williamson emphasize that labor was so crucial to the smooth functioning of the cotton tenant system that “[s]everal states adopted ‘alienation of labor’ laws” (13).<sup>55</sup> Such laws restricted the mobility of tenants, by tying the tenant’s labor, but technically not the tenants themselves, to a particular landowner. Those workers who pursued work elsewhere were subject to “forcible return by peace officers” (Street qtd. in Maharidge and Williamson 13).

In *Famous Men*, the tenants’ bodies are fully absorbed into the economic and social system, and, as a result, their human bodies and their labor are also object extensions of the “Rube Goldberg” economic machine. Agee argues that “[t]he family exists for work” and is itself “a cooperative economic unit” (*FM* 322). And even if labor doesn’t generate immediate profits for the three families and other tenant farmers who work in conditions of similar economic subordination, it produces multiple spaces of abundance. The work’s repetitive nature generates multiple traces visible in the tenants’ bodies. Labor wears them down. The gestures repeated every day are expressed as signs of the “weight of these action upon” their bodies (*FM* 321). Labor also produces the tenants’ leisure, affects their sexual lives, their reproductive

---

<sup>55</sup> One has to wonder whether this emphasis on labor as commodity and not human bodies as commodities in the South had something to do with the fact that in the 1920s and 1930s white bodies couldn’t be owned the way black slave bodies were owned in the economic system of the previous centuries. The colonial model of agricultural production gave rise to the cotton tenancy system of exploitation, yet the way the subordination of cotton farmers was articulated in legal and economic terms removed references to slave laws, especially after economic and political discrimination as well as racial violence caused massive emigration of the black labor force to the North. Although “Negro slavery and cotton grew up together,” by 1935 “white workers . . . outnumber the blacks more than five to three” (Johnson et al. 3;4) in cotton farming, “a one crop system” as “exploitative of the soil” as of people (3). Also, see Pietra Rivoli 20.

choices, and so on. This “cumulation” also *makes* the “mind” and “heart,” the very subjectivity of the tenants, according to Agee (*FM* 321). Finally, this labor accumulates wealth for the landowners and, importantly, for Agee and for *Famous Men*’s readers. Agee wants his audiences to consider their complicity in the exploitation of the poor when he addresses his readers directly.

And how is this [labor] to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your own experience that you are what you are, and that she [the female tenant laborer] is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers . . . . (*FM* 321)

Paula Rabinowitz emphasizes that “[d]ocumentary is based on exchange,” on a certain “economy” in which someone gives something, and someone gains something (*They Must Be Represented* 6, 7). Agee seems to be painfully aware that his and Evan’s book make them get something from the tenants with little to offer in return. This, Agee notes, is another instance when the labor of tenants, in this case, their “wretched being” that Agee spies on, is exploited, literally multiplied in images and text in distant geographical locations, producing abundance for Agee, Evans, their readers, but not any life-changing abundance for the cotton farmers in Alabama.

Through this observation, Agee reveals that although he and Evans focus on particular modes of interaction and relationship between objects and people in the Alabama of the 1930s, they try not to lose sight of the large-scale forces governing accumulation, forces invisible, they want us believe, to the tenants and yet affecting the tenants’ lives in most direct ways. Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, who followed up on the families Evans and Agee interviewed in the 1930s, put it more bluntly in *And Their Children After Them* (1989). There were, Maharidge writes,

nine million cotton tenant farmers in the South; virtually all of them lived under the most brutal conditions, often not too much better off than slaves. They worked . . . raising cotton with their own strong backs and mules as their only help. These nine million workers added one billion dollars of wealth annually to the world economy. Yet most ended each year further in debt. (Maharidge and Williamson xvi)

While the financial profits from *Famous Men* were negligible for Evans and Agee—the book was initially a commercial flop—Agee is attentive to how the tenants’ labor does generate abundance, and how this multiplicity is unevenly distributed and concentrated because of a “criminal” financial *and* “cultural economy” (*FM* 100).

In their 1935 study, Johnson et al. produced a scathing critique of the cotton tenancy system. They reported that despite adding a “billon dollars annually to the wealth of the world, the cotton farmers [were] the most impoverished . . . of any large group of producers in America” (1). In other words, the relentless labor of Alabama sharecroppers generated “positive” accumulation of wealth for others: the landowners, people involved in the cotton trade or the textile industry, and the country itself. The tenants’ labor produced and sustained the class status of the beneficiaries of their labor. On the other hand, the mode of accumulation of things they were subject to impoverished tenant families; the more they worked, the poorer they got. Yet in Agee’s text and Evans’ photos, none of the tenants seem to be aware of the existing system, or of the random bursts and stoppages in the flow of agricultural production, capital, or goods. The fact that their resulting poverty (and, to some degree, their whiteness) becomes the prerequisite to their “be[ing] represented” (Rabinowitz) and to their becoming narrated as the “collective subjects” of 1930s American culture seems intensely ironic.

In the end, Agee struggles in *Famous Men* perhaps not with how to represent the families truthfully, whatever that would mean, but rather with his inability to zoom in on just his “famous

men” and resist the force of modern crisis in his prose, the way Walker Evans can, by cropping all but the faces and bodies of tenants out of his images in the book’s first edition in 1941. Agee can’t successfully declutter the tenants’ lives and rearrange their world in a similar way. For Agee, the material world and its dangerous liaisons with global systems of labor and commodities circulation persistently intrude on his writing and bear upon his articulation of the humanity of the farmers. However, he doesn’t want to excise these forces completely from his narrative; he wants to control them, to make them a trickle, not a deluge. But the things, in their varied manifestations—daily-use objects, people’s bodies, objectified tenants’ labor—always escape the narrow localization of Agee’s narrative, and point to a global “elsewhere” where the abstract working of commodities production, trade flows, debt, and capital generate categories of human-ness and thingness, which the Gugders, Woodses, and Rickettses are not aware of and have no control over. But they also point to the American colonial and imperial past that underwrites the twentieth-century’s cotton tenancy system with its economy of commodified labor and commodified human flesh, environmental degradation, and regulations of human mobility. Neither Agee nor Evans wants to deal with this legacy directly, obscuring it with depictions of the physical matter of daily life, which seems at once ever present but also without history. Yet matter, things, crops—people-things, as I will describe later—have an annoying and revealing way of, if not entirely redirecting the flow of Agee and Evans’ narrative, of leaving at least the traces of the colonial system that perhaps is the invisible core, the mechanics of cotton tenancy that Agee both wants and doesn’t want to analyze. However, just as spaces of negative presence, invisible economic forces, and “things” that are assigned “zero-value” in 1930s culture help Agee recover narratives that produce people (Michael Thompson 10), so do absent-present things and people whom Agee relegates to the margins help contemporary readers to assess what

Agee can't quite express. The waste of Agee's own retelling of the narrative of tenants' lives in *Famous Men* can help us recover the colonial mechanism that made cotton tenancy "tick" and that produced human waste over eighty years after a slave-based economic system had been legally abolished.

I want to focus next on the way Agee's gaze shifts smoothly back and forth from people to things to people again. Agee often describes commodities and humans in similar terms, against ontological categories that would see them as belonging to separate realms. *Famous Men*, then, a book so obviously humanist in its objective, consciously focuses on the lowest point of convergence on the "sliding scale" of social value where things and humans occupy the same position (Michael Thompson 93). In fact, the very selection of tenant families on the part of James Agee and Walker Evans resembles a kind of "dumpster diving"; it is, however, a very selective search for "human trash."

Upon receiving their commission from *Fortune*, Agee and Evans both travel to Alabama to literally *pick* their subjects (and against *Fortune*'s suggestion, Agee picks three families instead of one). Not only does Agee actually call the families he eventually chooses to live with "objects" of the trip (*FM* xlv), together with Walker, he consciously selects people who seem least valuable to local powerbrokers—"the lowest trash you can find"—as the subjects of their work (*FM* 79). Jeff Allred reads the selection of families least assimilated into capitalist modernity as a primitivization of sorts on the part of Agee and Evans. He sees it as a gesture that literally immobilizes social change in *Famous Men*. Agee wants to show humanity even in the most isolated, simple, and pure folk (and, not, let's say, that of farmers who were more connected to urban culture, let alone the rich cotton tenants' landowners). I agree with Allred that numerous descriptions in *Famous Men* betray Agee's disdain for modern mass culture and,

at the same time, his privileging of the pure and simple.<sup>56</sup> Agee's particular choice of subjects, however, also has much to do with the fact that the three families are considered "waste" by local landlords, and with the fact that this local "human waste" is still *acceptable* as a narrative subject to Agee and Evans' audience. As I will discuss later, there is enough evidence to argue that the tenants Walker and Evans represent are neither the simplest folks, nor those truly viewed as "the lowest trash" in the Alabama community. Rather, they are the "lowest trash" that Agee and Evans' metropolitan audiences are able to digest.<sup>57</sup> Local comments about the tenants that Agee inserts into his text are the first coherent and decisive descriptions of the tenants in Part One of Book Two, titled "A Country Letter" (*FM* 47-82).

"A Country Letter" opens with scarcely punctuated sentences that often run for a page or more. However, once Agee gets to the locals' opinions about the families, quoted below, both the tone and the look of his prose change drastically. The vernacular of these comments is intended to make these statements seem more authentic and more reliable, and their distinct visual representation emphasizes their importance to Agee's text.

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

---

<sup>56</sup> This is more visible in Walker Evans' photos than in James Agee's prose, but Agee, too, expresses his views on simplicity and symmetry as virtues in several places, most notably on page 156. He also says that he believes that "negroes . . . understand the meaning of a camera, a weapon, a stealer of images and soul, a gun, an evil eye," echoing typical notions that more "primitive" blacks had their superstitions about camera as a soul catcher, but that they also were naturally wiser than whites thanks to having more access to their innate spirituality (*FM* 362). However, as I noted earlier in this chapter, the privileging of certain representational codes and not others depends in Evans and Agee not only on how they feel about poverty and excess wealth, but how they feel about aesthetic codes popular in their own media and disciplines governing the accumulation of objects.

<sup>57</sup> Despite the fact that *Famous Men* was eventually published in a book format to a small audience of intellectuals and most likely left-leaning consumers of the arts, it had been originally intended for a much wider but more conservative base of the close to half a million business readers of *Fortune*.

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

Ricketts? They're a bad lot . . . .

Why, Ivy Pritchert was one of the worst whores in this whole part of the country: only one that was worse was her own mother. They are about the lowest trash you can find . . . .

Gudger? He's a fair farmer . . . but he hain't got a mite of sense . . . . (*FM 79*)<sup>58</sup>

These comments are doubly emphasized in Agee's text as they are printed in a different layout from that used in the chapter's opening. They appear in two- and three-line sentences, separated by double-spaced leading. The words are simple, the opinions bold, and the sentences are short and conclusive; they even end with periods, not a common practice for Agee in *Famous Men*. Each period, I think, not only concludes a sentence but also confirms, cements the tenants' underclass status; it grounds the Gudgers and Rickettses firmly at the bottom of the Hobe's Hill social ladder (*FM 79-80*). The families that Agee and Evans write about and photograph are, we are to believe, the people assigned what Michael Thompson calls the social "zero-value" in the Alabama community in the 1930s (10). By this strategy, as by the earlier list of refuse Agee wishes his project to include, Agee and Evans are joining the chorus of other critics of American capitalism in the 1930s, critics who show their growing concern for and fascination with the accumulation of trash and waste (Scandura 15-21). Prior to the stock market collapse, the leftovers of a booming consumer economy might have not bothered even the most conscientious critics of capitalist excess. But with the Depression depleting people's financial resources, the manufacturing of waste begins to interest even those writers whose social position is one of privilege. After the 1929 market collapse, the "dump" reappears as a symbol of American failed

---

<sup>58</sup> Although I omitted several words in this quotation, I have preserved its original, sparse layout.

progress, but it also emerges as a main site of abundance. Such rubbish, material and human, is what feeds Agee's narrative.<sup>59</sup>

Trash, however, is an extremely fluid category, and I believe it eludes Agee's grip in his narrative on several occasions. Trash is what's left of what's been consumed; it is what's regurgitated, exerted, and made useless. But trash also is, in the Depression era as in our own times, what can be found by chance, and what can be made useful again. Moreover, waste and rubbish, like other things, have a "social life" (Appadurai) and are not finite and static categories. In his work on rubbish, Michael Thompson contends that the analysis of waste is crucial to our understanding of value systems in society and of small- and large-scale social processes, because trash is made, which means that it is produced by certain physical or biological processes as well as social ones. Thus, "to study the social control of value, we have to study rubbish" (10). Thompson divides objects into "transient" and "durable" (7). These very unstable categories have little to do with objects' actual durability. Instead, they refer to the increase or decrease in social value they are imbued with. Transient objects are those whose value gradually decreases, for example an old shoe, until their value reaches zero, at which point they become trash. Durable objects are those that have a steady or increasing social value, such as, for example, a famous artifact, a piece of jewelry, or a wine that ages well.

What interests Thompson, and apparently Agee as well, is the concept of "value transformation," which is the process that increases or decreases the value of a thing, thus allowing garbage to be rediscovered and reused following the prior loss of its cultural value. Theorists of modernity offer a compelling argument about how the category of waste has

---

<sup>59</sup> *My Man Godfrey* (1936) is perhaps one of the more recognizable films of the era about the lucriveness of the dump as well as the financial potential that is vested in a "wasted human," the "tramp" Godfrey whom rich Irene Bullock adopts as her "protégé."

broadened increasingly to include the “human waste”: the poor, racial others, immigrants, migrants, and displaced persons. Zygmunt Bauman points out, for example, that in the connected global world, social systems, just like manufacturing industries, produce an abundance of waste that cannot easily be absorbed, thus becoming a visible problem (*Liquid Times* 41). In Bauman’s view, the production of “human waste” is a function of modern society, and it erodes whatever little human-rights protections that states and international legal apparatuses offer disenfranchised human subjects.

Waste, therefore, as Thompson noted in 1978, is complicated. As in the old adage “one man trash is another man’s treasure,” waste reveals the contradictory processes involved in the making and unmaking of things, and in making them useful: garbage can reveal stages in the “life of a thing”; it can uncover the spheres of influence, and the different spheres of circulation, that gave the same object diverse meanings, and that increased or decreased its value. And if some humans are waste, a by-product of the cotton tenancy system or industrialization, Agee and Evans explore what transforms them into “transient objects” (Thompson 7). However, rubbish as a humans- and things-encompassing category is most useful as a tool of social analysis when fully contextualized and historicized, and Agee and Evans only partly succeed at that.

Their use of human and material refuse as a critical and a narrative apparatus is often undermined by the fact that Agee and Evans value as “human trash” only white tenant families, that is, white, poor farmers who remain in heteronormative sexual and family arrangements.<sup>60</sup> In the process, they ignore the most obvious causes of social disenfranchisement besides poverty, that is, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as how these relate to the agricultural economic

---

<sup>60</sup> Or, at least, are presented as such in *Famous Men*.

system in the South prior to the 1900s. This, in turn, makes their social analysis of the “valuation system” incomplete.

On the one hand, Agee and Evans explore and document humans’ loss of cultural value, but they both also hope that their work, just like the attention Franklin Delano Roosevelt gives to the poor underclass in his speeches, can mark a beginning of the reevaluation of a social system that dehumanizes impoverished persons. In other words, they believe they can generate positive “value transformation,” that they can rehumanize their subjects by pulling them out of the mass garbage pile of “wasted humans,”<sup>61</sup> by replacing the anonymity of the mass poor of the Depression era with visual and textual portraits of specific individuals and families.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, Agee, in particular, was attracted to the concept of garbage accumulation as a counterhegemonic narrative technique. His lists are full of scraps, food, and excrement; his chapters are filled with overheard gossip, multiple voices, descriptions of objects mixed in with reflections and sexual fantasies. All this material reveals for Agee how rubbish can function as a subversive narrative strategy itself, one that can challenge the established aesthetic codes, abolish genre distinctions, and challenge his middle- and upper-class readers’ political and aesthetic conformism. Agee wishes for his book, which he doesn’t want viewed as a work of “art” or a “book,” to be constructed on the basis of such nonhierarchical accumulation, and in ways that differentiate it from more traditional, and thus more hierarchical selections of material. By letting garbage, feces, and lower-class folks into his narrative, Agee makes a powerful

---

<sup>61</sup> Of course, it could be argued that Agee was less interested than his contemporaries such as John Steinbeck, or Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, in producing “propaganda” books that would have an immediate social effect. On the other hand, Agee was religiously devoted to the project that later became *Famous Men*, and considered it the most important writing project of all his *Fortune* assignments.

<sup>62</sup> The white family is the locus of social and national meaning in Agee’s text, eliding all other social formations of humans.

statement not only about the tenants' lives but also about the aesthetic rules that generate cultural value in nonegalitarian ways. He wants his work to include what is customarily excluded from public narratives, and not less importantly, what offends his audiences' tastes.<sup>63</sup>

Yet waste accumulation is neither an innocent process, nor one that can be easily implemented in its idealized, nonhierarchical form as a benign, all-encompassing narrative principle. For one thing, at the time of Agee's work on *Famous Men*, two-thirds of the country's population was an underclass, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt officially confirmed in 1937, which made them more visible and popular as narrative subjects than ever. They were in fact accepted, and popular, literary "topics." During the Depression, the mass, flesh-and-blood poor, were a modern(ist) abundance. But, more importantly, those whom Agee calls "people at the bottom of the world" in his text, the three tenant families, are certainly not at "bottom of the [1930s] world." We can glean from his text (*FM* 203), and the writers of 1989's *And Their Children After Them* confirm in great detail, that the three families were certainly not the "lowest trash [Agee and Evans] could find."<sup>64</sup> But just like the strange absences-presences I have described in reference to unequally distributed material objects in tenant farmers' lives, these narrative omissions, which pass over some types of "human waste" that both Agee and Evans encountered in Alabama, are their narratives' most irrepressible moments.

I feel that some seemingly peripheral episodes in Agee's text and virtual absences in Evans' photo are the spaces within the narrative structure of both that truly reveal the potential,

---

<sup>63</sup> It is ironic that one of the conditions for having *Famous Men* finally published by a Boston publisher, Houghton Mifflin, in 1941, was the removal of words considered obscene by Massachusetts law.

<sup>64</sup> I discussed this project earlier in the chapter. Maharidge and Williamson revisited the original tenant families and their descendants, in an effort to compare their diagnosis of the Southern poor in the 1980s with that of Evans and Agee. In the process, they provided more context of the inner workings of the cotton tenancy system in the 1930s. They also included their own images, alongside the original ones taken by Evans. Importantly, they added photos of black farmers, missing from Evans' photos entirely.

partially lost (or wasted), of waste as a focus, method, and subject of analysis. For example, random meetings with African American farmers, or a chance encounter with a white prostitute are mentioned in *Famous Men* but never fully explored; they also never command as much space in Agee's text as the interactions with tenant families. Agee should be credited with not avoiding the topic of racism altogether, but black tenant farmers, visible in Maharidge and Williamsons' book, are hardly ever present in Agee's text. Agee does discuss black Alabamans at several moments in his work. In "Late Sunday Morning," one of the opening sections of Book Two, he gives a heart-wrenching account of the performance black workers are commanded to give to him (*FM* 25-31). Agee is ashamed that the white landlord interrupts the workers and makes them perform gospel songs and, later, demands that they sing "something with some life" (*FM* 30). Agee knows that blacks experienced much terror in the South and are in no position to refuse the landlord's request. He notes the fright that his very sight causes to the black couple he follows (*FM* 39-43). He spends a bit of time observing black workers from afar (*FM* 93-94); he cites a white farmer's comments about the dangers of "nigrah education"; the farmer, we learn, is "too strong a believah in white syewprency" (*FM* 296-297), much like Agee's own racist host (*FM* 411-412). Eventually, Agee even devotes a paragraph to the white tenants "deliberated cruelty, in relation toward extra-human life and toward negroes, terrible enough to freeze your blood or to break your heart or to propel you to murder" (*FM* 216-217). But nowhere does he pursue the issue of racism and poverty with the relentless scrutiny with which he inspects the white tenants' belongings. Nor does he draw any connections between Alabama's slave-holding past and its current agricultural system, which produce human waste in extremely similar ways. In other

words, blacks are deselected from Agee's human pile, or rubbish. Neither are they present in photos by Walker Evans in the 1941<sup>65</sup> edition of *Famous Men*.

Agee and Evans use similarly selective criteria in their work as it deals with (or doesn't deal with) matters of class stratification, giving some tenant families more narrative space than others. Agee, for example, pays more attention in his text to the Gudgers than to the Woodses and Rickettses because the Gudgers represent an almost perfect detachment from popular and urban culture, and thus are an ideal example of simple, rural folk.<sup>66</sup> In 1989, Gallatin Woods, brother of the Emma Woods whom Agee wrote about in *Famous Men*, quite sternly challenged Agee's account of how he and Evans selected the families. Far from "chanc[ing] upon" Ricketts, Woods, and Gudger (Maharidge and Williamson 57), Agee sought them out. In fact, Agee didn't want to interview Gallatin because Gallatin was "above average" (Maharidge and Williamson 57). Gallatin said of Evans and Agee that

They didn't want anything to do with me . . . I told [Agee] where daddy and his family lived. I told them they would be average. Daddy was poor enough for them. I was making a living. They didn't want to talk to anybody making a living. (qtd. in Maharidge and Williamson 57)

Similarly, women are not at the foreground of Agee's narrative, although their double marginalization within the family and within the economic system of cotton tenancy is quite apparent. Agee describes female members of the three tenant families he met but does not quite account for others he must have met during his two months' stay in Alabama. Farm and domestic labor were the main but not the only work women did in cotton towns of the South. For example, on one of his car rides, Agee passes by prostitutes, yet despite his inquisitiveness, he thinks little

---

<sup>65</sup> They do reappear, as I mention before, in one image in the 1961 edition.

<sup>66</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Agee's bias toward the simple people, see Jeff Allred's chapter "Moving Violations" (93-131).

of what it might mean to be a sex worker, rather than a field worker, in Cherokee City (*FM* 374-385). What follow are quite striking passages enumerating Agee's cravings for tobacco, the "pleasures of speed" (*FM* 375), and, later, his sexual arousal. He says, "[t]here is nothing in the world I wanted so much as a girl, but she must not be a whore or a bitch, nor any girl I know, but a girl nearly new to me" (*FM* 382). He passes on the whore, and his sexual fantasies lead him, surprisingly, to Mr. Gudger, his "protégé" in the language of *My Man Godfrey*. Agee never accounts for how his sexual appetite for commodities, including his craving for a "girl," coincides with his desire for "his poor" (*FM* 385). Nor does he see unmarried Alabama girls, sex workers or not, as anything but fodder for his own sexual fantasies. "I must excuse myself this apparent digression," Agee states apologetically, placing this important episode ever further on the margins of his narrative (*FM* 391). However, this startling passage actually upsets Agee's presegated pile of human waste, mixing diverse humanities, and complicating his neat genealogy of the system that produces human refuse. What I mean is that Agee misses the opportunity to complicate his and Evans' discussion of the reduced, pseudo-human-ness, by disposing of a discussion of gender, race, desire, and production. And yet, this act of disposal that marks the narrative moments I have discussed as narrative trash, so to speak, reveals a "valuation system" that is the logic of Agee's own narrative.

In other words, I am not accusing Agee or Evans of insensitivity to the plight of blacks in the South or to that of prostitutes—there were several reasons why Agee and Evans focused on white tenant farmers and not on black ones, and on the family unit, specifically. I simply want to demonstrate that Agee didn't want to and, given the sponsorship attached to the project, perhaps couldn't carry out his dream of indiscriminate gathering of material, as he quite obviously preselected whom to represent in his narrative. However, this very process of the exclusion of

material, of discarding some of his narrative material, shows the “scales of humanness” he could not or did not want to fully explore.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Agee and Evans searched for documentary subjects with a clear purpose in mind. They wanted to work with those people who were not above “average,” but also not too much “below average.” Even the social underclass in the South was stratified, and Agee and Evans represented white families as those who were the most “wretched,” when in fact they were not. And it is obvious that the awareness of their audience’s expectations, with regard to this choice of subject, influenced their decision to replicate the (near) exclusion of certain social persons on the Alabama cultural landscape in the text and photos.

In 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his Inaugural Address that “[t]he test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” He makes it clear that alleviating poverty and incorporating new political subjects in the Depression era are inseparable processes. They depend on a more or less radical redistribution of material and nonmaterial wealth. Yet, such a redistribution of more goods to more people demands first connecting more people to more people across social boundaries, shortening the distance between those who “have much”—access to new information technology and the political process, as well as taste-making potential—and those who “have too little.”

New Deal documentaries and commercially sponsored work about the poor played an important role in increasing the social intimacy between metropolitan writers and “provincial”

---

<sup>67</sup> Daniel M. Fox provides an interesting overview of the WPA’s *American Guide Series*. He claims that guides describing southern states praised segregation, literally separating sections of text devoted to “white” or “black” cultures, as for example in “White Folkways” versus “Negro Folkways” (11). The racist content of the guides was often censored out by “the Washington FWP office” (12).

subjects, and between metropolitan commodities and simple things. It is interesting therefore to note that Agee and Evans displayed varied degrees of comfort in these close encounters with material objects and with human subjects they perceived to be the social waste of Depression culture. Quite notably, Evans didn't socialize with the tenants and stayed in a local town while on assignment. He also didn't include himself in the photos of "famous men" but is credited with making his subjects actively participate in the shooting process. The end result is a series of portraits as intimate as Agee's most revealing passages about all three families. Agee, on the other hand, decided to live with the tenant families as a participant-observer of sorts: an uninvited guest and an employer at the same time. His initial assumption was that if he lived, slept, and ate with the tenants, he could, for a time, inhabit their social position, and thus shed his own identity and the markers of social status that secured his high position on the stratified scale of humanity. In a sense, he hoped that by increasing his intimacy not only with the families—after all, he could have socialized with the tenants in the fields or in town—but with their material things, food, houses, clothes, sheets, he would become one of them. Things that he hoped would describe the tenants accurately, in other words, should, for a time, alter his own social position and, thus, his narrative point of view.

Yet, toward the end of *Famous Men*, Agee acknowledges that the experiment was not particularly effective; his proximity to material objects didn't have the transformative power he wished it had.

Things which were [before] at least immediate in my senses, I know now only as at some great and untouchable distance; distinctly, yet coldly as through reversed field-glasses, and with no warmth or traction or faith in words . . . . (*FM* 403)

To his credit, Agee treats his own “participant-observer” experience with enough self-conscious scrutiny to notice the limits of his “anthropological” methods. His temporary embeddedness in the households of the three tenant farmers does not instantly produce the kinds of intimacy and knowledge he searches for. The meager objects that the Gudgers “own” and that Agee scrupulously inspects and interacts with do not affect his identity. His humanity remains intact. He finds that it is not the proximity to objects that matters but rather the predetermined relationship one is forced to have with commodities, food, or crops in the Alabama cotton town and in the larger economic and social system, and perhaps as well the affect and desire. Agee’s social position is underwritten by specific rules that guarantee a specific relationship to objects—he can buy things, sell commodities and his labor easily, and his mobility is not limited to a particular geographical location. The tenants lack not only material wealth, and the right to multiply it, but, most importantly, the awareness of the fact that their own subordinate social position is culturally, economically, and politically predetermined.

Agee finds that his naïve self-othering, rather than making him more intimate, actually removes him further from his subjects, who are never misled by his “going native” experiment. He remains an urban writer and a man of privilege to the tenants. Walter Benjamin emphasizes the importance of temporal rather than spatial travel in descriptive projects,<sup>68</sup> and in the end, Agee must leave the families and Alabama in order to regain the panoramic vision that attracted him to the poor tenants and that allowed him to place them on the human map in the first place. Agee can’t see the small- and large-scale forces of dehumanization from his self-imposed banishment to the flea- and lice-infested site of social waste in Hobe’s Hill. In other words, the

---

<sup>68</sup> Walter Benjamin discusses the differences between travelers and natives’ descriptions of city spaces in 1929’s “The Return of the Flâneur,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing*, Volume II, Part I (Jennings et al. 262).

“bottom of the world” where urban writers encounter the poor and their things does not, in Agee’s case at least, provide a more useful vantage point from which to examine the complex forces that make “the human question” so relevant to documentarians of the 1930s.

I have discussed Agee’s critique of journalism and different literary genres. Evans’ attitudes toward the aesthetic requirements within his profession during the New Deal were similarly conflicted; he often worked against the propaganda parameters set up by the New Deal art agencies he worked for. Many modernist documentaries, Depression-era documentaries specifically, were products of conflicting interests and of diverse political ideologies and aesthetics.<sup>69</sup> Quite possibly, such difficult, often hostile collaborations were the most generative narrative force behind these documentaries. Agee was a *Fortune* professional business writer, and Evans had expertise in government PR photography and understood well advertising’s visual language.<sup>70</sup> These skills, both downplayed consistently, made both men more attuned to the “whys” of “social valuation,” the large-scale patterns producing the southern poor; they also made them equally aware of the needs of their audiences.

In other words, some see it as ironic that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* owes its existence to a commission James Agee received in 1932 from *Fortune*, an unashamedly pro-business publication. John Hersey called *Fortune* a “monthly manual of capitalism”<sup>71</sup> (in Agee, *FM* xi), despite its provision of a safe haven for many leftist writers who would have otherwise been impoverished during the Depression (Hart Crane, Dwight McDonald, and Wilder

---

<sup>69</sup> Take, for example, Zora Neale’s Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men*, produced under the influence of Charlotte Osgood Mason and Franz Boas. Or, John Joseph Mathews’ seminal tribal history, *The Osages*, which was sponsored by oil tycoons as well as nonprofit organizations, and so on.

<sup>70</sup> Evans eventually joined *Fortune* permanently in 1945, and he worked there for the next twenty years as a *Fortune* Special Photographic Editor.

<sup>71</sup> For a thumbnail overview of *Fortune* covers celebrating economic and industrial progress and its icons, the car, airplane, skyscraper, etc., see <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/print/fortune/fortunethumbs.html>.

Hobson<sup>72</sup>). A self-declared liberal, Agee wrote to his friend that his *Fortune* job made him alternatively feel “a sort of hard, masochistic liking without enthusiasm or trust,[ or] direct nausea at the sight of this symbol \$ and this % and *this* biggest and this some blank billion.”<sup>73</sup>

Despite his reservations, Agee made a living as a writer for the conservative publications *Fortune* and *Time*,<sup>74</sup> for whom he covered political and business topics. Prior to his Alabama assignment, Agee was encouraged by *Fortune*'s editor, Henry Luce,<sup>75</sup> to “learn how to write about business,”<sup>76</sup> and he certainly did as a *Fortune* staff writer. In the end, Agee wrote a book about the American business of human rights, albeit not a book Luce was likely to appreciate.<sup>77</sup>

Agee and Evans forfeited the opportunity to explore the historical foundations of this business of making social persons, its roots in agrarian practices dependant on slave labor, on the social-spatial segregation of what Mike Davis calls “different humanities” (234), and on the absorption of biological reproduction into the system of production of crops. However, Agee manages to see the contemporary residue of what Michael Thompson defines as “macro levels of social life” in the human and material debris he inspects (93). According to Thompson, this is precisely what the study of refuse can reveal, the social system that underlies the “micro and

---

<sup>72</sup> Hersey, xii.

<sup>73</sup> This quote comes from a letter to Robert Fitzgerald quoted in “James Agee: A Memoir” 599.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Ashdown perceptively notices that despite his disdain for journalism and his socialist sympathies, “Agee spent most of his professional life on the payroll of *Time* and *Fortune*” (xiii).

<sup>75</sup> Henry Luce was one of the most prominent publishers of the twentieth century, the man behind some of the most influential magazines of his times, *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Life*. For more about Luce, consult Alan Brinkley's recent book, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*.

<sup>76</sup> Hersey mentions that Luce offered to pay for Agee to attend Harvard Business School to learn more about business, but Agee declined the offer (in Agee, *FM* xiii). Robert Fitzgerald also confirms this account, describing how Luce, whom he humorously calls Founder, wanted to “combine good writing and ‘human understanding’ with familiarity with business” (“James Agee: A Memoir” 599).

<sup>77</sup> Luce, however, realized that the Depression would last longer than first assumed, and allowed more human-centered articles in 1937 (“Biggest Cotton Plantation”) and in 1939 (“Along the Road”). In addition, he believed that good writers and photographers, regardless of their political affiliations, were crucial to his project of humanizing and popularizing business writing.

macro levels of social life” (93). Agee and Evans know that accumulation constituted of persons and objects in 1930s culture. However, studying human and material waste in Alabama taught Agee not only about the perils of framing human rights in economic terms, especially at the time of volatile market performance of the late 1920s and 1930s. More importantly, he learned that any articulation of universal humanity, any attempt at transforming the tenants into “the human brothers of the reader” (Jessop), is incompatible with an economic system that sustains its power through the logic of individual credit and thus debt. Maurizio Lazzarato argues that widely used debt, such as the one the cotton tenancy system depends on, is not only an “economic technique” that generates wealth (for some), but a technique that produces the illusion of accumulation of wealth, of property, money, and so on, without changing the actual relations between humans and things. As Lazzarato puts it,

[the] transformation of rights into debt or credit is absolutely contradictory because on the one hand [it] impoverishes people . . . and at the same time, it produces the illusion of enriching them through credit. . . . It’s a way of pretending to enrich people without changing the relation to property. (Massumi and Manning, “Grasping the Political”)

Debt and credit,<sup>78</sup> therefore, “produce” and “control subjectivity” as much as they undercut any collectively shared rights.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the cotton tenants of *Famous Men* live under the illusion of home and land ownership. They believe that the farm labor that impoverishes them and defines what they do every day of their lives actually enriches them. As Agee points out, “few tenants pay cash rent” (*FM* 116). All of their transactions are barter of sorts, and in the

---

<sup>78</sup> Johnson et al., the authors of the 1935 cotton tenancy study, used an even more vivid reference to critique the credit system by quoting Louis XIV, who allegedly “observed with grim irony that ‘credit supports agriculture, as the cord supports the hanged’” (25).

<sup>79</sup> There is much debate about what rights are: legal norms and social practices emanating from them, for example. To be effective, they have to be widely legible, enforceable, practiced (Slaughter 1-44). Yet, although human rights can be and are exercised individually, to be effective they must always be, in Lazzarato’s view, shared collectively and equally (Massumi, “Grasping the Political”).

Depression era, most “purchases,” exchanges of food for crops or fertilizer, for example, are done on credit. Agee observes that local landlords encouraged their tenants’ indebtedness during the cotton-growing period, but left impoverished farmers to their own devices during the rest of the year, which included “the worst of weather, the least adequacy of shelter, the worst and least of food [and] the worst of health” (*FM* 117). This strategy (called “furnishing”) relied on landlords providing food rations<sup>80</sup> and other supplies, which were then taken out of the “tenants’ share of the crop” (Johnson et al. 17-18). As the landlord and so-called credit merchants controlled the accounting process, tenants were constantly overcharged fees, and interest. Johnson et al. found out that this was one of the reasons why in 1935 “many tenants had made nothing since World War [I]” (13).

In *Famous Men*, the fortunate Woodses manage to “clear” some money one year, but the Rickettses and Gudgers consistently indebt themselves to their landlords at the end of each year, selling decades of their lives, and of their families’ lives, to the local landowners. Interestingly, Maharidge and Williamson found in 1980<sup>81</sup> that when welfare became more available, contrary to popular belief, most of these families and their descendants refused it. They believed that they did not *deserve* help, and they viewed welfare as credit they couldn’t pay off through labor, rather than as a right.<sup>82</sup>

However poorly they might be living, some people, such as the Ricketts, find welfare repugnant. If any job becomes available to them, they will take the job and perform its

---

<sup>80</sup> Johnson et al. spend considerable time discussing the pandemic malnutrition among the southern tenant farmers. Despite the fertility of the land they cultivate, the cash-crop system discourages local food production, resulting in the tenant families’ dependence on imported food (16-17).

<sup>81</sup> Their book was published in 1989 but the study covered an earlier period.

<sup>82</sup> Maharidge and Williamson found out that “[n]o one in the Ricketts is on welfare or . . . ever was on welfare” (181). Johnson et al. reported in 1935 that landlords were against any New Deal relief being granted to tenants: “forty percent of the landlords in [their] study . . . were opposed to the granting of relief to [sharecroppers] because of its demoralizing effect upon them . . .” (59).

duties with blind fervor, no matter how they may be exploited in the job. (Maharidge and Williamson 281)

Agee describes his cotton tenants as having little understating of the fact that their economic and social situation is produced through large-scale systems and processes (speculation, cotton overproduction, a slavery-like labor regime, fraudulent credit practices, and so on). Moreover, they do not recognize themselves as a collective group whose preestablished relationships to property, geographical space, and access to credit, as much as the “alienation of labor” laws, produce their destitution and seal their fate as a social underclass. Agee, not unlike other documentarians of the time, suggests that the unavailability of self- and group-consciousness is both the cause and effect of the economic oppression. Agee thus emerges from his own text as the only receptacle of social consciousness, and the only fully individuated and socialized subject of *Famous Men*.<sup>83</sup>

Agee repeats the choruslike refrain “How is it we were caught?”<sup>84</sup> like a mantra throughout “A Country Letter” (see pages 80, 81, 91), but the mantra’s implications never rise to the level of consciousness for Agee’s subjects. Even so, an answer to this question appears when Agee collects local gossip: “Give [the tenant families] money and all they’ll do it is throw it away” (*FM* 80). Another anonymous voice sees a clear connection between debt and the tenants’ being. In fact, debt is listed as one of the tenants’ human and personal characteristics, just like their personalities, intelligence, grooming habits, and sexual performance. “Tell you the honest truth,” an unidentified voice in Agee’s text says, “they owe us a big debt. Now you just tell me,

---

<sup>83</sup> Again, he proceeds with such an argument, despite his initial disclaimers and hesitations about his privileged role of observer, and despite his efforts to pick his documentary subjects, precisely from one a group considered most trapped in the debt economy of cotton tenancy.

<sup>84</sup> Possibly, these are Annie Mae Gudger’s utterances, although Paula Rabinowitz captions them nicely as “Agee, as Annie Mae” (52).

if you can, what would all those folk be doing if it wasn't for us?" (*FM* 80). Although the questions and answers scattered throughout Agee's text involve mostly possible conversations between Agee and Evans and the locals talking about the three families—it is never clear if the Gudgers, Woodses, or Rickettses really are unable to answer questions asked of them, or if Agee produces the lack of comprehension in his narrative.

Evans and Agee are still attentive to collection and selection, as social and narrative practices that not only produce economic wealth, generate value that is economic, political, cultural, as well as human, but also affect the way people make meaning out of their social situation. Agee and Evans understand that the uneven accumulation practices that apply to modernist commodities—keepsakes, inanimate matter, and crops—apply to human persons similarly and have a huge impact on individual and group subjectivity. They want to resist the voracious accumulation that swallows up modern commodities and “wasted humans” (Bauman); but they also want to avoid the credit-debt narrative methods that mirror oppressive economic techniques.

However, accumulation itself is not only uneven, but heterogeneous. It signifies differently in diverse social realms, genres, and media. On the one hand, there is the discriminate gathering common among art collectors and various upper-class cultural elites concerned with artifacts and “rare and curious objects.”<sup>85</sup> This kind of accumulation is, in principle, extremely selective and thus utterly undemocratic. On the other hand, there is indiscriminate accumulation, such as garbage collection, but also the capitalist multiplication of wealth, and even the nonhierarchical and mechanical accumulation facilitated by new technologies of mass culture. These processes obviously are not discrete or autonomous, and neither are they uniformly

---

<sup>85</sup> Krzysztof Pomian 115-116 (qtd. in Franco Moretti 3).

democratic or undemocratic. And part of the conundrum that Agee and Evans face with their project, and only partly succeed in solving, is how to expose the unequal distribution of wealth and the resulting cultural and political absences that dehumanize persons, without using disempowering narrative strategies. Agee and Evans worry as much about representational modes native to high art, ethnography, and journalism's representations of the poor or the folk, as they do about the ones embedded in the American economic system at the time. Thus, the prose section of the "documentary book . . . to end all documentary books"<sup>86</sup> naively picks up garbage accumulation as a narrative strategy, in response and in opposition to other forms of accumulation that were legible, and acceptable, to Agee's different audiences: the literati and business readers in American metropolitan centers in the 1930s and 1940s.

In other words, Agee and Evans, in their powerful cultural portraits of the tenant families, attack the undemocratic principles of collection and of taste-making that, to Agee and Evans' outrage, are applied equally to objects and people and that can increase and decrease the status of both depending on the fluctuation of the market. Ideally, this attack could be carried out successfully if their photo-book followed the logic of a garbage dump, rather than that of a piece of art, or a journal article, or a capitalist accumulation. Yet, Agee and Evans' hunt for representatives of the American "disposed," that is, "the lowest trash you can find" (*FM* 79), their very effort to show the tenants' humanity through words and images, fails to elevate garbage collection as the most effective narrative technique of personification. Neither can they work into the project a logic of fair reciprocity, of even exchange. Both Agee and Evans, in different ways, engage in highly selective, not random, narrative techniques: Evans in his

---

<sup>86</sup> Kazin 495.

“remnants”<sup>87</sup> of photos (*FM* 404), and Agee through his carefully constructed pre-segregated textual garbage dump. We know what Agee and Walker gain from their Alabama trip, but all they return to the tenants is the book with its strangely inadequate dedication, “To those of whom the record is made. In gratefulness and in love.” Thus, the main achievement of *Famous Men* might be just its effort, its not fully successful interrogation of the ethics of accumulation, and of the ethics of waste and value production.

The market collapse of 1929 made visible the effects of the articulation of human rights in relation to the ownership of things. During the economic crisis of the 1930s human persons were instantly rendered “transient objects” and even “trash” as a result of political and economic forces they had no control over. The emergence of twentieth-century consumer culture, and specifically of the American consumer culture I discussed in my introduction to section one, was closely tied to the emergence of inabsorbable amounts of waste. According to Paul Mazur, the only way to sustain American economic domination is through the production of insatiable consumer appetite for the new. In his words, only through the manufacturing of products’ “obsolescence,” through ensuring that things would be discarded long before they were actually used up, would the national economy and American cultural power grow.<sup>88</sup> “Only as a consuming nation can we remain a producing one,” he argues (*Standard We Raise* ix). He sees America as a “nation that consumes its way to property, security, prosperity, and freedom” (ix). Pre-market crash abundance in American culture, the mass production of modern commodities, as much as the overproduction of cotton, were shadowed by an ever-growing, mass-produced national, human and material, garbage dump. In the Depression era, human and material waste

---

<sup>87</sup> Agee actually uses this phrase to describe his own work, which, according to him, transforms from a beautiful painting into a movie clip.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Mazur, *American Prosperity* 54.

was what was left of the 1920s' abundance. It was no accident, therefore, that refuse proved so meaningful to Evans and Agee as a cultural metaphor, and that they traveled to the rural wasteland of American society in search of human "waste" to collect, inspect, display, and humanize for metropolitan audiences.

But even though Evans and Agee narrate things and persons by managing excess and shortage of objects in opposite ways, and not fully successfully, the end product of their collaboration reveals and juxtaposes different modes of accumulation, and the role they play in the aesthetic personification of the three families, and in the personification and humanization of people *like* them in Depression culture, allows us to reconstruct a "social valuation system" that constituted people and things equally. Agee and Evans might not have found a fully satisfactory idiom with which to present their subjects' stories to metropolitan audiences,<sup>89</sup> or to reveal unmediated matter in their photojournalistic project. They do manage, however, to display and examine the ways in which processes governing shortage and abundance of material objects at the time—agricultural production, waste accumulation, debt, and their own removal of narrative matter—constituted the social identities and social roles of both persons and things in 1930s culture and in their own work. In the context of an economic crisis that multiplied the population of the unemployed or underemployed poor, Agee and Evans reveal the power that the scarcity and excess of things, of people, and of narrative exercised over human subjects of the 1930s American economy and culture.

---

<sup>89</sup> And they certainly weren't successful in persuading *Fortune's* editor, Henry Luce, to run it in his magazine in 1936. The first edition of *Famous Men* sold barely over one thousand copies. John Hersey notes that it sold less than seven hundred copies in the first year (in Agee, *FM* xxxii).

CHAPTER FOUR:

“Biology of America”: “Human-nonhuman assemblages”

in John Joseph Mathews’ *Talking to the Moon*<sup>1</sup>

*Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others.*

—Jane Bennet<sup>2</sup>

*Theoretically, I own the house and should be able to do any damn thing I want to it, subject only to the feelings of my family and the laws of the state. But, of course, I can’t. The wretched house is simply too good-looking and constantly humiliates me.*

—Daniel Miller<sup>3</sup>

It is not exactly clear what propelled John Joseph Mathews, an Oklahoma-born, Osage American author, to abandon his international travels, his careers as a geologist and, later, as a real estate agent in Los Angeles, to return to Pawhuska, settle down in the blackjacks,<sup>4</sup> and pursue a writing career. He liked to claim that it was his North African epiphany that led to his return to the Osage reservation in Oklahoma. In an interview with Guy Logsdon, he described the profound impression the North African Bedouins had made on him during one of his hunting trips in Africa (Logsdon 71). The Bedouins reminded him of the Osage warriors, Mathews said,

---

<sup>1</sup> I will be referring to the 1945 edition of *Talking to the Moon* as *TM* 1945 and to the 1981 edition as *TM* 1981 throughout this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> *Vibrant Matter* 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> *Stuff* 94.

<sup>4</sup> Blackjack oaks are native plants, very common in the Oklahoma and Texas territories. Ironically, they grow in poor soil, the same soil that eventually turned out to be extremely rich in mineral resources, and that was a source of the Osages’ tremendous wealth in the 1920s.

and that encounter with their culture sparked in him a desire to return to his native Osage County to reclaim his Native American identity and cultural heritage.

The Osage reservation in Oklahoma, however, was in a lot of ways unlike any other aboriginal reservation in the United States at the time. Overrun by “exploiters of oil . . . [who] had come, like Cortés, to get rich,” the overpopulated reservation was a site of accelerated industrialization, and ethnic violence (Mathews, *The Osages* 776). The Osage endured decades of socioeconomic and political discrimination and were nearly exterminated by the end of nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> After being removed from what is now Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas, they purchased their current reservation land in Oklahoma from the Cherokees in 1865. When they moved to what seemed at the time to be “worthless acreage”<sup>6</sup> with “not even an ear of corn,” nobody could have imagined that the land itself would turn the Osage into the richest aboriginal community in the world by the 1920s (Glasscock 147).<sup>7</sup> C. B. Glasscock wrote in *Then Came Oil* that “for a century the Osage tribe had been pushed along the downgrade by the United States government. And by the irony of fate, from the depths of its barren lands and its tribal degradation it [finally] drew a prize . . .” of “black gold” (147). In 1925 alone, he noted, “every individual of the Osage Nation with originally assigned or inherited rights . . . [was] to draw a minimum of \$13, 200 from oil” (147).

The Osage opposed the Dawes Act and postponed its execution until 1906, unlike other, less-fortunate tribes forced to proceed with the allotment, that is, privatization of communal

---

<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, 95% of the original population made it across the Trail of Tears. According to the Osage Nation website, only 3,000 Osages settled in Oklahoma ([http://www.osagetribe.com/main\\_culture\\_overview.aspx](http://www.osagetribe.com/main_culture_overview.aspx)). According to Luis F. Burns, the Osage population declined from 17,000 in 1680 to 3,500 in 1860 (243).

<sup>6</sup> Other historians differ in their assessment of the Oklahoma land. Terry P. Wilson suggested that the land itself was not entirely “worthless,” but, of course, nobody had predicted the existence of its subsurface wealth in the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> “Indians’ Wealth Ebbs with Oil” x11.

lands. As a result, aware that mineral resources had been discovered on their reservation, the Osage negotiated a particularly important exclusion from the privatization. No mineral resources were to be privatized or "allotted," and any profits derived from mineral resources were to be divided equally among all members of the tribe as listed on the 1906 tribal roll, or their descendants (Wilson, *The Underground Reservation* 92). As Luis F. Burns points out, it was an absolutely unique legal and political agreement, one that "led to a new concept in American Indian law" (400). He emphasizes that "[n]ever before had American law allowed Indian allotment on the basis of separating the surface ownership from mineral ownership." Thus, from the early 1900s until the market crash, the annual income of Osage citizens would range between \$12,000 and \$15,000.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Osage reservation in Oklahoma was in the national spotlight, represented as a land of plenty, a land unfortunately, in many writers' opinion, also populated with many "incompetent" Indians. Hostile references to Oklahoma Osage appeared in most national papers in the 1920s and 1930s, consistently chastising Osages' lavish lifestyles and spending habits,<sup>9</sup> accusing Osages, who apparently didn't *deserve* their wealth, of spending money on planes, cars, and expensive jewelry. A 1929 article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, with the screaming headline "Brave Pays \$2000 for Clock to Chime His Reservation Tepee," was a typical example of such journalistic work. The *Washington Post* ran ads for land leases, and the *New York Times* documented all land sales and oil companies' profits, and proclaimed the Osage the

---

<sup>8</sup> This would be between \$144,530 and \$166,766 in 2011 US dollars. In his 1920 article in *Harper's Magazine*, William Shepherd noted that some Osages who inherited more than one "share" would earn as much as President Wilson that year (724).

<sup>9</sup> It is fascinating that overconsumption, so revered in the 1920s, was still considered a racial and national privilege. While overconsumption was encouraged for women, it was certainly not viewed as appropriate for racial or ethnic minorities. Although women were thought to perform an important civic and national role through their consuming of modern commodities, the Osage were not.

“wealthiest tribe in the world” (“Oil Makes Osages of Northern Oklahoma Richest Indian Community in the World”).

However, the discovery of oil on the Osage reservation in Oklahoma called by Glasscock the “most ironic practical joke played . . . upon the government and taxpayers of the United States”<sup>10</sup> (146) proved to be a mixed blessing for the Osage. The new income allowed the tribe to survive at a time when federal policy and local corruption aimed literally to starve the population of reservations.<sup>11</sup> However, the 1920s, known in the mainstream culture as the Roaring Twenties, were called the period of Great Frenzy<sup>12</sup> or, even more emphatically, the Reign of Terror<sup>13</sup> on the Osage reservation. The promise of easy “oil money” brought to the reservation all kinds of speculators, criminals, drug dealers, murderers, dishonest lawyers, bankers, and merchants, all of whom were interested in stripping the Osage of their “headrights” (shares of profits from mineral resources divided based on the 1906 census). It was common practice to assign guardians to the legally “restricted Indians”<sup>14</sup> (Mathews, *Sundown* 235-236). In practice, such “guardians” not only didn’t protect the estates of Osages but in fact extorted money from Osages through various forms of manipulation, abuse, and even murder.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> While sympathetic to the Osage, Glasscock’s comments echo some of the language of incredulity that marked much of mainstream writing about the Osage. In fact, it is important to remember that the Osage’s gain at the turn of the century was primarily the Cherokee’s—not the US government’s—loss.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, historical accounts of the Chippewa tribe’s starvation at the turn of the century (David Miller et al. 178-179; 214).

<sup>12</sup> John Joseph Mathews, *Sundown* 266, 304, 305.

<sup>13</sup> Terry P. Wilson, *Underground Reservation* 145-146.

<sup>14</sup> Again, the terms and the practice were applied equally to orphaned Osages as well as to adult Osages considered “incompetent.” However, the characteristics of incompetency were fluid and applied mainly to those Osages who had money. Mathews mentions, for example, that Mr. Abbot “was given a certificate of competency by the Secretary of Interior” (*TM* 1981, 131).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Osage murders during this period, consult books by Lawrence Logan and Dennis McAuliffe. Mathews’ novel *Sundown* is also a fictional account of widespread murder of Osage tribal members.

Thus, it was interesting that Mathews described his decision to return to Pawhuska to preserve whatever was left of traditional Osage culture in language identical to that of such white globetrotting modernist primitivists as Paul Gauguin, Robert Flaherty, or William B. Seabrook, who dreamt of escaping the corruption of white man's civilization to rediscover "pure" aboriginal cultures after a trip to the tropics, the desert, or the Arctic. In a similar vein, Mathews mused: "Why not go back to the Osage? They've got *culture*" (emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup> Whatever Mathews' motives, his decision paid off: his first book, *Wah'Kon Tah or the White Man's Road*, became a Book-of-the-Month selection in 1932; he won Guggenheim awards to conduct research on Native Americans in Mexico;<sup>17</sup> and later he became a well-known tribal historian of the Osage.

However, Mathews' return and especially his writing are of particular interest to me. Not only was Mathews part Osage, but the Osage were not among the impoverished aboriginal communities twentieth-century primitivists were normally attracted to. As members of the richest aboriginal nation in the world,<sup>18</sup> early-twentieth-century Osages, as I described above, were not much like the North African Bedouins. They "had culture" but they also had oil money.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, choosing to write about the Osage ("who had culture") rather than to follow

---

<sup>16</sup> Logsdon 71.

<sup>17</sup> Mathews received Guggenheim fellowships twice, in 1939 and 1940.

<sup>18</sup> See "Oil Makes Osages of Northern Oklahoma the Richest Indian Community in the World," published in the *New York Times*, 21 May 1923.

<sup>19</sup> In his later book, *The Osages*, Mathews notes that the tribes' oil royalties plummeted from \$13,000 in 1925 to \$715 in 1932 (775). There were several reasons for this. With the collapse of global markets came a decrease in overall production and investment, and thus also in oil extraction. Louis F. Burns suggests that the poor economic situation made it unprofitable to drill new wells, and "wildcatters could not get financing to drill exploratory wells" (433-434). Moreover, there were also many "aging wells" on the reservation that became "stripper" wells, that is, wells producing "less than ten barrels a day" (Burns 434). Such "marginal wells were the first to shut down" in the climate of economic depression, making it very expensive to reactivate them later (Burns 434). However, it is important that at a time when Alabama sharecroppers had to survive on less than \$20 a year, Osage Depression incomes of \$700 a year were still very high.

the several other paths open to him<sup>20</sup> meant for Mathews a return to Oklahoma oil-boom towns, to the most overdeveloped, least “pure,” or unadulterated, landscapes in the United States at the time. Thus, whatever the nature of Mathews’ primitivist fantasies about Osage culture, the facts on the ground in Pawhuska belied them. With the discovery of oil on the Osage reservation in Oklahoma,<sup>21</sup> Pawhuska was radically transformed. Shady financial transactions, overindustrialization, environmental degradation, violent ethnic tensions, drug trafficking, and murder of full-blood Osages<sup>22</sup> were elements of that transformation.

Mathews handled this depressing reality differently in his Pawhuska-related book projects. His earliest book, *Wah’Kon Tah* (1932), a documentary rewriting of the diaries of an Indian Agent, Major Laban J. Miles,<sup>23</sup> was devoted to the period in Osage history before the discovery of oil. Mathews’ second book, his first and only novel, *Sundown* (1934),<sup>24</sup> was a semiautobiographical book about the Great Frenzy. Mathews’ third book, *Talking to the Moon* (1945), marked a return to documentary conventions. This time, however, Mathews, who was

---

<sup>20</sup> Mathews came from one of the wealthiest families in Pawhuska. A cosmopolitan fluent in Osage, English, and French, he traveled extensively all over the world. He attended the University of Oklahoma, where he specialized in geology, received a degree from Oxford University with training in natural sciences, and earned a certificate from the School of International Relations in Geneva. Mathews was also a World War I pilot, a writer, a real estate agent in Los Angeles, and a correspondent for the *Philadelphia Ledger* (Ruoff 6-7).

<sup>21</sup> The first well was drilled in 1857, but it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1897 and 1901) that oil was extracted commercially in Oklahoma. See Mathews, *The Osages* 772.

<sup>22</sup> I am using the terms full-blood and mixed-blood to denote Osage and multiracial Osage. The term, while obviously a product of racist, colonialist policies, was in wide use in the early twentieth century and continues to be used by Native Studies scholars (Warrior; Ruoff; Parker; Deloria) for historical purposes.

<sup>23</sup> This documentary experiment brought Mathews popular and critical acclaim. The book was a fascinating collaboration between the white governmental official, Miles, an Osage-American writer, Mathews, and scores of tribal elders whose oral narratives Mathews incorporated into his work. It was very unusual in the way it subverted generic conventions of such white–Indian collaborations, as in this case, it was Mathews, an Osage-American intellectual, who was transcribing the work of an Indian Agent, not the other way around.

<sup>24</sup> *Sundown* is a very unusual project in Mathews’ literary career as it is the only book in which he tackles the period of the “great frenzy” and of the “reign of terror” on the Osage reservation, directly and explicitly. All his other works turn to the Osage past and Pawhuska’s nature.

obviously searching for a new narrative idiom and a new lens through which to approach Osage culture, chose nature study.<sup>25</sup> While to some the book might seem to have been simply about “wildlife adventures,”<sup>26</sup> Mathews was intent on producing a “biology of America,” one that opened the category of nature to encompass humans and nonhumans, modern commodities, mineral resources, and plants (*TM* 1981, 227). More importantly, however, in *Talking to the Moon* Mathews wanted to interrogate how social identities of people are constructed simultaneously through diverse modes of interaction with different kinds of matter. Specifically, his nature study examines how ownership, technological and biophysical environmental interventions, and cultural reproduction constitute Osage and non-Osage subjects. Thus, his book, apparently focused on Pawhuska nature, seemingly isolated from the realities of tribal and transitional politics, in fact examines how property, land, material resources, and documentary modes of cultural representation produce and erase social personhood of people in the context of American colonization of Native American lands.

In the first part of the twentieth century, Native Americans, regardless of their tribal origins, were typically defined in mainstream American culture by their material poverty, by the richness of their cultural traditions (and yet lack of “civilization”), by their supposed spiritual relationship with the land, and by their simultaneous incompatibility with modernist commodities. At the same time, the Osage (who emerged in the national consciousness as a unique tribe at the turn of the century) were described in ways that challenged such widely held assumptions about US aboriginal populations. The Osage were perceived as a cultural aberration of sorts. Oil, and the material abundance it brought, defined Osage-ness in popular culture, and

---

<sup>25</sup> All of Mathews’ subsequent books were documentaries, dealing with the history of the Osage, Oklahoma, and the oil industry there.

<sup>26</sup> The reedition of the book from 1981 was advertised as such, for example.

in the 1930s, Mathews worked to produce a narrative that would account for the ways the Osage, citizens of a semiautonomous state within a state, were produced not only by outside economic, political, and cultural forces, but also by forces that emanated both from within the local biophysical environment and from within their distinctly Osage cultural practices. Most importantly, however, Mathews aimed to focus on laws of natural sciences to redefine concepts of change, progress, and humanness and nonhumanity in distinctly transnational, transracial, and transethnic, global ways.

*Talking to the Moon* covers ten years of Mathews' life in Pawhuska, but focuses primarily on a careful study of the blackjacks ecosystem, animal behaviors, soil properties, changes of seasons, and Mathews' own interventions in the local ecosystem. In that, his project stands out among his other more obviously historiographical books about Osage culture and the reservation, blending his historicist practices with his training in natural science to develop a new way of writing persons and nonpersons, Osage and oil, men and environment, citizens and property, Indian and white men into the American and Osage literary traditions into one "biology of America" (*TM* 1981, 227). And it is this peculiar book of nature, seemingly uninvolved in the Osage and Washington politics of the time, seemingly not concerned about the juridicopolitical, technological, and economic processes through which the Osages were made and unmade as Osage and US citizens in the 1920s and 1930s to which I devote this final chapter.

*Talking to the Moon* is an autobiographical account of the decade Mathews spent in Pawhuska but it tracks other temporalities as well: cyclical changes of seasons, according to both the Western calendar and Osage moon cycles. The book begins with Mathews' account of his choosing land to settle on and building a house, and then proceeds with descriptions of farming, hunting and, sporadically, his interactions with local Osages, incoming laborers, and visitors. But

all these happenings and changes that traditionally mark narrative progression are compressed in *Talking* so as always to repeat the four Western weather seasons and the twelve Osage moon phases. The story of ten years of environmental changes, in other words, is told as an always repeating but also always changing twelve-month cycle. Mathews occasionally intersperses his descriptions of the natural world with philosophical reflections on global politics, World War II, the Osage and Christian religions, the colonization of North America, and what it means to be Osage. Yet, nothing in Mathews' documentary nature study is conclusive. He records minutia of change, the growth of plants, his own aging, the deaths of his animals, Euro-Americans' territorial aggression, and yet, although everything evolves, his biology of people and nonhumans never turns into an optimistic narrative of progress.

On one level, then, the book resembles projects by primitivists who escaped urban centers to immerse themselves in supposedly uncontaminated nature and culture. Predictably, Mathews states in the opening chapter that “[he] came to the blackjacks as a man who had pulled himself out of the roaring river of civilization . . . ; out of the flood where formerly only [his] head had been above the surface (*TM* 1981, 3-4). Yet, Mathews' book also modifies primitivist paradigms. Nature is the platform from which to examine concrete fabrications of humans and nonhumans that are social but also biophysical. It is true that unlike *Sundown, Talking to the Moon* seems to be removed from the actual concerns of the 1930s reservation and Oklahoma oil industry but Mathews' examination of nature is not entirely escapist; his project is not an exercise in self-indulgent primitivist pastoralism. Mathews turns to biology because he hopes that, paradoxically, it can give him ways of “accounting” for the environmental, social, political, and economic processes of change ravaging Pawhuska and the national economy at the same time (*TM* 1981, 12). He uses it, too, as a way to cut across diverse discourses about persons and

objects, primitivism, nationalism, consumerism, social Darwinism, and communism, which in the early twentieth century reimagined the construction of personhood and political identities of different social groups with regard to property, nature, and cultural representation.

In other words, Mathews' work, influenced by his training in natural sciences, is meticulous in its descriptions and actual illustrations of the natural world.<sup>27</sup> But such documenting of the physical environment, including its transformative processes, is not for him an excuse to avoid issues of culture: contemporary tribal and national politics, the history of the American colonization of indigenous peoples, and, particularly, early-twentieth-century exploitation of the natural environment.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Mathews uses documentary, a genre traditionally preoccupied with the recording of material culture, not to wave "the banner of truth" (*TM* 1981, 3), but to allow the recording of the physical, embodied world around him in ways that can reveal the "strangeness"<sup>29</sup> and yet permanence of the processes that implicate the object world, matter in the social identity of persons, and vice versa.

It seems that, in the midst of the Depression, Mathews feels the epistemologies of both history and fiction (*bildungsroman*) that he employed earlier fall short of accounting for the unprecedented social transformations taking place on and off reservation. The narrative forms he used in his earlier work (*Wah'Kon Tah* and *Sundown*) privilege an anthropocentric understating of "world-systems."<sup>30</sup> With *Talking to the Moon*, Mathews senses that it's time to focus on the

---

<sup>27</sup> *Talking to the Moon* includes twenty-six drawings by Mathews himself. The black-and-white sketches precede each chapter and are often inserted in the middle of them as well. They seem very ascetic and realistic in their representation of animals, plants, or Osage. None, however, is overtly technical or scientific; they all seem to have the transient quality of a rough sketch to them.

<sup>28</sup> He finds fascinating "[t]he fact that [he] had lived to see the end of period . . . when the exploitation of natural resources of a continent had reached a saturation point, under the berserk methods of economically, socially, and politically liberated Europeans called Americans . . ." (*TM* 1981, 15).

<sup>29</sup> Jeff Allred sees the "strangeness" of Depression documentaries as their most significant quality (7), a feature of the distinctive "interruptive aesthetic of documentary modernism" (7).

<sup>30</sup> Wallerstein.

agency of matter itself,<sup>31</sup> the power of objects, the nonhuman, built environment, entire ecosystems, such seemingly inanimate matter such as mineral resources, and finally, modernist commodities, to effect change. “Each year several blackjacks die, owing to wind, lighting, or draught,” Mathews begins in one such passage that transforms from a naturalist depiction of the local ecosystem into a theory of human and nonhuman relations beyond the scope of Pawhuska (*TM* 1981, 53). Blackjacks, he continues,

Are blasted . . . in late spring or during the summer, but they usually do not actually die until midsummer. They express hope, too, in their attempts to bloom . . . There is one old post oak on the west point that has been declining for the last ten years, but still puts out his tassels each Planting Moon. But each year the tassels on the higher limbs wither in midsummer and do not have the vitality to bloom the succeeding spring, and thus his vitality retreats from the crown downward, until the lower limbs are only capable of putting dark-green leaves . . . This old post oak is my Symbol Tree. The evidence of his mortality, a disintegration which I can see from season to season, gives me comfort and returns me that sense of importance which I lost after coming to the ridges to live; that swaggering importance of Homo Sapiens fresh from the magic of steel and concrete.

He also serves as a concrete example of the relationship of all things that spring from the earth and helps to anchor my thoughts about man’s relationship to man and to the earth from which he sprang. (*TM* 1981, 53-55)

Thus, Mathews studies matter and nature not in a primitivist, romanticized way, as simply precultural. Through nature, Mathews manages to reconnect with his human-ness as it is partially produced by the “magic of steel and concrete” (*TM* 1981, 55). The oak allows him to ponder the relationship between not only vegetation and decay, tree and man, but also between people and oil, that most obvious thing that literally “springs from earth” on the Osage reservation at the time (*TM* 1981, 55). Later he will deconstruct nature, a seemingly self-evident category that was indispensable to the twentieth-century articulations of Indians, even further. He

---

<sup>31</sup> My understanding of matter and agency is deeply indebted to Jane Bennett’s discussion of the vitality of matter in her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

wants to dissect the complexity of nature's many "regimes," the purely "organic," man-manufactured, "Fordist" nature, as well as the "technonature," a product of technological interventions into the environment (Escobar 1).<sup>32</sup>

The recognition of the multiplicity of nature's formations allows Mathews to closely record matter's transformative, evolutionary power, "the natural *raison d'être* of mad whirlpools," as he calls it, and the way in which matter constitutes and interacts with persons (*TM* 1981, 4). Thus, nature in *Talking* is central to Mathews' argument about the person-thing dilemma; nature is also and always already political, economic, mechanized, and cultural. Thus, Mathews is interested in a "biology of America" (*TM* 1981, 227), one that "circle[s] indecisively" (55) between the particular and large-scale details, between the "biophysical" (Escobar 1) and the political and cultural. His biological theory incorporates realms considered to be beyond the reach of the discipline's explanatory power, such as political ecology, tribal cosmology, colonialism, imperialism, and technological revolution. He searches for the causes of current-day political conflicts through an interrogation of the particular (individual person, rock,

---

<sup>32</sup> Arturo Escobar calls for the understanding of different "regimes of nature": organic, capitalist, and technonatures. He emphasized the need for recognition of the ways in which nature is a discursive category without denying its biophysical reality (1). "Worldwide, the transformation of the biological is yielding a great variety of the natural . . . As much as identities, natures can be thought of as hybrid and multiform . . . [depending on] a place and a set of cultural and social practices" (2). The capitalist nature, Escobar argues is, "uniform, legible, manageable, harvestable, and Fordist" (7). The organic nature is a regime in which "nature and culture are not separated ontologically" (7). Moreover, it's important not to romanticize the relationship between nature and aboriginality, especially in the context of the US policies of forced removal. I am very grateful for an anonymous speaker's comments during the American Literature Association in Boston in 2008. She pointed out the inherent irony in contemporary criticism that doesn't distinguish between different types of nature, and specifically "land" (or different kinds of relationships with land). In such a view, all Native Americans appear to have a spiritual connection to nature, even if the land they inhabited in the twentieth century was reservation land, often perceived by displaced tribal members as the land of extermination camps.

or tree branch) and the communal (community, species, race, social class). He explores these as alternative modes of the social-identity production of both objects and human persons.<sup>33</sup>

His biology then gestures toward other modernist primitivizations of culture common in international high art and national arts of the New Deal, in that it searches for new models of social organization. Mathews' project, however, forges connections not between the metropolitan "us" and exotic "them"—he, as the central character, is both one of "us" and one of "them"—but between matter and humans. Most importantly, he doesn't place nature, history, or aboriginality in the "trap" of "timelessness," which Rasheed Araeen describes as "a static condition characterized and contained by . . . ethnic, tribal, unconscious traditional modes of existence" (8). Instead, Mathews' work traces the development of environmental and cultural transformations as inseparable, defying the hierarchical and explicitly Western fetishization of progress. In Mathews, "change" is not "Western progress." It is "progression"; leading to decay, it is a "chain of events . . . one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage . . .," which is how Walter Benjamin defines historical progress ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Arendt 257-258). It is the "violent storm" that produces the ever-growing "pile of debris" (Benjamin in Arendt 258), and the inescapable death-drive and "mortality" of things and persons (but not of the "system") (*TM* 1981, 29).

Unlike James Agee, whose religious upbringing and socialist sympathies shaped his understanding of modern material objects as perversely powerful when in the hands of corporate powerbrokers,<sup>34</sup> Mathews sees more agency in things, nature, and inanimate matter. To

---

<sup>33</sup> Robert Warrior discusses the tensions these two concepts produce in the Native American intellectual tradition in his "Intellectual Sovereignty," which later was published as a chapter of his *Tribal Secrets* (87-126).

<sup>34</sup> I discuss James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in chapter three.

Mathews, their power is often intensified or limited by human interaction, but that power does not derive simply from human intervention, or human-produced practices of cultural signification. Mathews' empiricism—his focus on the natural world, on Osage material culture, and on the methods of natural sciences—is an attempt to explore the issue of human-objects' co-fabrication. This co-fabrication, in Mathews view, is both universal, that is, subject to large-scale bioevolutionary processes worldwide, and locally performed and produced. He focuses equally on particular instances of person–thing connections that apply to multicultural and multiracial social persons such as himself, and on the large-scale connections of things en masse: oil, water, food to the Osage, marginalized social groups and classes (the Okies, workers), and other modernist “crowds.”<sup>35</sup>

As I said before, Native Americans, like other politically marginalized social groups at the time, were constructed as social persons differently in different cultural contexts. In American legal discourse, Native Americans across tribal differences were featured as pseudopersons and semicitizens, whose full participation in American politics was impossible because of their presumed inability to handle modernist commodities and to engage effectively in the right kind of relationship with commodities (private, individual, ownership of property). On the other hand, in simplistic primitivizations that longed for the incorporation of Native Americans into the larger national culture, it was the romanticized relationship between Native Americans and land, as well as cultural artifacts, that constituted their social identity: “Indians” were “of nature,” so to speak.<sup>36</sup> *Talking to the Moon* can be understood, then, as an important

---

<sup>35</sup> For an example, see Mathews' discussion of Steinbeck's Okies and the “unnatural crowding of men” in the industrializing societies (*TM* 1981, 16, 15). Also, see Gustave Le Bon's turn of the century classic, *The Crowd*.

<sup>36</sup> It seems that one of the most common ideological programs in the West was systematic falsification of the relationship between the material world and the colonized or otherwise oppressed social groups.

project with twentieth-century discussions of persons and things in that it seeks to articulate “human-nonhuman assemblages”<sup>37</sup> through a biological materialism that accounts for these prior formulations of Native American personhood, but also goes beyond their limitations. In other words, Mathews’ documentary still drew from a rich tradition of American nonfiction, which dealt with things and Native persons, while exploring personhood through a uniquely detailed recording and analysis of the material world in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. In a sense the Osage reservation was a prime space from which to contemplate the whimsical processes of humanization and objectification occurring in American culture. Pawhuska was a unique geopolitical space, both within and outside American national borders; a land crucial to farming and indispensable to the industrial boom; the territory, which was simultaneously owned collectively by the Osage and privately by allottees and corporations; and, last but not least, a reservation inhabited by a most diverse racial, ethnic, and national population, where differences in the social status of Osage full-bloods and mixed-bloods, Irish immigrants, African American laborers, American nationals, and ethnic immigrants were particularly visible.

Mathews was influenced in his writing by Native American traditions of nonfiction history-telling, by the US government’s documents about Native Americans, and by the documentary boom sponsored by the New Deal. At the time of the largest economic crisis in twentieth-century America, Depression documentaries played a crucial role in writing “collective subjects”<sup>38</sup>—the poor, the thing-less, the displaced—into the national consciousness and into the American literary and visual traditions. New Deal sponsorship of the literary and visual arts contributed significantly to the popularization of documentaries by providing funding and access

---

<sup>37</sup> Bennett xvii; 20-38.

<sup>38</sup> Allred 7.

to human capital, and by facilitating distribution. Federal arts programs such as the WPA provided unprecedented financial support for the documentary arts, often pairing professional or amateur social scientists with writers to do the job. In other words, the genre of documentary received special treatment during the New Deal, and even documentaries such as James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (ones that were openly skeptical of the ideological and aesthetic agenda of national arts) owed their origin to New Deal programs.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Mathews, who included many anecdotes about the collaborations of WPA artists and Osage elders in *Talking to the Moon*, was directly involved in securing WPA funds intended for projects devoted to the documentation and preservation of Osage culture.<sup>40</sup> However, even if the New Deal documentary boom produced mass audiences familiar with new documentary genres and a national market for them, in *Talking to the Moon* Mathews resisted the populist push associated with such work. If New Deal writings privileged the examination of collective subjects, he placed himself and physical matter, rather than the Osage tribe, as narrative subjects.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was officially commissioned by *Fortune* magazine, but Walker Evans worked for FSA at the time of the assignment and Agee was familiar with the documentary projects of his co-workers Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell.

<sup>40</sup> See the "John Joseph Mathews" tribute booklet for information about the role Mathews played in securing WPA funds, facilitating the interaction between Osages and WPA workers, and founding the Osage Museum in 1938. It is available at the Osage Museum website at [http://www.osagetribe.com/museum/uploads/2009\\_FOLIO\\_John\\_Joseph\\_Mathews.pdf](http://www.osagetribe.com/museum/uploads/2009_FOLIO_John_Joseph_Mathews.pdf). It might be important to note here that documentary-writing was well supported not only by national arts programs in the 1930s but also through grants from various nonprofit organizations and through private sponsorship, that Mathews received two Guggenheim fellowships in 1939 and 1940 for research of Native Americans, and that *The Osage* lists "Frank Phillips of the Phillips Petroleum Company, . . . Allen G. Olliphant, oil producer, and . . . W. G. Skelly of the Skelly Oil Company as his key sponsors that sped up the completion of his work by two years" (xv).

<sup>41</sup> Mathews wrote such a collective tribal history, expected of the Depression-era documentarians, much later in the 1960s, after several projects devoted to individual male protagonists. *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters* was published in 1961.

In the 1930s, Mathews, as a novice tribal historian,<sup>42</sup> was still aware of the role that Native American nonfiction writing played in the intertwined literary, intellectual, and political traditions of Native Americans; a role much more significant than that of documentary writing in mainstream American literary culture. Robert Warrior reminds us that Native nonfiction writing, with its diverse traditions and genres, autobiographies, conversion narratives, various species of journalistic and legal writings (treaties, appeals, constitutions), has been at the core of the Native American literary tradition<sup>43</sup> in the United States, and contributed to the very emergence of Native American fiction writing. It was also crucial in the writing of Native American persons into American political culture. Most Native American writing prior to the Depression was actively involved in the writing of Native Americans as national, human subjects, or as economic objects, or as extensions of objects (of property, confiscated land, etc.) into the national political and cultural discourses.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, documentary writing produced or co-produced by First Nations peoples often mattered in quite practical, political and economical ways. In a political landscape that denied Native Americans recognition as human and political subjects, documentary writing was a marker of literary and cultural competence as well as a point of entry into a legal contract demanding, and often enforcing, the enfranchisement of Native nations in the political culture of the United States. In such narratives, Native persons were narratively produced in relation to the

---

<sup>42</sup> In addition to writing about the Osage tribe and collaborating with the WPA artists on documentary projects, he was also an important force behind the establishment of the Osage Museum, the first tribally owned museum in the United States, in 1938. The Museum website offers an overview of Mathews' involvement in Osage affairs at <http://www.osagetribe.com/museum/>.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Warrior's extensive discussion of Native nonfiction in his *People and the Word*, and specifically in "Introduction: Reading Experience in Native Nonfiction" (xiii-xxxii).

<sup>44</sup> Mathews' earlier work, *Wah'Kon Tah*, explores this complicated political and artistic print tradition.

material culture, “stuff,”<sup>45</sup> Daniel Miller’s term—things, land, and property they owned or were deprived of, cultural artifacts they created, gifts they gave, or modern commodities they could not afford. Often, they were literally catalogued together with objects of material culture.<sup>46</sup> In this context, Mathews’ rewriting of persons and material culture through his biological historicism should be read as a revision of such practices. *Talking to the Moon* collapses humans and nonhumans into the same category of physical and biological matter. At the same time, in Mathews, such physical and biological matter is not subsumed under the colonial or capitalist vocabulary of ownership laws, but exists simultaneously and complicatedly, in its biophysical, economical, cultural, and technologized manifestations.

Furthermore, Native American nonfiction in the 1930s and 1940s interacted with federal arts projects in complicated, circular ways. It is true that New Deal sponsorship significantly influenced Native American documentaries.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Native American documentary narratives, often oral or visual or both, provided narrative models for New Deal writers. The Depression documentaries by and about Native Americans, often transcribed by WPA writers from oral narratives, were products of more or less voluntary collaborations, and ultimately fused

---

<sup>45</sup> There is an abundance of scholarship of different kinds of things, especially in anthropology-inspired cultural studies. Some of the theories I referred to in previous chapters (Gregory; Appadurai; Weiner) are focused on the transformations of objects based on their function, or on the sphere of economic or cultural influence they fall under. Miller opens up the study of material culture to a multitude of disciplinary theories and approaches, and “stuff,” an all-encompassing word, is an expression of Miller’s belief in the fluidity and durability of things and their categories. “Stuff is not necessarily a thing we can hold or touch,” he reminds us in his book devoted to promoting a more inclusive and interdisciplinary study of material culture (11).

<sup>46</sup> Detailed records of the Osage Indian Agency in Oklahoma are available in the federal records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the National Archives in Fort Worth. For an overview of available records, visit <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/075.html#75.19.74>.

<sup>47</sup> For example, books such as *Black Elk Speaks* were quite common in the period, in which white writers transcribed or translated oral narratives of tribal members.

multiple literary and oral, Native and Western documentary traditions. As such, they documented not only diverse but often hostile and self-cancelling agendas and worldviews.

Mathews, immersed in such multiethnic and multidisciplinary documentary traditions, was aware and wary of the economic, political, and artistic patterns of narrative fusions, mixing ethnic persons and different objects in North American nonfiction writing. Yet, in *Talking*, he spent a lot of time clarifying his documentary methodology, as his writerly task was quite complicated, and quite different from John G. Neihardt and Black Elk's, for example. As a wealthy and powerful member of the tribal council and a multilingual writer, fluent in French, English, and Osage, Mathews had a lot of control over the parameters of collective authorship.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, because of the peculiar economic situation of the Osage and their tremendous popularity in mainstream culture,<sup>49</sup> his task was not to put them on the cultural map, as might have been the case for Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, but rather to remove them from the sensationalist discourse of the early twentieth century.

Mathews, dismayed with how oil came to define the Osage, wants to explore other kinds of matter that produce human persons. But Mathews also records in *Talking to the Moon* his own

---

<sup>48</sup> He did not have to rely on white transcribers and interviewers. At the same time, he incorporated oral narratives of tribal members and, for his later work, accepted financial support from wealthy industrialists.

<sup>49</sup> Consider for example an article that appeared in *Christian Science Monitor* on 2 November, 1929, "Osage Indians Face Depletion of Oil Income." Its screaming headlines read, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, "Wealthiest Tribe May Be Forced to Work; Few Have Savings 'Easy' Money Spent for Cars, Planes . . . Brave Pays \$2000 for Clock to Chime His Reservation Teepee." The fact that the Osage first refused to (and then, for a time didn't have to) participate in a capitalist economy by supplying it with their manual farm labor, which the whites believed to have "civilizing properties," was a sore spot for local and federal governments. The fact that "the Osage didn't want to be farmers" and as former warriors and hunters didn't want to tend to "squaw patches," a particularly feminine occupation, didn't interest anybody (Wilson, *The Underground Reservation* 20). The print media often offered sensational stories, featuring lazy and insolent Native Americans. The marriage of labor and Indian-ness seemed impossible. See also "Osage Oil Revenue Is \$240,000,000." *New York Times* 9 Oct. 1932: F3; "Osage Leases Sold.; Auctions Bring \$3,000,000." *New York Times* 30 Mar. 1928: 50.

incorporation into the Osage culture; he is a cosmopolitan “mixed-blood,” who is and at the same time is not considered a rightful citizen of the tribe. Thus, Mathews’ return to the blackjacks was also the personal journey of someone who could easily afford a trip to London, the African desert, or an early retirement in Oklahoma. But Mathews moved back to Pawhuska “after years spent in many other parts of the earth” (*TM* 1981, 4), not only to “rest and to watch” (3, 11) but also to reclaim his personhood, his Osage-ness. He sees Osage-ness as social and racial, as well as geospatial, as it is constituted equally by the human community, his “herd or pack” (*TM* 1981, 12), and by its physical, material environment: the “familiar things” (*TM* 1981, 12). In his text, he echoes the concerns of many multiracial and multicultural writers of the twentieth century, conflicted over their multiple identities and resulting from their multiple social roles. The return to the blackjacks is meant to be a therapeutic break, giving Mathews enough time to consider issues of the “human condition” in “isolation,” away from the pressures of the “roaring stream of civilization” (*TM* 1981, 11; 12). For Mathews, an Osage American writer, the “human” condition, however, is deeply situated in a specific and complicated historical context; it is also inseparably tied to many *things*: land thought to be “rocky waste” (*The Osages* 779) before mineral and natural resources were discovered in it; cultural capital, new technologies of information reproduction (the printing press, paintings, the radio, the camera, or the gramophone); and other modernist commodities.

Historically, Native Americans in the United States had not been legally recognized as persons or citizens until the 1887 Federal Court decision in the case of *Standing Bear v. Crook*, the first case in which Native Americans were officially discussed as persons and “claimants” of justice.<sup>50</sup> However, their social personhood as American and tribal citizens remained

---

<sup>50</sup> Referred to as such in Nancy Fraser’s *Scales of Justice* 12.

complicated at the time Mathews was writing *Talking to the Moon*. While the Citizenship Act of 1924 granted all Native Americans born in the United States American citizenship (and was seen by many as a culmination of forced assimilation), rules governing tribal membership were usually complicated by the coexistence of dual (or more), often mutually exclusive, citizenship-granting systems. The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 amended by the Burke Act of 1906 privatized Indian lands, by first dividing them into individual plots of land and then allotting them to Native Americans who appeared on tribal rolls and were deemed “competent.”

The Osage conformed to the Allotment Act late, in 1906. Because they decided to share royalties from subsurface mineral resources equally among all tribal citizens listed on the census roll of 1906, oil and their Osage citizenship have been inextricably connected ever since. Since Osage citizenship was tied directly to oil profits, it also contributed to the Reign of Terror on the reservation.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the rules of tribal belonging that were imposed by the federal government differed from the traditional cultural practices of the Osage tribe, which only exacerbated disagreements among the “full-bloods” and “mixed-bloods” over who was truly Osage. Mathews, as a multiethnic Osage American, experienced this legal and cultural paradox of being and not being an Osage himself. Mathews’ positions within the Osage tribe and mainstream culture were quite complicated, although he was considered a privileged outsider in both.<sup>52</sup> While Mathews was often referred to as an “Indian writer”<sup>53</sup> by the mainstream American

---

<sup>51</sup> Several recent books discuss this remarkably grim period in Osage history, when Osage members with “headrights” (rights to royalty payments for mineral resources) were murdered by incoming settlers or by non-Osage and family members. See, for example, Dennis McAuliffe’s *Bloodland*, or *The Osage Indian Murder Plot: The True Story of a Multiple Murder Plot to Acquire the Estates of Wealthy Osage Tribe Members*, by Lawrence J. Hogan, one of the FBI agents involved in the Osage murder cases. Declassified FBI files about the Osage murder cases are available at <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/osageind.htm>. As I noted earlier, Mathews refers to the Reign of Terror or the Great Frenzy period in *Sundown*.

<sup>52</sup> Despite Mathews’ outsider status in both worlds, Mathews’ problematic position in both societies was certainly mollified by his wealth and class position. With financial independence, an impressive

public, his “mixed-blood” status and Osage matrilineal heritage<sup>54</sup> made him a semi-citizen and a semi-outsider (and sometimes an untrustworthy one at that<sup>55</sup>). Moreover, his educational background and cosmopolitan travel experiences pitted him against more-traditional tribal members.<sup>56</sup>

*Talking to the Moon* is less obviously dedicated to issues of tribal belonging and US citizenship than his earlier book. The reason for this, apart from Mathews’ attempt to find a different “thing” than oil to define the 1930s’ Osages, might have been his desire to examine new ways of narrating mono- and multiracial Osages, and others living on the reservation or off. This all-encompassing all-person category, Mathews felt, would have to incorporate nonhuman matter, and not only in its capitalist articulation. On the other hand, with his own tribal belonging at stake, Mathews wanted specifically to reincorporate himself into the Osage culture.

Thus, throughout the book Mathews expresses his conflicted feelings: his desire to pursue individualistic and populist projects at the same time. He avoids dealing with the Osage directly

---

education, and multiple career options, he could handle social ostracism much better than most multiethnic writers of the time.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the reviews of his work in the *New York Times* or *Nation*. After the publication of his *Wah’Kon Tah*, he was commonly referred to as an Indian writer. *Nation* hailed the book the best “studies of Indian mind” (Walton 156). Readers were asked to “at last come to realize that to have any record of the Indian mind before it perishes entirely, we must collect quickly the stories of such old Indians as remember the past” (156). Another reviewer was taken aback by the fact that such a great book was the product of an “educated Indian” (*New York Times* 25 Nov. 1934: 19-20).

<sup>54</sup> Unlike other tribes with a matrilineal structure, the Osage had a patrilineal clan structure, and it was patrilineal heritage that defined which Osage clan formation one belonged to. Of course, as a result of the Allotment Act of 1906, Osages formed diverse family formations, and Osage traditions were standardized to follow mainstream federal inheritance laws.

<sup>55</sup> See Terry Wilson’s “Osage Oxonian” for a more in-depth discussion of inner-tribal animosities and conflicts.

<sup>56</sup> One of the saddest consequences of the Allotment Act of 1887, adopted by the Osages in 1906, and the Indian Redistribution Act of 1934 was how both exacerbated inner-tribal conflicts. The problems with, first, forced privatization and then forced recollectivization of land led to intense, often violent, disagreements between the full-blood and mixed-blood tribal members, and between those tribal members who opposed assimilation into the American culture and those who supported it.

or centrally in his work, since he feels that the contemporary culture is oversaturated with news about Osage wealth in the aftermath of the oil discovery.<sup>57</sup> Yet his decision to focus on his methodical observation of the physical world can be viewed as an attempt to present the Osage indirectly, through a depiction of a different “thing,” different “stuff” than the oil, which so powerfully (and negatively) defined the Osage in mainstream culture of the 1910s and 1920s. In other words, Mathews does not entirely reject narrative reification. To the contrary, he sees it as indispensable to his documentary project. The *stuff* and subject of Mathews’ book is material culture: Pawhuska’s physical environment, Mathews’ house, the ridges, coyotes, and, too, the processes that produce, transform, and animate material culture and the humans embedded in it. He wants to explore objectification, as a phenomenon that allows human persons to “assemble” into new social beings,<sup>58</sup> he also wants narratively to perform it. The matter of the physical world and its elements shape the chapter structure of his book and define the flow of his writing.<sup>59</sup> For

---

<sup>57</sup> As I mentioned before, the press was extremely scathing in its depiction of money management, earning, borrowing, or especially spending by the Osage.

<sup>57</sup> Terry P. Wilson mentions that the use of morphine and marihuana in addition to whiskey was widespread on the reservation. The 1929 drug bust that confiscated \$50,000 worth of morphine was the “largest in Oklahoma history before World War II” (*Underground Reservation* 156). Shepherd talks of mescal, possibly referring to widespread peyote use (734-744). Finally, Mathews describes both morphine/heroine and peyote use on the reservation in *Sundown* (83, 162, 184, 248, 277).

<sup>58</sup> Again, I am borrowing the word “assemble” from Jane Bennett’s work (xvi; xvii, 20-38). Bennett herself, however, relies loosely in the concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari. See, for example, *A Thousand Plateaus* 25, 79, 237.

<sup>59</sup> I wonder if this is the direct influence of John Steinbeck and Edward Ricketts’ documentary experiment, as Mathews refers to Steinbeck’s writing in *Talking to the Moon*. In the introduction to *Sea of Cortez*, John Steinbeck and Edward Ricketts write the following about the relationship between the content and shape of their narrative.

The design of a book is the pattern of reality controlled and shaped by the mind of the writer. This is completely understood about poetry or fiction, but it is seldom realized about books of facts . . . We have a book to write about the Gulf of California. We could do one of several things about its design. But we have decided to let it form itself: its boundaries: a boat and a sea; its duration a six week’s charter of time; its subject

example, although readers might expect Mathews to follow the chronology of his stay in Pawhuska, each chapter, named after an Osage moon cycle (Just-Doing-that Moon, Planting Moon, Little-Flower Moon, Buffalo-Pawing-Earth Moon, and so on), opens with descriptions of natural changes occurring at that particular moment of the year, trees blossoming, animals breeding, trees losing foliage, and so on. In “Deer-Breeding Moon,” for instance, Mathews talks about how his writing must literally be interrupted by the sudden appearance of the moon (*TM* 1981, 156). He opens by saying,

If I have not finished my work at the typewriter when the moon comes to the blackjacks, I must push it aside. If I attempt to carry on, the writing suffers; it loses so much in such a mysterious way that it is often useless and insipid. (*TM* 1981, 156)

In “Coon-Breeding Moon,” his first sentence informs the reader, again, that Coon-Breeding Moon “is the true hunting moon, and during this moon all other business is secondary to hunting” (*TM* 1981, 174). Thus, despite the fact that the previous chapter ends with an amusing anecdote about Mathews’ buddy, Cowwooly, who as an act of revenge against a teacher chops down a school’s cottonwoods in the middle of the night, the following chapter, as if automatically, shifts to activities that are “primary” in this particular moon phase. Mathews first details what happens to the prairie during that season and moves to a description of his own hunting habits when he “alone . . . saddle[s] Hereford in early morning, put[s] two bars of chocolate in [his] hunting jacket . . . and set[s] off” (*TM* 1981, 175).

In the very first chapter of his book, however, Mathews weaves descriptions of man-produced changes within his physical environment, the house-building process, into

---

everything we could see and think and even imagine; its limits—our own without reservation. (1)

metacommentary about the writing process. He constantly articulates and rearticulates the intended purpose of his project in ways that, he hopes, will reveal its “moods,” emphasize its constant flux. At different times in the book, he variously defines his return to Pawhuska as an escape from civilization, a return to his homeland, a temporary rest, a vacation, a scientific project, and, last but not least, a test of virility. He also acknowledges his work in Oklahoma “to raise the standards of [Osage] learning . . . and to make more comfortable the assimilation of the Osage Indian,” the latter phase hinting at the special position Mathews held as a cultural negotiator in the Oklahoma community of the 1930s (*TM* 1981, 14). Since the acculturation processes were well underway in oil-rich Pawhuska, his desire to assist the integration of “full-blood” Osages was problematic, not least because it seemed to run counter to his desire to reclaim his own Osage identity and citizenship.

Significantly, traditional Osages, quoted and described frequently in his book, were not his intended audience. The book pays tribute to the Osage but, quite practically, was intended for the literate and English-speaking publics, whose anticipation of a new “Indian book” Mathews describes with disdain in his work. He says that it “[t]akes a queer kind of man and a lot of hard work” to write (*TM* 1981, 71), and he certainly doesn’t appreciate the pressure from his readers, “a certain group of literati people called my ‘public’” (*TM* 1981, 13). While he has not much good to say about his middle-class (and most likely white) readers, whom he dismisses as either “men who work in offices, read papers, play poker and golf,” “receptionists, . . . stenographers, clerks with their red fingernails,” or “the wives, the gallant club women”<sup>60</sup> (*TM* 1981, 13), he

---

<sup>60</sup> Mathews’ hostile and dismissive treatment of women in his writing is evident in his earlier projects *Wah’Kon Tah* and *Sundown*, as well. For a queer reading of *Sundown* (or a reading of “queer,” an adjective that continuously pops up in *Sundown*) and a discussion of masculinity in Mathews’ work, see Robert Park Doyle’s discussion of *Sundown* in *The Invention of Native American Literature* 19-50.

succumbs eventually to the urge to write and publish again because he finds that “just living” in nature is not enough. His “thoughts and emotions demand an expression that physical activity could not satisfy” (*TM* 1981, 16-17).

Unlike white writers such as James Agee, who despite sharing Mathews’ disregard for his audience, feel freer to challenge his readers—Mathews feels uneasy about his audience’s expectations. And this feeling makes him constantly rearticulate the purpose of his return to Pawhuska in terms both legible and acceptable to his white readers. He fills his book with metadiscursive comments about the relationship between the genre and the matter being described, and between documentary representation and objective truth, about the importance of linear chronology and different temporalities in his narrative, and, finally, between him and his audience. Mathews wants to avoid slipping into the simplistic ideology of primitivism that fused ethnic persons with the physical landscapes around them, or, into modern discourses of consumerism and privatization, imagining human emancipation through the commercial acquisition of objects. He is also critical about other ideologies that reimagined the relationship between material resources and people: Collier’s collectivization of Indian lands, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s brand of nationalism, and even the Osages’ own tribal collectivism. He understands their importance in the intellectual, political, and economic traditions, but he considers them simply to be dialectically related elements of his American evolutionary “biologism.”

Moreover, he doesn’t strive for the easy mimeticism or the Depression-era propagandism of New Deal documentaries. It’s not the universal “banner of truth” he is after, but rather “learn[ing] something of the *moods*<sup>61</sup> of the little corner of the earth which had given [him]

---

<sup>61</sup> Emphasis mine.

being” (*TM* 1981, 3; 2). Mathews’ choice of words here is significant, the way he “softens” his register, from dry, supposedly objective descriptions typical of natural science to the melancholy language of feelings and of the intangible. The “moods” of the matter he describes are as important as the “moods,” fissures, tensions, and inconsistencies of his evolutionary theory of society. Later in the book, these shifts from scientific to nonscientific registers, and various “mashups” of technical and primitivist, neutral and emotional vocabularies become his signature style, and an important statement about the interconnection of the animate and the nonanimate, natural and social. He is as comfortable expressing his fascination with transformation and “frenzies of nature” (*TM* 1981, 37), as he is explaining such transformations through a particularly Osage worldview (as in a passage where he describes the effect of day and night change: “The Osage say the moon is a woman and that she makes her appearances twelve times a year . . . At dawn she leaves, they say . . . She goes on silent moccasins with modesty befitting a woman”<sup>62</sup>). At the same time, Mathews takes his tape measure empirically to check how “the life of [his ridge] had been shortened by nearly one-half inch,” an estimate he makes by tape-measuring “exposed parts of the roots of tussocks” (*TM* 1981, 30), acknowledging simultaneously that others, such as Les Claypole, a local cowboy, measure environmental change through the “Lord’s time” (*TM* 1981, 46). Despite Les Claypole’s warnings to stop “man a-monkeyin’ with His time” (*TM* 1981, 46), Mathews continues to record changes within the physical environment through different epistemologies. Matter, seen in different ways, and revealed through different discursive apparatuses, is deeply imbedded in his narrative.

Mathews wants such diverse, and diversely handled, biophysical matter to reconnect him with the Osage culture and to strengthen his Osage credentials in Pawhuska. His entanglement

---

<sup>62</sup> *TM* 1981, 33.

with the biophysical environment in Pawhuska is to trump racial barriers—his lack of full-blood Osage heritage. If his international upbringing and formal education had further disconnected him from the Osage, the physical matter of Pawhuska’s land he wants to blend with can turn him into, or at least camouflage him as, an Osage. Observing nature’s matter leads him to undo first the nature/culture binary, and the division between Osage cosmology and Western natural sciences. Similarly, he first dismisses decorativeness of style, and modern urban culture in general, as products of Western civilization and its industrialized societies, only to trace such decorativeness back to nature, and to draw parallels between art, “artificial ornamentation,” and the “useless ornamentation among the creatures of [his] little corner of the earth” (*TM* 1981, 3). According to Mathews, the song of a wood thrush and “man’s artistic creations” are both “primal” (*TM* 1981, 3), and products of evolution and a sign of progression<sup>63</sup> (*TM* 1981, 3).

The contradictory ways in which Mathews describes the purpose of his documentation projects bleeds into his treatment of matter, as a matter of narrative. Initially, he works within the typical primitivist dichotomy between his beloved blackjacks and busy urban centers and areas ravaged by the new industries of early-twentieth-century America. “[S]treams . . . with varicolored chemicals . . . the screaming of steel”<sup>64</sup> are in stark contrast with Pawhuska “forests of the headlands that grow to the emerald, wind-rippled prairie sea” (*TM* 1981, 14; 1). Later, not only does he argue for an understanding of nature and technology, man and landscape as having a common genealogy, or as Alain Pottage puts it, “institutional architecture” (Pottage and Mundy 5), but he thinks they are subject to the same evolutionary forces.

---

<sup>63</sup> However, the progression in Mathews does not mean a triumphal progress but merely a later, nonhierarchical stage or any change.

<sup>64</sup> Mathews obviously knows that “streams . . . with varicolored chemicals” are as much a part of the Pawhuska landscape as they are of more well-known polluted regions near industrial centers (*TM* 1981, 14). In fact, he covers the topic of environmental pollution in his earlier work, *Sundown* (73).

The language of Mathews' descriptions fuses live and inanimate matter, subverting the conventional chronology that places nature prior to culture, the environment prior to technology. Thus, when he does talk about the autumn prairie it has "the brilliance of a color film" (*TM* 1981, 1). He thinks of the natural change of seasons as the "stoppages [frames] of the cinema film of natural drama that come every day" (*TM* 1981, 2). The drought on the prairie that kills vegetation is presented as just a pause from which nature will "resume the drama—the constant tragedy which is a part of nature's balance" (*TM* 1981, 2). The tarantulas and other local spiders' webs are "perfect piece[s] of Swiss lace" (*TM* 1981, 146), and he sees the cicada larvae hatching process as a "Rube Goldberg mechanism"<sup>65</sup> of sorts (*TM* 1981, 147), and so on. Such narrative "meshwork" (Bennett 23) supports Mathews' argument about the power of diverse animate and mechanic "assemblages," as well as his critique of the conventional ways in which evolution has been used in social theory to relegate aboriginality and nature to the realm of "cultural childhood" (Parker, *The Invention of Native American Literature* 29).

His insistence on the format and subject matter of his own documentary is mirrored by descriptions of similar preoccupations with the materiality of documentary representations among the full-blood Osages themselves (on the Pawhuska reservation in the 1930s and in Mathews' book). Unlike other, less economically fortunate tribes absent from the national imagination (and literally made politically absent through a systematic federal policy of near-extermination), the Osage and their story were the sensation in mass magazines in the 1910s and 1920s as the most decadent revelers of the Roaring Twenties.<sup>66</sup> Unlike other tribes, however, the

---

<sup>65</sup> Rube Goldberg was a cartoonist and satirist who drew images of complicated machines performing basic tasks through multiple and redundant steps. Interestingly, James Agee refers to it as well in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>66</sup> As I mentioned before, coverage of Osage decadence was quite common in the national press. Mathews also covered Osages' heavy partying, binge drinking, dance parties, drug use, car cruises, random sex,

Osage could afford to exercise more control over their representation, thanks to their shared income from oil royalties and land leases. The founding of the Osage Museum, the first tribally owned museum in the United States, with the Osages' work with the WPA, were expressions of the desire to translate Osage cultural material into a new material and cultural form and into a new cultural practice. Mathews says that it was the acute awareness of the power of the white man's art objects that persuaded the most reluctant tribal members to sit for portraits in the scorching heat of summer.

People's memory is short. If they don't see [the WPA] picture [of Claremore in the New Osage Museum], they will say there was no Claremore. We will not be there a hundred years from now to tell these people that there was Claremore. We cannot say to these people that Claremore once lived here but he did not have his picture taken because it was too hot. These people will shake their heads and say there was no Claremore. (*TM* 1981, 128)

Tribal members described in *Talking*, Claremore, Nonceh Tonkah, anonymous Osage women, and Mr. Abbot, put forth special effort to dress up when sitting for portraits, often covering their everyday clothes with ceremonial and traditional ones, or dressing up only from the waist up, and therefore participating in an autoprimitivization of sorts. Absent from these portraits was the contemporary Osage environment: modern commodities and clothes in their houses or white laborers and "Negro Chauffer[s]" working for them (*TM* 1981, 133). Eventually, however, the Osage were disappointed with the WPA painter's work, and called him "O-skee-kah," Osage for "liar and horse thief" (*TM* 1981, 136). They believed that the artist,<sup>67</sup> whom Mathews described as a "sensitive man" who had survived "a pogrom in Russia and later had undoubtedly read

---

and spending sprees in *Sundown*. From his accounts of the interactions between the Osages and other tribes, Sioux and Pawnees, for example, it would seem that Osages' reputation for extreme entertainment was known at the time to other Native Americans as well.

<sup>67</sup> This painter is identified by A.W. von Struve as Todros Geller, a Chicago painter of Ukrainian-Jewish descent (118).

James Fenimore Cooper . . . , put suffering in the face where [there was] no suffering” (*TM* 1981, 134).

Nonetheless, the Osage elders understood the power of art things (of the material representation that came to dominate American cultural “preservation” practices), to erase, rewrite, or maintain the history of the Osage. They knew that what we now call information technology was instrumental to the future being or nonbeing of the Osages’ collective memory of themselves. And in *Talking to the Moon*, Mathews captured the Osage elders’ anxiety about the inadequacy of the oral transmission of Osage narratives, and their own documentary experimentation in the age of the radio, gramophone, and moving pictures. However, he also recorded that they took an active role in archiving their own cultural heritage through material objects, as Osages could no longer exist in cultural memory without them. In this context, it’s important to see the Osages’ and Mathews’ own preoccupation with the new material modes of cultural reproduction as motivated by cultural pragmatism, a matter of cultural survival. The Osages manipulated the cultural material they wished to see represented, but they also sought to engage the new and most durable means of cultural reproduction. On the day of the Museum’s opening, “the prairie was emerald, and mauve cloud shadows moved indolently across the campus of the agency, and the smoke from the separate camps of the four Osage clans arose in the semicircle” (*TM* 1981, 136). Mathews felt that if pictures (photographs) could be taken of

the descending sun . . . the dancers of the four clans coming together for the first time in many years to dance to the earth rhythm of the drums like befeathered and gorgeously painted gods . . . there would be little need to attempt to have their souls painted on canvas. (*TM* 1981, 136)

The twelve WPA-commissioned portraits were inferior to photography or film, in Mathews’ view. Since the preservation of Osage culture was tied to the preservation of the peoples that

descended from the portraits' Osage subjects, Mathews wished more vibrant images could be retained for posterity.

Mathews explored multiple traditions of material documentary representations: that of the Osages participating in the work of the museum; that of WPA painters who descended on the Osage reservation motivated by the desire to lament the loss of Osage indigenous traditions; that of other documentarians such as John Joseph Steinbeck, whose work Mathews was familiar with; and that of his own writings about nature, to emphasize the power such durable and material objects of culture have on producing the collective identity of entire social groups.

However, the importance of material techniques of indigenous history preservation is only one of the reasons why Mathews anchors his book firmly in the material world as he mocks men who “had begun to think that they were cutting their bonds with the earth; that they had torn themselves from the restrictive laws of biology” (*TM* 1981, 3). And in his biological history of persons and things, property matters tremendously. His first two chapters strongly indicate the important role that property and the natural environment play in the constitution of human persons. “The Sandstone House” and “Blackjacks,” chapters one and two, respectively, stand out especially, as they are the only chapter titles devoted to the Osages’ physical spaces, both man-made and “environment,” rather than seasons and moon cycles.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, the fact that Mathews begins his book with a chapter devoted exclusively to the very details of building a house deserves even more attention. Owning land and setting up a house is, in a way, a dominant metaphor of the American dream, and of its consumer culture. A particularly Eurocentric dream. Yet Mathews’ wish to “get [his] feet on his own bit of earth” at a

---

<sup>68</sup> They are followed by twelve chapters, all of which are named simultaneously after the four Western seasons and the twelve Osage moon cycles. For example, “SPRING” is divided into “Just-Doing-That Moon,” “Planting Moon,” and “Little-Flower-Killer Moon.”

time when his Irish hired hands can barely survive in Pawhuska sounds ironic (*TM* 1981, 16). To further complicate the meaning of his house construction, Mathews describes his settling-down in Pawhuska in a way that echoes the accounts of European settlers. The irony, of course, is that this time around it is an Osage American who wants to re-settle himself on a land that is his, to recolonize (or decolonize) Oklahoma, using white laborers. Paradoxically, to reintroduce himself to the Osage tribe that “[has] culture,” Mathews must reattach himself to a physical space in Pawhuska. Therefore, Mathews’ manufacturing of a physical space that, he hopes, will produce his neo-Osage identity, is crucial to his narrative, as it undermines mainstream understanding of the master scene of American house-building. Mathews might downplay his entry into the ridges first; he is, after all, just building “a simple thing; a one-man house,” and he simply wants “to arrange [his] body comfortably” there, to “express [his] harmony with the natural flow of life” (*TM* 1981, 5). Yet, the very emphasis he places on the production process and on situating himself within the newly erected house, and the time he spends describing it, suggest the importance he gives to the processes that produce the house, and, in turn, produce the “new” Mathews. The house matters in his narrative not only as a space, then, and as a commodity, but also as a symbolic marker of multiple positions within two societies (an American homeowner, a Native American who enjoys nature, and an affluent Osage). Yet, the very process through which Mathews acquires land, and builds a house, already alludes to larger economic forces and cultural meanings that made such person–property transactions available to the Osage in the first part of the twentieth century but unavailable to other Native peoples. After all, Mathews can afford to outsource the house-building labor to impoverished white workers on the reservation, some of whom have reportedly returned from the Mexican and South American revolutions, others of whom were fresh from the Civilian Conservation Corps camps (*TM* 1981, 10; 26), at a

time when “one-third of a nation [is] ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” and most can barely afford “necessities of life” (Roosevelt, “Second Inaugural Address”<sup>69</sup>).

Mathews’ white readers at the time must have sensed the ways in which his house-building seemed deeply culturally “unnatural,”<sup>70</sup> as the very relationship between ownership of land and house-building and political personhood has a long tradition in American colonialist and imperialist history. In this tradition, Native Americans are rarely featured as powerful homeowners. That’s one of the reasons why modern commodities-owning and money-spending Osages were such a controversial topic in the press of Mathews’ time.

“The Sandstone House,” the first chapter in the book, fuses the tropes of “house,” “land ownership,” and Indian-ness in American mainstream culture and points to how these tropes might be read differently by indigenous, multicultural, or white audiences. Ownership and maintenance of unfairly acquired property have historically secured economic privileges and possibilities for participation in political processes for white male citizens. Alternatively, entire categories of persons were prevented from participating fully in the same economic exchanges and political processes because their gender, race, or ethnicity precluded their owning property, thus defining their status as noncitizens and, even in legal discourse, as nonpersons. At the same time, Native Americans, and the Osage specifically, occupied an even stranger position in relation to owned land.

---

<sup>69</sup> For a print copy or an audio recording of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Inaugural Address,” visit the History Matters site, maintained by the American Social History Project / Center for Media and Learning of the City University of New York and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5105/>.

<sup>70</sup> Of course, Mathews’ desire to settle down to become a rancher in Pawhuska might have surprised many Osages as well. Farming carried little prestige, especially among the male and older Osages.

Following the colonization of America, the inability of aboriginal nations to enter into capitalist exchanges of property supposedly "confirmed" their civilizational and evolutionary inferiority.<sup>71</sup> Lack of a system of private ownership prior to the Allotment Acts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>72</sup> made Native Americans susceptible to fraud at the hands of federal and local governments and unscrupulous settlers. Lack of legal, that is, written, documentation of ownership further disenfranchised them, both economically and politically. The adoption of the Allotment Act transformed the Native American relation to property, because individual members (heads of household), rather than clans, or entire tribes, were to own the land. In the process, the Allotment Act also redefined the rules of tribal membership, overriding specific tribal laws or customs guaranteeing citizenship. The Act also altered tribal gender roles, by enforcing Western-based "gender assignments," to use Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky's phrase (*Tendencies* 161), through its promotion of domestic labor for women and farming for men.<sup>73</sup> Imposing patrilineal heritage requirements on matrilineal societies,<sup>74</sup> it also seriously limited women's participation in the economic and political life of tribes. Finally, requiring "Christian marriages" for women<sup>75</sup> who wanted to own allotted property further disenfranchised Native women politically, economically, culturally, and sexually. The resulting post-Allotment gender roles were also infused with hierarchical meanings, with women's

---

<sup>71</sup> The accounts of sales of land to the whites for commodities of unequal value were used in popular culture as a sign of incompatibility with capitalist culture and an incurable social "savagery," naivety, and backwardness.

<sup>72</sup> Some tribes, such as the Osage or Alaskan Natives, resisted the adoption of the Allotment Act until 1906. The Alaskan Allotment, however, was not repealed until the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

<sup>73</sup> See a very interesting discussion of the transformation of gender roles after the Dawes Act in Jane E. Simonsen's *Making Home Work* 1-16.

<sup>74</sup> The Osage actually had a patrilineal, two-clan social structure.

<sup>75</sup> Of course, men were also affected by the newly required family structure.

domestic work reconceptualized as “labors of love rather than work with economic value” (Simonsen 8).

The point of this historical overview is to emphasize not only the conflicting ways in which the relationship to property (land, livestock, material possessions, and mineral resources) produced “Indian-ness” in the American imaginary but also how the redefinitions of ownership rules it reinforced actually affected Native American social personhood in very significant ways. Moreover, the unique position of the Osage tribe, as the wealthiest aboriginal community in the world (perhaps the wealthiest early-twentieth-century community in the world, in general) produced further complications of property–person interconstitution in twentieth-century American culture.

Thus, it is important to look at the relationship between ownership and citizenship within the frameworks of federal, state, and tribal laws and cultural practices simultaneously. In early-twentieth-century America, indigenous peoples, like immigrant, ethnic, and racial minorities, were *personae non grata* in the national culture, and their public participation in the cultural and democratic processes was complicated by legal and cultural barriers imposed to prevent nonwhite Americans from exercising various privileges of citizenship, not the least of which were those related to ownership of property. Native Americans, however, occupied a unique position within the American national culture of the early twentieth century with regard to their legal status as tribal citizens and as semi-American national citizens, whose American citizenship was inseparably (and legally) tied to property law. Like other minorities in the early twentieth century, Native Americans could partially participate in the dream of national integration through private ownership. However, in order to do so, they had to give up communal property ownership. Individual ownership of property, therefore, was a precondition of Native

American US citizenship, from 1887 until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and, later, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, Native Americans across the United States were forced to change their relationship to property as well as, in the process, the actual cultural practices governing their relationship with property. What's more, the terms of intimacy with material things preconstituted Native Americans' human and citizenship rights in American legal discourse. The architect of the Allotment Act was quite explicit about his belief in the constructive relationship between personhood and things associated with Western material culture. In the words of Henry Dawes, "private property" had "civilizing properties," and one was not a person until he or she "w[ore] civilized clothes, . . . cultivate[d] the ground, live[d] in houses, r[o]de in Studebaker wagons, . . . dr[a]nk whiskey, [and] own[ed] property" (PBS).<sup>77</sup> There was a consensus that a particular kind of intimacy with objects of Western culture, individual ownership, would transform Natives into Americans, but there was also consensus among the federal power brokers that not only did Native American have to get close to certain kinds of objects in order to become US citizens, but that the circulation objects had to follow, in the parlance of anthropology, the rules of the Market, and not of the House.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> There were several exceptions that allowed Native Americans to gain US citizenship prior to 1924. For example, their service in World War I led to the passage of the American Indian Act in 1919. The Act granted American citizenship to Native American World War I veterans, although not all of them took advantage of this opportunity at the time.

<sup>77</sup> It is fascinating to see echoes of this statement in Mathews' *Talking*. He inserts a very similar-sounding passage about his friends in his book. He states that he "had played both poker and golf with [his friends], and as long as [he] dressed in well-appearing clothes, spoke 'American' without an accent, kept [his] mouth shut and held [his] Scotch, they didn't seem distressed . . ." (13).

<sup>78</sup> I have explained the theory of Market, State, and House circulation of objects in the chapter devoted to Fannie Hurst. Please see chapter two, page 103, for definitions of different social realms in which things circulate and signify.

Documentary writing by or about Native Americans often translated directly into political or human-rights gains or losses for Native American individuals and entire communities.<sup>79</sup> More importantly, these human rights gains and losses were inseparably tied to property gains or losses. Documentaries such as Mathews' *Wah'Kon Tah* often exposed different constructions of the social identity of persons based on their relationship to objects. The Western econopolitical and aesthetic tradition privileged individual ownership, whereas traditional tribal economic, national, and cultural practices emphasized multiple ways in which collective, clan-based ownership or guardianship shaped the social and political identity of tribal members. Yet American removal and allotment policies enforced by the US government produced very diverse models of ownership among US Native Americans in the twentieth century. Despite the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, as Joel Pfister points out, by the 1930s many Natives, especially the proponents of assimilation who were allotted land, challenged John Collier's plans to reintroduce collective ownership of property. They also voted against the establishment of roadless land for soil conservation, and supported individual property rights<sup>80</sup> (205). In other

---

<sup>79</sup> In *Wah'Kon Tah*, Mathews includes anecdotes about Oh Hunka Moie (Will Conner), "the first Indian allowed to practice law in the Indian Territory" (McAuliffe 308). Oh Hunka Moie / Will Conner, for example, was instrumental in the writing of the Osage Constitution. He also worked on the negotiations with the federal government that led to the agreement about the collective sharing of subterranean resources, a major victory for the Osage, forced to accept the Allotment Act in 1906.

<sup>80</sup> Some Native Americans in the 1930s supported the privatization of land, and others voted for the reorganization of land ownership. Pfister lists Pawnee, Ponca, Kaw, Otoe, Oklahoma Arapahoe, Kiowa, Navajo, and their tribal Business Councils among those who opposed the provisions of the Reorganization Act. However, by the time the second wave of primitivism of the New Deal swept across America, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had already promoted a new brand of American nationalism, one that bore a resemblance to what the public perceived as Native American intellectual and economic traditions, their political and economic practices of collective sharing, rather than owning.

words, “Indians were . . . too diversely individual to be Indianized as Collier thought best” (Pfister 204).<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, the neoprimitivist revival in New Deal arts during the Great Depression promoted romantic representations of Indian “intimacy” with land, commodities, or cattle, because tribal collective practices were often seen as models and as alternatives to what was seen as a collapsing capitalist system based on the adulation of individually owned private property. But, as Daniel Miller reminds us, “[t]here are good uses of anthropology and also terrible uses of anthropology,” the discipline that influenced early-twentieth-century arts devoted to racial and ethnic others (5). In Miller’s view, the primitivist “assum[ption] that because tribal people didn’t have much stuff[,] they were necessarily less materialistic,” or that their relationship with things was less complicated or purer, is among anthropology’s most troubling legacies. Such representation, as systematized in New Deal arts, produced a dichotomized world, often further, in which “we” were always modern<sup>82</sup> because of our sophisticated relationship with objects, while “they” were of the past, and intimate with “stuff” in spiritual, unmediated, and primordial ways. Mathews’ opening his “nature study” with a chapter on house-building and settling down on a land, despite its seeming innocence, unearths complicated, violent, and almost incompatible narratives of social personhood, “Indian-ness,” and property that popular accounts of American aboriginality consistently suppressed.

---

<sup>81</sup> It is interesting to note that collectivization of wealth was alternatively seen as either a distinctly (Native) American, if forgotten, tradition or as a foreign influence (communism). Pfister describes John Collier’s struggles to place his views and policies about communal sharing in the context of Native American rather than Soviet traditions. While he was successful at first, his office came under scrutiny in the 1940s and eventually succumbed to the anticommunist witch hunts (200). Also see the discussion of Oliver La Farge’s correspondence (Pfister 215-216).

<sup>82</sup> I am alluding here to Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Mathews' second chapter, "Blackjacks," complicates his autobiography and nature study further by bringing up another seemingly obvious trope, the natural environment, right after that of house-building and -ownership. During the Great Depression, federally sponsored documentaries introduced "collective subjects," the destitute, into the national imagination and at the same time often celebrated the ethnic differences of Native Americans. Their poverty and lack of material possessions were a direct result of federal policies, not of indigenous socioeconomic customs, yet primitivism often romanticized destitution as a pre-capitalist, indigenous, and noble condition. Mathews sees great irony in these romanticizing impulses that falsified the relationship between objects and ethnic or aboriginal subjects, and that represented twentieth-century Native Americans as if they were unaffected by American colonization and industrialization. *Talking to the Moon* mocks primitivists' and communists' misunderstanding of laws of communal ownership, labor, and nature (*TM* 1981, 143). In his view, communists who based their theory of labor on the observation of nature (bee and ant colonies, for example) have a very superficial understanding of nature, just as do primitivists, who romanticize aboriginal communalism. Mathews encourages his readers to peek beneath nature's shining mechanism in order to see its complicated processes and its violence, pointing out again that any contextual and empirical examination of the environment undermines idealizations of nature, culture, and personhood. Nature, he continues, is full of violence and will that "the communist and the socialist [who] go to the ants and bees for their communal economies and division of labor, . . . fail to see . . ." (*TM* 1981, 143).

Instead of employing such simplifications, Mathews proceeds to focus on mutual interventions: Mathews' ownership of the land, the physical environment's impact on Mathews' Osage-ness, the ridges' and oil's impact on the Osage and non-Osage inhabitants of Pawhuska,

and Mathews' economic and physical intrusion into the blackjacks' ecosystem and the Osages' social system. Mathews describes the "balance of nature" consistently throughout his book. Yet, for him, "nature is [always] out of joint"; its balance doesn't depend on homogeneity or purity, or on the distinctiveness of human/nonhuman, or Indian/white categories, but on the constant, relentless, and often violent interaction among species, human and animals, the built environment, cultural spaces, and technology, as well as capital and land (Robert A. Lee 104).

Therefore, one of the most important aspects of *Talking to the Moon*'s entry into the discourse about matter and personhood, nature and *Indian-ness*, is its recognition of diversity of "natural regimes," to borrow Arturo Escobar's term, to describe Mathews' self-reflexive probing of the diverse varieties of "human-nonhuman assemblages" taking place in Pawhuska. In his seminal essay on the antiessentialist theory of nature, Escobar asks if "there [is] a view of nature that goes beyond the truism that nature is constructed to theorize the manifold ways in which it is culturally constructed, socially produced, while fully acknowledging the biophysical basis of its construction" ("After Nature" 1). Mathews would share Escobar's plea for an antiessentialist understanding of environment and political ecology. He attempts to bring different discourses of the "natural" (tribal cosmology, politics, geology, biology, or literature, history of colonialism) to probe the complexity of the physical world in Pawhuska. Mathews' nature study challenges primitivist representations of aboriginality and nature, human-ness and nonhuman-ness, and it locates neither one of them outside the econopolitical, biophysical, and technological transformations of the early part of twentieth-century America.

In his attention to the natural environment, Mathews wants his readers to look beyond Osages' most recent history, to adopt a view that is deeper, as it goes beneath the surface of the earth where the oil is but also where the roots are. As he says, "I could not begin with the upper

branches of a tree and follow one to the trunk, but must go to the roots, and beyond the roots to the reasons of nature's encouragement of the seedling" (*TM* 1981, 3) He then wants his audience to apply the historical perspective.

Study first the original conditions, wherein the Indian was in harmony with the natural balance; then study the effects of the European freed from the tight political, economic, and social pressures of Europe, running almost berserk on the new continent . . . balance [when] he is suddenly free . . . to expand . . . where his enemies are absent and food is abundant. (*TM* 1981, 227)

Mathews feels therefore that the history of ownership, colonization, and personhood can be understood through the natural sciences because they ultimately follow the laws of such biological historicism. This also explains how his detailed descriptions of biological processes occurring on the ridges can bear upon Osage history. After all, the Osage history of land and property ownership seems most unusual and ironic, but a closer look reveals that the land, and what's under it (oil), energized Osage cultural and political life, and was a cause of ongoing intrusions of white settlers.

In this context, it seems that Mathews' decision to focus on the material world, and to rarely reference humans inhabiting the reservations, is an act of narrative "crowd control." In other words, for Mathews to study "human nature" means going to the roots, not the tree branches (*TM* 1981, 3). The land, the oil, the communal ownership of mineral resources, and the allotted ownership of property are what *produced* the Osage society in the early twentieth century. *Talking to the Moon* retreats from the popular themes of Osage oil and Osage decadence, and from the sensationalist discourse of mass magazines and newspapers which from the 1900s through the 1930s presented the Osage mainly in the context of their tremendous oil-produced wealth. However, in its foregrounding of nature, rather than the Osage economy, and

cultural practices, or even stories of actual Osages living on the reservation, it draws an inseparable link between land and persons, oil, and culture, and so on.

Mathews expressed his desire to preserve nature and Osage culture (which is as valuable as that of the Bedouins), but his conservation efforts are in fact deeply economic, and technological, as well as political interventions. Readers of *Talking to the Moon* can sense the author's great fondness for the ridges. Yet, at the same time, Mathews' narrative is full of instances indicating his separation, his position as an "imposter"<sup>83</sup> in both culture<sup>84</sup> and nature. He describes in great detail his entry into the blackjacks (and reentry into the reservation), but when spring comes, he realizes that

. . . with all my plans to become part of the balance of nature on the ridges, I brought conflict . . . Perhaps my position was unnatural, living as I did, not from the ridge, but feeding myself artificially from cans brought from town and food from the ranch. I was not part of the economic struggle . . . therefore I was really an anomaly, as my own survival was concerned. (*TM* 1981, 60)

He admits then to disturbing the local environment by introducing "pheasant, chickens, and guineas to the ridge" (*TM* 1981, 60). He cuts through the blackjacks to build the house, drills a water well, and experiments on the coyote whelp, which eventually dies in Mathews' captivity. He orders the so-called H.D. chickens, which were originally imported from England, from North Carolina (*TM* 1981, 164). His long musings on the invasive species he imports treats their arrival on the ridges as being similar to that of "the landing of a few zealous Christians on the bare shores of Massachusetts" (*TM* 1981, 68). In other words, the "interference of white men" (68) is similar to his own.

---

<sup>83</sup> I have borrowed the term from a snippet ad from the back cover of *Talking to the Moon* (1981 edition). The original source of the actual review is *The Quarterly Journal of Biology* (Hedgepeth).

<sup>84</sup> You can find more information on Mathews' position within the tribe in Terry Wilson's "Osage Oxonian" and Robert Warrior's "Intellectual Sovereignty."

Mathews emphasizes the importance of pleasure, “*joie de vivre*” (*TM* 1981, 53), in his activities of bird-watching in the blackjacks, and reveals his ignorance of ornithology (*TM* 1981, 41). But he also talks of the pleasure of killing animals with his 22-caliber rifle (*TM* 1981, 67). Earlier, he describes a scene when he kills a skunk with his Smith & Wesson as if it were a clip from a film noir depicting an execution.

I held the muzzle of my [gun] to his head and emptied the cylinder, glorifying in the nauseating musk odor that hung on the heavy air of the night, transforming its glory with the sharp explosions that broke the silence of the ridge into the symbol of the mighty power of Homo Sapiens when aroused and announcing his entrance into the struggle. (*TM* 1981, 65)

The point of these descriptions, I believe, is that they blur binaries, collapse the categories of white/Indian, predator/victim, colonizer/colonized, with Mathews alternating his position in the cultural and physical ecosystem of Pawhuska. At once an invader and a guest, an animal, an Osage, a thing. The different roles he adopts define the types of intervention he makes in the material world around him. He often produces new kinds of relations to the material world with the use of new technology, a gun, tape measure, or typewriter (*TM* 1981, 156), and dreams of a power wheelchair that would let him hunt game when he is old, challenging any assumptions his readers might have about the kinds of tools an Osage American might employ to interact with the material world.

Yet Mathews further delinks the world of technology from whiteness and the “wonders of Western civilization” by emphasizing the inherent, “biological” closeness of nature and factory machine.

Through the ages, philosophers who have gone back to “nature” have found the obvious beauty and harmony which is the climax of natural struggle; they have not noted the

shavings and the cuttings and the cast-off inferior parts on the factory floor . . . [but only] the perfect shining mechanism. (*TM* 1980, 143)

In this view, nature is powerful and “temperamental” (*TM* 1981, 17, 52, 62, 194, 210).<sup>85</sup> Matter “wills” itself onto humans: the changing seasons affect the moods of inhabitants of the prairie, just like Daniel Miller’s “wretched house” wills itself onto him, and “constantly humiliates” him (94). Jane Bennett sees “edible matter” (39-51) as another very significant type of “human-nonhuman assemblage” in which the vitality of matter can, through the act of consumption, transfer its power or drain it away from humans (39). Mathews notes the effects of such vitality of “edible matter” on himself as well<sup>86</sup> (*TM* 1981, 60).

Mathews had little luck with his reviewers in 1945 when *Talking* was published, as most tended to see him as either a primitivist, a romantic naturalist, or a follower of Thoreau (that is, an “educated Indian” who entered into the white literary canon).<sup>87</sup> *Talking to the Moon* was commonly described as a Waldenesque experiment<sup>88</sup> when it was published, while a later edition

---

<sup>85</sup> Importantly, he often references moon cycles and the Moon Woman specifically with this gendered word. Mathews’ entire narrative and his semiscientific vocabulary betray his unease with the position of women in the twentieth-century culture. Aside from a few random examples, women are conveniently absent from the Osage world and its cultural drama; female animals receive more attention than female persons do.

<sup>86</sup> Eating canned food, for example, makes him a stranger to the ridges’ ecosystem. On the other hand, his rare urban guests behave differently when on the reservation. What they eat and drink makes them act differently.

<sup>87</sup> See the reviews in *Western American Literature*, *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, and *Nation*.

<sup>88</sup> I find it ironic that this term was used by his daughter, who wrote an introduction to a reissue of *Talking to the Moon*, and by the critics who were eager to see Mathews’ works as derived from the Anglo-American literary canon. Mathews’ decision to return to Pawhuska was influenced by the primitivist rhetoric of early modernists, and by the “second wave” primitivism of WPA arts, and a shift in the federal policy toward the nationalization of resources and toward the Native Americans, away from a policy of forced assimilation to the policy of reindigenization under John Collier. At the same time, it’s important to remember that Mathews could return to the blackjacks and appreciate the scarcity of modern commodities around him only because of his wealth, which was directly related to the excess of oil production in Oklahoma. In other words, he could settle down in Oklahoma because he could afford to.

advertised his work as “wildlife adventures on the plains and prairies of Osage country.”<sup>89</sup> Yet Mathews’ project fused the writing of self (autobiography) with the writing of nature (nature study, biology) to meditate on the ways in which self and environment were intertwined but, more importantly, mutually co-produced. At a time when old- and new-school primitivists wrote about the world’s indigenous populations as if the national, geographical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries and differences between them didn’t exist, *Talking to the Moon* dealt with biophysical matter to reconnect seemingly temporally incompatible words of nature and machine, aboriginality and whiteness, civilizations and wildness, to shrink the distance these assumed in contemporary primitivist and nationalist articulations.

*Talking to the Moon* is a complicated “biology of America” (TM 1981, 227). In Mathews’ treatment, biological and cultural evolutionary theory reveals the mutual constitution of the human and nonhuman, of persons and things, through constantly occurring processes of transformation. These processes fall under different laws that are alternately biophysical (such as those controlling hunger or the animal urge to reproduce); economic (such as those defining the terms of ownership); political (defining citizenship or prompting colonization); technological (defined by the use of technology to extract oil, use mechanized labor to farm, guns to hunt, or cameras to narrate the Osage); and cultural (regulating the norms of intergenerational communication, for instance). Mathews, however, makes an effort to see these laws and the discourses that define them as interconnected. He wants his work to modify the “vulgarity” of social Darwinism that justified the oppression of subordinate social groups. And, despite his own

---

<sup>89</sup> This quote comes from the cover of the 1981 reissue, published by Oklahoma University Press. While the cover of the original edition (1945) bore only the image of a spider sign, an image crucial to Mathews’ celebration of Osage culture, the visual design of the cover as well as of advertising blurbs for the newer edition place Mathews’ work more directly in the canon of American (rather than indigenous) literature.

“ornamental thoughts” getting “poetic when [his] radio bring[s him] the war news”<sup>90</sup> (*TM* 1981, 225), he reminds himself to always “remember the drama of the blackjacks” (*TM* 1981, 225).

The drama of the “vibrant matter” is for Mathews simultaneously a drama of culture, one that produces Osages, Americans, and other ethnic subjects, albeit in uneven, arbitrary ways.

---

<sup>90</sup> Mathews refers here to World War II.

## POSTSCRIPT

*. . . objects . . . bind all of us in ways that map a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of “the political.”*

—Bruno Latour<sup>1</sup>

In 2008 Donna Haraway stated—as boldly as Bruno Latour in 1993 asserted that “we have never been modern”<sup>2</sup>—that “we have never been human,”<sup>3</sup> either. Both theorists see the human/nonhuman epistemological divide as an impediment to a full understanding of the mutual interconstitution of things, matter, and people. Yet the debate over the nature of the physical, emotional, political, and economic intimacy between human person and things, as well as nonhuman legal persons and pseudohumans, rages on in our time just as it did in the early part of the twentieth century. Bruno Latour says that objects “bind all of us,” creating new “maps” of “the political.”<sup>4</sup> These maps contour new publics, whose existence we often fail to acknowledge because they don’t seem to be part of the normative landscape of the political, and because they rewrite the classification boundaries between different social and nonsocial realms. Latour sees politically liberatory potential in implementing what he calls “object-oriented democracy,”<sup>5</sup> a system of representation, a parliament, that would consider more fully the whos *and* whats of any culture.

There is no doubt that things and their cultural as well as prediscursive, inanimate power shape the identity of human persons, or that making decisions about how to engage with what

---

<sup>1</sup> Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or How to Make Things Public” 5.

<sup>2</sup> *We Have Never Been Modern*.

<sup>3</sup> *When Species Meet* xii.

<sup>4</sup> “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” 4.

<sup>5</sup> “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” 6.

kinds of objects can transform the social life of a human person.<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler says that gender is many “styles of flesh” (*Gender Trouble* 190), and I would say that personhood comes in many “styles of things.” However, the conditions under which many things “fabricate” with humans, in modernist times and now, often replicate hegemonic power. Oil may be said to have produced the Osage tribe of the 1900s through the 1930s, and consumer products to have produced women’s culture, or what Lauren Berlant calls “the first . . . mass-marketed intimate public in the United States of significant scale” (*The Female Complaint* 5). But the conditions under which such material things exercise their force are extremely complex and unpredictable; objects produce people as social persons unevenly in different geological spaces. There is a reason why, sixty years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and nearly forty years after *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), Catherine MacKinnon still has to ask whether “women are human yet.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in a recent interview on *The Colbert Report*, Cornel West expressed his hope for a *future* in which “poor people will have the same dignity as investment bankers” (Colbert). His dream of social justice would require social conditions that enable equal legal and political “personification” of all human subjects,<sup>8</sup> and we should recognize MacKinnon and West’s disappointment in the unequal production and distribution of humanity, as well as

---

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

<sup>7</sup> This question is at once the title of MacKinnon’s famous essay, published originally in 1999, as well as the title of a recent collection of her writing in which it is included (“Are Women Human?” in *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* 41-43). In her essay, she argues that even the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, with its gendered language of “brotherhood,” places limits on the legal personification of women.

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, if we take seriously the work of the historian of American law Gregory Mark, as well as consider the ominous decision of the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, then perhaps West, if he wants his dream of full cultural, economic, and political “capaciation” of humans to be realized, should have hoped for the disenfranchised people to “have the same dignity” as such nonhuman actors of American political life as Citizens United, who by virtue of *being* “autonomous, creative, self-directed” (Mark 1478), and even “immortal” legal persons (1476), have just been granted additional political rights unavailable even to “investment bankers.”

their concerns about the potential for liberatory human-thing reinventions in the context of oppressive political, legal, and economic norms

The texts I have discussed in my dissertation thoroughly examine the predicament of selective humanization and politicization of certain human subjects and not others. Hurst, Mathews, Agee, Walker, and Larsen pay attention to legal, political, and literary norms, conventions, and forms of humanization that are available to social subjects. But in their texts, they also experiment with the liberatory possibilities of localized, ad hoc, often individual efforts to use material objects to remake, to (legally) personify persons. Hurst, Mathews, Agee, Walker, and Larsen are fully aware that human-ness, unlike legal personhood, guarantees few protections; and the political, cultural, and economic incorporation in the national polity of the marginalized social subjects they write about depends on how well and how creatively they manage to socialize through diverse material things. These writers' explorations of the entanglements and intimacies of thing and persons were part of a larger discussion about the boundaries between humans and things, and about the best methods, and most worthy candidates, for social and political emancipation.

In American culture of the early twentieth century, in the advent of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the 1960s' Civil Rights movements, humanization-through-objectification was one of the key liberatory strategies promoted by nationalism, primitivism, and consumerism. Enfranchised things—cars, fashion, oil, debris, and cultural artifacts—functioned as sealants of diverse dominant, counter-<sup>9</sup> and intimate publics;<sup>10</sup> these “objects of emancipation” helped create and maintain new, identity-producing publics, networks,

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii.

and ideologies of great political significance. The modernist writers I have discussed in my dissertation reflect on these developments, asking whether different types of reification can be deployed creatively and effectively to expand and conventionalize the rights of human persons without becoming complicit in the oppressive forces that control how things are circulated and what they can mean.

When I first approached my topic, I expected these writers to express their outrage at the commodification of ethnic, female, poor persons in early-twentieth-century American culture; at the practices that naturalized the process of the constant expanding of political, economic, and cultural rights of nonhumans, while the category of human person was constantly being modified to exclude this or that social group on account of its being of the “wrong” race, gender, sexuality, country, or class; at the whittling away of legal privileges already granted to marginalized social persons (such as African Americans); at the normative acceptance of humanity for people as a “process of becoming” (Slaughter 80; Cornell 18), when for nonhuman corporate actors humanity and personhood was simply being. In many ways they did.

However, what stunned me was the complexity of Hurst’s, Larsen’s, Agee’s, and Mathews’ understanding of objectification as, all at once, a mode of oppression, a characteristic “intrinsic to the very processes we describe as culture” (Daniel Miller 68), and a process that could have emancipatory potential. Unlike the post-1948 international culture, in which semi-universalist norms emphasize “humanity”<sup>11</sup> as a first rather than the final step of an evolutionary

---

<sup>11</sup> I am speaking here about the international human rights norms of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and by no means do I suggest that in the post-World War II world they were the accepted norm of human rights practices in the world, or that they eradicated human rights violations. Moreover, the language of *The Declaration*, with its emphasis on “brotherhood” and the human “family,” isn’t as universalist as it may initially seem. My point is simply that the *Declaration* provided a different model of human-ness (being human) that should have been obvious in legal norms, but had never been.

metamorphosis from something, a thing, or a pseudoperson, into a human legal person, these writers operated in the context of popular discourses and legal norms that promoted incremental, “anticipatory humanity” (Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* 174). Thus, quite pragmatically, they engaged in the critique and revision of contemporary recipes for evolutionary humanization through things. Accepting the reality of the “not-yet”<sup>12</sup> human, they explored new modes of human intimacy with objects, doing so in ways that not only exposed the existing fictions of personification but also probed the potential of reifications that would bring the “not-yet” a bit closer to the now. All of them, however, also accepted, for pragmatic reasons or not, that humanization is not only incremental but also rather arbitrarily “granted” or produced. Thus in their narratives of emancipation through reification, each of these writers also denied some social subjects prospects for legal personification.

Thus, as we embrace possibilities of emancipatory reification, we should recognize the significance of generic forms that conventionalize civil, political human rights and interrogate personhood, while also recognizing the limits of spontaneous, incoherent, often individual human liberatory reinventions. It is important to recover conventional modernist narratives that delineate human socialization, such as the bildungsroman, or ones that examine the social lives of matter, such as nonfiction writing from the period of great political incorporations into and exclusions from American political culture. Even if the taste-making forces within modernist literary studies see little value in the generic, conventional modernist narratives were significant

---

<sup>12</sup> Slaughter 81.

“enabling fictions”<sup>13</sup> that struggled to “canonize”<sup>14</sup> and complicate *conventions* of being human, of being social and political person in early-twentieth-century America.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rita Felski argues that women’s writing functions in this way but it also does for other socially or politically marginalized subjects (*Beyond the Feminist Aesthetics* 168).

<sup>14</sup> Slaughter 144.

## WORKS CITED

### Note on Sources

In my dissertation, I have referred to many primary and secondary sources in diverse media, and this note attempts to help readers identify the use and placement of bibliographic information for sources such as journal, magazine, and newspaper articles, films, television programs, court cases, as well as advertisements and magazine covers. I have placed court cases under a separate category, Court Cases, films, under Films, and the rest of sources alphabetically in Other Sources. Please note that references to individual magazine ads and covers are included only in extensive bibliographic footnotes throughout the dissertation, unless images are part of articles cited in my text, in which case these references also appear in the Works Cited, listed alphabetically under the author's name or, if the article appeared anonymously, under the article title.

### Court Cases

Note that court cases are arranged in reverse chronological order.

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. US Supreme Court 2010.

Garcetti v. Ceballos. US Supreme Court 2006.

First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti. US Supreme Court 1978.

Loving v. Virginia. US Supreme Court 1967.

Shelley v. Kraemer. US Supreme Court 1948.

Breedlove v. Suttles. US Supreme Court 1937.

West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish. US Supreme Court 1937.

Powell v. Alabama. US Supreme Court 1932.

Adkins v. Children's Hospital. US Supreme Court 1923.

Muller v. Oregon. US Supreme Court 1908.

Plessy v. Fergusson. US Supreme Court 1896.

Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company. US Supreme Court 1886.

Pace v. Alabama. US Supreme Court 1883.

United States Ex Rel. Standing Bear v. Crook. US District Court in Omaha, Nebraska 1879.

Dred Scott v. Sandford. US Supreme Court 1857.

## **Films**

*Admiral Cigarettes*. Dir. William Heise. 1897. [http://www.archive.org/details/admiral\\_cigarette](http://www.archive.org/details/admiral_cigarette).

*Back Street*. Dir. David Miller. 1961.

*Back Street*. Dir. John Stahl. 1932.

*Back Street*. Dir. Robert Stevenson. 1941.

*The Birth of a Nation*. Dir. D. W. Griffith. 1915.

*The Century of the Self*. Dir. Adam Curtis. 2002. DVD.

*The Country Doctor*. Dir. D. W. Griffith. 1906. DVD, 2006.

*Cradle Will Rock*. Dir. Tim Robbins. 1999. DVD.

*The Gold Diggers of 1933*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. 1933.

*Gone with the Wind*. Dir. Victor Fleming. 1939.

*Jazz Singer*. Dir. Alan Crosland. 1927.

*The Land*. Dir. Robert Flaherty. 1942.

*Louisiana Story*. Dir. Robert Flaherty. 1948.

*Man of Aran*. Dir. Robert Flaherty. 1934.

*Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* Dir. Robert Flaherty and Francis Flaherty. 1926.

*My Japan*. 1945. <http://www.archive.org/details/MyJapan1945>.

*My Man Godfrey*. Dir. Gregory La Cava. 1936.

*Nanook of the North*. Dir. Robert Flaherty. 2000. DVD, 1922.

*New Deal for Artists, Part 1 & 2: The Federal Writers Project*. 2006. DVD.

*New Deal for the Artists, Parts III & IV*. 2006.

*Our Enemy: The Japanese*. 1943. <http://www.archive.org/details/OurEnemy1943>.

### **Other Sources (books, journal, magazine and newspaper articles, and websites)**

Abel, Richard. *Americanization of the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2006. Print.

Achtenberg, Ben and Helen Van Dongen. "Helen Van Dongen: An Interview." *Film Quarterly* 30.2 (1976): 46-57. Print.

Ackerknecht, Erwin H. "Talking to the Moon. By John Joseph Mathews." *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 21.1 (1946): 133. Print.

Adams, Don and Arlene Goldfarb. "New Deal Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy." *Webster's World of Cultural Democracy*. Talage: Institute for Cultural Democracy, 1995. Print.

Agee, James. *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*. New York: Library of America, 2005. Print.

Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. 1941. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988. Print.

Allred, Jeff. *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.

Althusser, Louis. "Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation." *For Marx*. New York: Vintage, 2005. 87-128. Print.

—. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review, 1972. 127-200. Print.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, 2003. Print.

- Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Robbins. "Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn of the Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts." *Signs* 21.3 (1996): 643-78. Print.
- Appadurai, Arjan. "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination." *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 1. Print.
- , ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. Print.
- Araeen, Rasheed. "From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts." *Third Text* 1 (1887): 6-25. Print.
- Ardis, Ann. "Introduction: Rethinking Modernism, Remapping the Turn of the Century." *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 1-14. Print.
- Ardis, Ann and Leslie W. Lewis ed. *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875-1945*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah, ed. *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969. Print.
- Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print.
- Arthurs, Alberta. "Social Imaginaries and Global Realities." *Public Culture* 15.3 (2000): 579-86. Print.
- Ashdown, Paul, ed. *James Agee: Selected Journalism*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985. Print.
- "Auctions of Oil Land Enrich Osage Indians." *Los Angeles Times* 4 Mar. 1934: 15. Print.
- "Back Street, by Fannie Hurst." *The New Republic* 11 Feb. 1931: 262. Print.
- Bailey, Garrick A. "John Joseph Mathews." *American Indian Intellectuals*. Ed. Margot Liberty. St. Paul: West Pub. Co, 2002. 232-44. Print.
- , ed. *The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche*. Norman and London: Oklahoma UP, 1995. Print.
- Baker, Phil. "Sailing on the Cunard Line." *TLS*.5070 (2000): 7. Print.

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. 1981. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas, 2004. Print.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon, 1984. Print.
- Barkan, Elazar and Ronald Bush, eds. *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995. Print.
- Barnaby, Edward. "The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38.1 (2008): 37-59. Print.
- Barsam, Richard. *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988. Print.
- Batker, Carol. "Literary Reformers: Crossing Class and Ethnic Boundaries in Jewish Women's Fiction of the 1920s." *MELUS* 25.1 (2000): 81-104. Print.
- . "'Love Me Like I Love to Be': The Sexual Politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement." *African American Review* 32.2 (1998): 199-213. Print.
- Bauer, Dale M. *Sex Expression and American Women Writers, 1860-1940*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in the Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.
- . *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity, 2004. Print.
- . *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*. Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open UP, 1998. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone. *Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Borzoi Books, 2009. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. Print.
- . *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- . *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- Bennett, Gwendolyn B. "The Ebony Flute." *Opportunity* 30 May 1928: 153. Print.

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Bergman-Carton, Janis and Evan Carton. "James Agee, Walker Evans: Tenants in the House of Art." *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 20.4 (2001): 1-19. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- , ed. *Intimacy* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren and Hortense J. Spillers. "National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life." *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*. Essays from the English Institute. New York: Routledge, 1991. 110-40. Print.
- Bernays, Edward L. "The Engineering of Consent." *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250. Communication and Social Action (1947): 113-20. Print.
- Bernstein, Matthew and Dana F. White. "Imitation of Life in a Segregated Atlanta: Its Promotion, Distribution and Reception." *Film History: An International Journal* 19.2 (2007): 152-78. Print.
- Beverly, Lowry. *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C. J. Walker*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. Print.
- Bishop, Ryan and John Phillips. "Sighted Weapons and Modernist Opacity: Aesthetics, Poetics, Prosthetics." *Boundary* 2.29 (2002): 157-79. Print.
- Blackburn, Bob L. "Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame: John Joseph Mathews." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 74.3 (1996): 332-34. Print.
- Blinder, Caroline, ed. *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Blinder, Caroline A. "Between the Unimagined and the Imagined: Photographic Aesthetics and Literary Illumination in Walker Evans' and James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*. Ed. Wim Tigges. Studies in Literature (DQR: Studies in Literature): 25. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999. 293-308. Print.
- Bloch, Ernst. "Natural Law and Human Dignity." *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*. Ed. Thomas McCarthy. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1986. Print.
- Bloch, Ernst, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Trans. Ronald Taylor. London: Verso, 2002. Print.

- Bloomfield Jr., Lincoln P., ed. *Global Markets and National Interests: The New Geopolitics of Energy, Capital, and Information*. Washington, DC: Crisis, 2002. Print.
- “Book Notes.” *New York Times* 19 July 1934: 29. Print.
- Bordo, Susan. “Hunger as Ideology.” *Eating Culture*. Eds. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz. New York: State U of New York P, 1998. 11-35. Print.
- Bornstein, George. *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Botshon, Lisa and Meredith Goldsmith, eds. *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. Print.
- Bower, Stephanie, et al. “The Wages of Virtue: Consumerism and Class Formation in Fannie Hurst’s Back Street.” *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. 245-62. Print.
- Bradford, Raork. “Mixed Blood; Quicksand. By Nella Larsen.” *New York Herald Tribune* 13 May 1928: 522. Print.
- Braun, Bruce and Sarah J. Whatmore, eds. *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*. Minneapolis and London: U Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Brinkley, Alan. *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. Vol. II: From 1865. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. *Realist Vision*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005. Print.
- Brotherston, Gordon. *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through Their Literature*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1992. Print.
- Brown, Bill. “How to Do Things with Things (a Toy Story).” *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (1998): 935-64. Print.
- Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2003. Print.
- , ed. *Things*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004. Print.

- Brown, Bill. "The Tyranny of Things (Trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain)." *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 442-69. Print.
- Brown, Elspeth H. *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1924* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print.
- Burke, Virginia M. "Zora Neale Hurston and Fannie Hurst as They Saw Each Other." *College Language Association Journal* 20 (1977): 435-47. Print.
- Burns, Louis F. *A History of the Osage People*. Tuscaloosa and London: U of Alabama P, 2004. Print.
- Butcher, Fanny. "Fannie Hurst's Back Street Wins Praise, Shows Closer Sense of Values, It's Said." *Chicago Daily Tribune* 17 Jan. 1933. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- "Buy 148 Osage Oil Tracts for \$8,290,100." *The Washington Post* 6 Apr. 1923. Print.
- Calder-Marshall, Arthur. *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Flaherty*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1963. Print.
- Caldwell, Erskine and Margaret Bourke-White. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. 1937. Athens: U of Georgia, 1995. Print.
- Calloway, Licia Morrow. *Black Family (Dys)Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen & Fannie Hurst*. *Modern American Literature: New Approaches* (Moal): 27. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2003. Print.
- Calo, Mary Ann. *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010. Print.
- Carr, Helen. *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789-1936*. New York: New York UP, 1996. Print.
- Cather, Willa. *Professor's House*. 1925. New York Random House, 1990. Print.
- . *Saphira and the Slave Girl*. 1940. Reprint ed. New York Alfred A. Knopf, 1961. Print.

- Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Discourse sur le colonialisme by Presence Africaine in 1955. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review, 2000. Print.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital." *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 653. Print.
- Chapman, Berlin B. "[Review of] *the Osages: Children of the Middle Waters*." *Ethnohistory* 9.1 (1962): 103-04. Print.
- Charles, Anne. "Women, Power, and Political Change/Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice/Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist." *NWSA Journal* 21.1 (2009): 204-08. Print.
- Christopher, Robert J. *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A Documentary Life, 1883-1922*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2005. Print.
- "'Citizens United' Ruling Opened Floodgates on Groups' Ad Spending." 7 Oct. 2010. Web. NPR. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=130399554>>.
- City of Philadelphia. "Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition Association." 2000. Web. 1 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.phila.gov/PHILS/Docs/Inventor/graphics/agencies/A232.htm>>.
- Clark, Suzanne. *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- Clemens, Elisabeth S. "Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women's Groups and the Transformation of U.S. Politics, 1890-1920." *The American Journal of Sociology* 98.4 (1993): 755-98. Print.
- Clifford, James and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkley and Los Angeles, 1986. Print.
- Clifton, James A. *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1990. Print.
- . "The Political Rhetoric of Indian History: A Review Essay." *Annals of Iowa* 49.1/2 (1987): 101. Print.
- Clough, Wilson O. "Anatomy of Me: A Wonderer in Search of Herself (Book)." *American Literature* 31.2 (1959): 212. Print.
- Codde, Philippe. *The Jewish American Novel*. West Lafayette: Purdue University, 2007. Print.

- Colbert, Stephen. "Interview with Cornel West." *The Colbert Report*: Comedy Central, 18 Jan. 2011 of *Colbert Nation*. Print.
- Connelly, Frances S. *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995. Print.
- Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996. Print.
- Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost, eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Cornell, Drucilla. *Just Cause; Freedom, Identity, and Rights*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. Print.
- Crank, James Andrew. "'A Piece of the Body Torn out by the Roots': Failure and Fragmentation in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 62.1-2 (2009): 163-78. Print.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle, et al., eds. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. New York: New York Press, 1995. Print.
- Cross, Gary. *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in America*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000. Print.
- Currier, Susan and Bobby Ellen Kimbel. "Fannie Hurst." *American Short-Story Writers, 1910-1945: First Series*. Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB): 86. Detroit: Gale, 1989. 151-58. Print.
- DaGue, Elizabeth. "Images of Work, Glimpses of Professionalism in Selected Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Novels." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5.1 (1980): 50-55. Print.
- Damon-Moore, Helen. *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1994. Print.
- Daniel, Pete, et al. *Official Images: New Deal Photography*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1987. Print.
- Darcy, McNikle. *The Surrounded*. 1936. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1978. Print.
- Davis, Hugh. *The Making of James Agee*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2008. Print.

- Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London Parks: Pimlico, 1998. Print.
- Davis, Thadious M., ed. *Nella Larsen Quicksand*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002. Print.
- Dearborn, Mary V. "A Passionate Life." *American Book Review* 28.6 (2007): 21-22. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Trans. Michael Taormina. Paris: Semiotext(e) 2002. Print.
- . *Negotiations 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983. Print.
- . *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, 2004. Print.
- Deloria, Phillip J. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. Print.
- Dharwadker, Vinay, ed. *Cosmopolitan Geographies*. New York; London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Dimock, Wei Chee and Lawrence Buell, eds. *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Doan, Laura. *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of the Modern English Lesbian Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. Print.
- Doan, Laura and Jane Garrity, eds. *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women, and National Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Dongen, Helen van. "Robert J. Flaherty 1884-1951." *Film Quarterly* 18.4 (Summer 1965): 2-14. Print.
- Dorman, Robert L. *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1993. Print.
- Doyle, Laura. "Transnationalism at Our Backs: A Long View of Larsen, Woolf, and Queer Racial Subjectivity in Atlantic Modernism." *Modernism/Modernity* 13.3 (2006): 531-59. Print.
- Drowne, Kathleen and Patrick Huber. *The 1920s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print.

- Drowne, Kathleen Morgan and Patrick Huber. *The 1920s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 2000. Print.
- . “Two Novels.” *The Crisis* June 1928: 202, 11. Print.
- . *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*. New York: Pathfinder, 1970. Print.
- Earle, David M. *Recovering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. Print.
- Eastman, Max, ed. *Capital, the Communist Manifesto and Other Writings by Karl Marx*. New York: Modern Library, 1959. Print.
- “An Educated Indian.” *New York Times* 25 Nov. 1934: 19-20. Print.
- Eisler, Benita. “Giving It Away.” *Nation* 229.3 (1979): 87-88. Print.
- Eldridge, J. E. T., ed. *Max Weber: The Interpretation of Social Reality*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. “Hamlet and Other Problems.” Print.
- Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, eds. *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Readings*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee, 1997. Print.
- Entin, Joseph B. *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. Print.
- Escobar, Arturo. “After Nature: Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology.” *Current Anthropology* 40.1 (1999): 1-30. Print.
- Esteve, Mary. *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature*. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (CSALC). Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- Evans, Walker. *Walker Evans at Work*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982. Print.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Anchor, 1992. Print.

- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skins White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967. Print.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963. Print.
- Fauset, Arthur Huff. "Quicksand." *Black Opals* June 1928: 19-20. Print.
- Fauset, Jessie Redmon. *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*. Boston: Beacon, 1928. Print.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989. Print.
- . *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Print.
- Findling, John E., ed. *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*. New York: Greenwood, 1990. Print.
- Finnegan, Cara A. *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Books, 2003. Print.
- Fitzgerald, Robert. "James Agee: A Memoir." *Kenyon Review* 30.5 (1968): 587-624. Print.
- Flaherty, Frances. *The Odyssey of a Film-Maker: Robert Flaherty's Story*. New York: Arno, 1972. Print.
- Flaherty, Robert. *My Eskimo Friends: "Nanook of the North."* Garden City and New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924. Print.
- Flam, Jack and Miriam Deutch, eds. *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art: A Documentary History*. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 2003. Print.
- Flaus, John. "Back Street (John M Stahl, 1932) *Senses of Cinema*." 2001. <[http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/20/back\\_street.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/20/back_street.html)>. 19 Mar. 2009.
- Flynn, Elizabeth A. *Feminism Beyond Modernism*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois P, 2002. Print.
- Ford, James L. C. *Magazines for Millions: The Story of Specialized Publications / [by] James L. C. Ford; Foreword by Howard Rusk Long*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1969. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Harper Colophon, 1972. Print.

- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print.
- . *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78*. Trans. Graham Burhell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Fox, Daniel M. "The Achievement of the Federal Writers' Project." *American Quarterly* 13.1 (1961): 3-19. Print.
- Fox, J. R. "[Review of ] *the Osages: Children of the Middle Waters*. By John Joseph Mathews." *Man* 62 (1962): 109-10. Print.
- Francis, Elizabeth. *The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Print.
- Fraser, Nancy. "From Redistribution to Recognition?: Dilemmas of Justice in a "Postsocialist" Age." 1997. <<http://ethicalpolitics.org/blackwood/fraser.htm>>. *Justice Interruptus*. Routledge. 11 July 2010.
- . "Rethinking Recognition." *New Left* 3. May-June (2000). 10 July 2010.
- . *Scales of Justice; Reimagining Political Space a Globalized World*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- Fraser, Nancy and Axel Honnet. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange*. London, New York: Verso, 2003. Print.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy." *Feminist Locations*. Ed. Marianne DeKoven. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001. Print.
- . *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- . "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernity and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies." *Modernism/Modernity* 13.3 (2006): 425-43. Print.
- Frost, Randy O. and Gail Steketee. *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarret, eds. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.

- Gidley, Mick. "Ontological Aspects of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Death, Irony, Faulkner." *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Ed. Caroline Blinder. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 21-39. Print.
- Gillian, Jennifer. "The Hazards of Osage Fortunes: Gender and the Rhetoric of Compensation in Federal Policy and American Indian Fiction." *Arizona Quarterly* 54.3 (1998). Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Giovacchini, Saverio. *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.
- Gish, Robert F. "[Review of] *Sundown* by John Joseph Mathews." *American Indian Quarterly* 14.3 (1990): 336-38. Print.
- Glass, Loren Daniel. *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980*. New York: New York UP, 2004. Print.
- Glasscock, C. B. *Then Came Oil: The Story of the Last Frontier*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1938. Print.
- Glickman, Lawrence B. *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2009. Print.
- Godden, Richard. *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer*. Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.
- Goeser, Caroline. *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 2007. Print.
- Goggans, Jan. *California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative*. Berkeley: U of California P 2010. Print.
- Goldstein, Paul. *Copyright's Highway: From Gutenberg to the Celestial Jukebox*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- Goldwater, Robert. *Primitivism and Modern Art*. 1938. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1986. Print.
- Good, Chris. "Citizens United Decision: Republicans Like It, Liberals Don't." *Atlantic* (2010). Jan 21.

- Gordon, Eugene. "The Negro Press." *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140. The American Negro (1928): 248-56. Print.
- Gosselin, Adrienne Johnson. "Beyond the Harlem Renaissance: The Case for Black Modernist Writers." *Modern Language Studies* 26.4 (1996): 37-45. Print.
- Gramling, Robert and William R. Freudenburg. "A Closer Look at "Local Control": Communities, Commodities, and the Collapse of the Coast." *Rural Sociology* 55.4 (1990): 541-58. Print.
- Gregory, Chris A. *Gifts and Commodities*. New York: Academic Press/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. Print.
- . *Savage Money: The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1997. Print.
- Griffith, Richard. "The Land." *National Board of Review Magazine* Dec. 1941: 11-12. Print.
- . Grimshaw, Anna. *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Gubar, Susan. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- H. R. W. "Quicksand: A Story of the Revolt of a Negro School Teacher." *Boston Evening Transcript* 20 June 1928: 2. Print.
- Hackett, Robin. *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004. Print.
- Hall, Mordaunt. "Back Street (1932), the Bankers Mistress." *New York Times* 29 Aug. 1932. Print.
- Halttunen, Karen. "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture." *The American Historical Review* 100.2 (1995): 303-34. Print.
- Hamilton, Ian. *Writers in Hollywood, 1915-1951*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990. Print.
- Hammill, Faye. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between Wars*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2007.
- Handzo, Stephen. "Intimations of Lifelessness: Sirk's Ironic Tearjerker." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 48 (2005). Print.

- Haraway, Donna. *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth-Century Developmental Biology*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1976. Print.
- . *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- . *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- . *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. Print.
- Hardt, Paolo and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Hardy, Forsyth, ed. *Grierson on Documentary*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1966. Print.
- Harris, Jonathan. *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.
- Harrison, Charles, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, eds. *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University P, 1994. Print.
- Harvey, David. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. Oxford UP: Oxford, 2010. Print.
- Hayden, Katharine Shepard. "Quicksand by Nella Larsen." *Annals of the American Academy of political and Social Science* 40. The American Negro (1928): 345. Print.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New Accents. Ed. Terence Hawkes. New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1979. Print.
- Hedgpeth, Joel W. "[Review] of Talking to the Moon. By John Joseph Mathews." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 56.4 (1981): 455. Print.
- Hegeman, Susan. *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. Print.
- Herman, Matthew. *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

- Herzstein, Robert E. *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- Hiller, Susan, ed. *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Hinsley, Curtis M. "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the Worlds Columbian Exposition, 1893." *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* Eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Javine. Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1990. 344-65. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between Great Expectations and Great Illusions." *Genre* 12.3 (1979): 293-311. Print.
- Hitchcock, Peter. "Oil in an American Imaginary." *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 69 (2010): 81-97. Print.
- Hoffman, Michael J. and Patrick D. Murphy, eds. *Critical Essays on American Modernism* New York: G. K. Hall 1992. Print.
- Hollingworth, Harry L. *Advertising and Selling*. New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1920. Print.
- Holmes, Brian. "Affectivist Manifesto: Artistic Critique in the 21st Century." 2008. *Continental Drift: The Other Side of Neoliberal Globalization*. 12 Jan. 2009. <<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/>>.
- Hughes, Langston. *Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1959. Print.
- Hunter, Carol. "The Historical Contexts in John Joseph Mathews' *Sundown*." *MELUS* 9.1 (1982): 61-72. Print.
- Hunter, Carol. "The Protagonist as a Mixed-Blood in John Joseph Mathews' Novel: *Sundown*." *American Indian Quarterly* 6.3/4 (1982): 319-37. Print.
- Hurley, Jack F. *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972. Print.
- "Hurst, Fannie." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Detroit: Macmillan References USA, 2007. 630. Print.
- "Hurst, Fannie." *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980. 359-63. Print.

- Hurst, Fannie. *Anatomy of Me: A Wonderer in Search of Herself*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1958. Print.
- . *Back Street*. 1930. New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1931. Print.
- . *Imitation of Life*. New York: P. F. Collier, 1933. Print.
- . *Imitation of Life*. 1933. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- . *LummoX*. New York: P. F. Collier, 1923. Print.
- . "Zora Hurston: A Personality Sketch." *Yale University Library Gazette* 35 (1960): 17-22. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks*. New York and London: HarperPerennial, 1995. Print.
- . *Mules and Men*. 1935. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.
- Hutner, Gordon. *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009. Print.
- Ickes, Harold. *Fightin' Oil*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943. Print.
- "Indians' Wealth Ebbs with Oil; an Osage Indian Chief." *New York Times* 23 June 1929: x11. Print.
- Ise, John. *The United States Oil Policy*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1926. Print.
- Izkovitz, Daniel, ed. *Imitation of Life*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Jacobs, Karen. *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.
- Jaffe, Aaron. *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- "James Agee, 45, Poet M Critic." *New York Times* (1923-Current file) 1955: 31. Print.
- Jameson, Frederick. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002. Print.
- Jennings, Michael W., Howard Eiland, and Cary Smith, eds. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005. Print.

- Jessup, John. "Experiment in Communication." *Time* 13 Oct. 1941. Print.
- Johnson, Abby Arthur and Ronald Maberry Johnson. *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African American Magazines in the Twentieth Century*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1979. Print.
- Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.
- Johnson, Charles S., Edwin R. Embree, and W. W. Alexander. *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys 1933-35*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1935. Print.
- Kalter, Susan. "John Joseph Mathews' Reverse Ethnography: The Literary Dimensions of Wah'kon-Tah." *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures* 14.1 (2002): 26-50. Print.
- Kaplan, Carla. *Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.
- . ed. *Passing Nella Larsen*. New York: Norton & Norton, 2007. Print.
- . "Undesirable Desire: Citizenship and Romance in Modern American Fiction." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (1997): 144-69. Print.
- Karl, Alissa G. *Modernism and the Marketplace: Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism in Rhys, Woolf Stein, and Nella Larsen*. New York and London: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Kawash, Samira. *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African American Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. Print.
- Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Reynall and Hitchcock, 1942. Print.
- . "A Universe of Feeling; a Universe." *New York Times* 17 Nov. 1957: BR13. Print.
- Kidd, Stuart. "Dissonant Encounters: FSA Photographers and the Southern Underclass, 1935-1943." *Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars, 1918-1939*. Eds. Richard Godden and Martin Crawford. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006. 25-47. Print.
- Kim, Elaine H. and Norma Alarcón, eds. *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*. Berkley: Third Woman, 1994. Print.

- Klukowski, Ken. "Founding Fathers Smiling after Supreme Court Campaign Finance Ruling." (2010). 10 Apr. 2011 <<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2010/01/22/ken-klukowski-supreme-court-amendment-mccain-feingold/>>.
- Knupfer, Anne Meis. *Toward a Tender Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*. New York and London: New York UP, 1996. Print.
- Kobler, John. *Luce: His Time, Life, and Fortune*. New York: Doubleday, 1968. Print.
- Koppelman, Susan, ed. *The Stories of Fannie Hurst*. New York: Feminist Press, 2004. Print.
- Kramer, Victor A. *Agee and Actuality: Artistic Vision in His Work*. Troy: Whitston, 1991. Print.
- Kroeger, Brooke. *Fannie: Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst*. New York: Times Books, 1999. Print.
- Krupat, Arnold, ed. *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1993. Print.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso, 2005. Print.
- Ladenson, Elizabeth. "By Fate Misbred." *Modernism/Modernity* 15.2 (2008): 381-86. Print.
- Larsen, Nella. "Black Sadie. By T. Bowyer Campbell." *Opportunity* Jan. 1929: 24. Print.
- . *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen*. Ed. Charles R. Larsen. New York: Anchor, 1989. Print.
- . "Sanctuary." *Forum* Jan. 1930: 14-18. Print.
- Lask, Thomas. "Publishing: What Jimmy Carter Reads." *New York Times* 23 June 1976: 62. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or How to Make Things Public." *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2005. 4-31. Print.
- . *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Science to Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: President and Fellow of Harvard College, 2004. Print.
- . *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.

- Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1897. Print.
- Leder, Priscilla. "Sugar Hearts: Female Power in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*." *JASAT (Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas)* 31 (2000): 47-63. Print.
- Lee, A. Robert. *Multicultural American Literature: Comparative Black, Native, Latino/a and Asian American Fictions*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi 2003. Print.
- Lee, Benjamin and Edward LiPuma. "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity." *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 191. Print.
- Lemke, Sieglinde. *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Lerner, Max, ed. *The Portable Veblen*. New York: Viking, 1967. Print.
- Lévi-Stauss, Claude. *Anthropology and Myth: Lectures, 1951-1982*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1984. Print.
- Lewis, Florence Chasan. "Is It Skaz? The Authentic Voice and Crossing Gender Lines in Three American Jewish Women Authors." *Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences*: U of California, Berkeley, 1999. 2983-83. Vol. 59. Print.
- Li, David Leiwei. *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- Lichtenstein, Diane. "Fannie Hurst and Her Nineteenth-Century Predecessors." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 7.1 (1988): 26-39. Print.
- Ling, Jinqi. *Narrating Nationalism: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Littell, Robert. "Moana." *The New Republic* 3 Mar. 1926: 46-47. Print.
- Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. 1925. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992. Print.
- Lofaro, Michael A., ed. *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author's Text*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2007. Print.

- Lofaro, Michael A. and Hugh Davis, eds. *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2005. Print.
- Logan, Lawrence J. *The Osage Indian Murder Plot: The True Story of a Multiple Murder Plot to Acquire the Estates of Wealthy Osage Tribe Members*. Frederick: Amlex, 1998. Print.
- Logan, Rayford Whittingham. *What the Negro Wants*. 1944. New York: Agathon P, 1969. Print.
- Logsdon, Guy. "John Joseph Mathews — a Conversation." *Nimrod* 16.2 (1972): 70-89. Print.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface And the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996. Print.
- . "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of Dictée." *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*. Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón. Berkeley: Third Woman, 1994. 35-72. Print.
- Lucaites, John Louis. "Visualizing 'the People': Individualism vs. Collectivism in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83.3 (1997): 269-88. Print.
- Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies and Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin, 1972. Print.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Accumulation of Capital: An Anti-Critique*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972. Print.
- MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken, 1976. Print.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2006. Print.
- MacLeish, Archibald. *Land of the Free*. 1938. New York: Da Capo, 1977. Print.
- Maddox, Lucy. *Citizens Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race and Reform*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005. Print.
- Madison, Charles A. *Book Publishing in America*. New York, Toronto, and London: McGraw-Hill, 1966. Print.

- Maharidge, Dale and Michael Williamson. *And Their Children after Them*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1989. Print.
- Manuel, George and Michael Posluns. *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1974. Print.
- Mao, Douglas. *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. *Bad Modernisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- Marangoly George, Rosemary, ed. *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*. Boulder: Westview, 1998. Print.
- Marazzi, Christian. *Capital and Language*. Trans. Gregory Conti. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008. Print.
- Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkley: U of California P, 1986. Print.
- Mark, Gregory A. "The Personification of the Business Corporation in American Law." *University of Chicago Law Review* 54 (1987): 1441-83. Print.
- Marx, John. *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New York: Modern Library, 1906. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002. Print.
- Massumi, Brian and Erin Manning. "Grasping the Political in the Event. An Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato." *Inflexions: A Journal for Research Creation* 3 (2009). Web. 29 Nov. 2009  
<[http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume\\_3/node\\_i3/PDF/Lazzarato%20Grasping%20the%20Political%20translation.pdf](http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume_3/node_i3/PDF/Lazzarato%20Grasping%20the%20Political%20translation.pdf)>.
- Mathews, John Joseph. *Sundown*. 1934. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1984. Print.
- . *Talking to the Moon*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1945. Print.

- . *Talking to the Moon*. 1945. Chicago: U of Oklahoma P, 1981. Print.
- . *Wah'kon-Tah: The Osage and the White Man's Road*. 1932. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1981. Print.
- . *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters*. Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1961. Print.
- Mathews, T. S. "What Gods! What Gongs!" *The New Republic* 30 May 1928: 50-51. Print.
- Maurice, Arthur Bartlett. "Fannie Hurst." *Bookman* 69 (1929): 258-60. Print.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. 1925. Trans. Ian Cunnison. New York: Norton, 1967. Print.
- Mazur, Paul M. *American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences*. New York: Viking, 1928. Print.
- . *The Dynamic of Economic Growth*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965. Print.
- . *New Roads to Prosperity: The Crisis and Some Ways Out*. New York: Viking, 1931. Print.
- . *The Standards We Raise: The Dynamics of Consumption*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953. Print.
- McAuliffe, Dennis Jr. *Bloodland: A Family Story of Oil, Greed and Murder on the Osage Reservation*. San Francisco and Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1999. Print.
- . "Sovereignty Denied; for Oklahoma's Osages, a Battle over Blood, Oil and Power." *Washington Post* 20 July 1997. Print.
- McCabe, Tracy. "The Multifaced Politics of Primitivism in Harlem Renaissance Writing." *Soundings* 80.4 (1997): 475-97. Print.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- McDowell, Deborah, ed. *Quicksand and Passing Nella Larsen*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000. Print.
- McGuigan, Jim. *Culture and the Public Sphere*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Melosh, Barbara. *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theatre*. Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1991. Print.

- Mignolo, Walter. "The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism." *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 721-48. Print.
- Miller, Daniel. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010. Print.
- Miller, David, et al. *The History of Assiniboine and the Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation, Montana 1800-2000*. Poplar: Montana Historical Society, 2008. Print.
- Miller, James S. "Inventing the 'Found' Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America." *Journal of American Folklore* 117.466 (2004): 373-93. Print.
- Miller, Sally M., ed. *The Ethnic Press in the United States*. New York, Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood, 1987. Print.
- Miller, Toby. *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Print.
- Miner, Craig. "[Review of] *the Underground Reservation: Osage Oil* by Terry P. Wilson." *American Historical Review* 91.4 (1986): 1004. Print.
- "Miscegenation! Bah!" *New York Amsterdam News*. 16 May 1928. Print.
- Missouri History Museum. "The 1904 World's Fair: Looking Back at Looking Forward." 1997-2004. Web. 4 Jan. 2007.  
<[http://www.mohistory.org/content/fair/wf/html/index\\_flash.html](http://www.mohistory.org/content/fair/wf/html/index_flash.html)>.
- Mitchell, W. J. T., ed. *Art and the Public Sphere*. Chicago and London: Chicago University P, 1990. Print.
- . "Ekphrasis and the Other." 1994. Web. *The Romantic Circles Electronic Edition of Shelley's "Medusa."* 7 June 2010.  
<<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mitchell.html>>.
- . "Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, and Images." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 167-84. Print.
- . *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005. Print.
- Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, and Trees: Abstract Models for Literary Analysis*. London and New York: Verso, 2007. Print.

- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.
- “A Mulatto Girl.” *New York Times* 8 Apr. 1928: 16-17. Print.
- Murphy, William T. *Robert Flaherty: A Guide to Materials and Resources*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1978. Print.
- Natanson, Nicholas. *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992. Print.
- Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. 1932. Albany: State U of New York, 2008. Print.
- “New Books Received.” *Social Forces* 20.2 (1941): 292-96. Print.
- Newman. “Two Letters from Nella Larsen.” *Biblion* 2.2 (1994): 124-29. Print.
- Nichols, Bill. “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde.” *Critical Inquiry* 27.4 (2001): 580-610. Print.
- North, Michael. *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Works*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- . *Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language & Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- “Novelist Here.” *Chicago Defender*. 23 Sep. 1933. Print.
- Oaks, Priscilla. “The First Generation of Native American Novelists.” *MELUS* 5.1 (1978): 57-65. Print.
- O’Connor, James. *Accumulation Crisis*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984. Print.
- “Oil Makes Osages of Northern Oklahoma Richest Indian Community in the World.” *New York Times* 21 May 1923: 1. Print.
- Olin, Margaret. “‘It Is Not Going to Be Easy to Look into Their Eyes’: Privilege of Perception in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.” *Art History* 14 (1991): 92. Print.
- Olson, Liesl. *Modernism and the Ordinary*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

- Orlando, Francesco. *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures*. Trans. Gabriel Pihás and Daniel Seidel. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. Print.
- Orner, Mark Robert. "Nature Documentary Explorations: A Survey History and Myth Typology of the Nature Documentary Film and Television Genre from the 1880s through the 1990s." Ph.D. U of Massachusetts Amherst, 1996. Print.
- "The Osage Indians" *The Nation* 8 Feb. 1933: 155. Print.
- "Osage Indians Face Depletion of Oil Incomes." *Christian Science Monitor* 2 Nov. 1929. Print.
- "Osage Leases Sold.; Auctions Bring \$3,000,000" *New York Times* 30 Mar. 1928: 50. Print.
- "Osage Lore Left by Hoover's Uncle." *New York Times* 1 Nov. 1932. Print.
- Osage Nation. "Overview." <[http://www.osage-tribe.com/main\\_culture\\_overview.aspx](http://www.osage-tribe.com/main_culture_overview.aspx)>, 2006. Print.
- "Osage Oil Revenue Is \$240,000,000." *New York Times* 9 Oct. 1932: F3. Print.
- "Osages before Oil [Review of *Wah'kon-Tah*]." *Time* 7 Nov. 1932: <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,744704,00.html>>. Print.
- Owens, Louis. "'Disturbed by Something Deeper': The Native Art of John Joseph Mathews." *Western American Literature* 35.2 (2000): 162-73. Print.
- . *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Norman, Oklahoma: Oklahoma UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Other Destinies: Understanding Indian American Novel*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992. Print.
- Padmore, George. *Pan-Africanism or Communism*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971. Print.
- Park, Marlene and Gerald E. Markowitz. *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1984. Print.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Invention of Native American Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2003. Print.

- . “Material Choices: American Fictions, the Classroom, and the Post-Canon.” *American Literary History* 5.1 (1993): 89-110. Print.
- Parson, Alice Beal. “Three Novels.” *Nation* 1928: 540. Print.
- Patterson, Frances Taylor. “Nanook of the North.” *The New Republic* 9 Aug. 1922: 306-07. Print.
- Patterson, Lyman Ray and Stanley W. Lindberg. *The Nature of Copyright: A Law of User’s Rights*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1991. Print.
- Patton, Phil. *Made in USA: The Secret Histories of the Things That Made America*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992. Print.
- Payne, James Robert, ed. *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives* Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992. Print.
- PBS. “The Dawes Act, February 8, 1887.” 2001. Web. *PBS.org*. PBS. 20 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/eight/dawes.htm>>.
- Peck, David R. “‘The Orgy of Apology’: The Recent Evaluation of Literature of the Thirties.” *Science and Society* 32.4 (1968): 371-82. Print.
- Pells, Richard H. *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Era*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Print.
- Pfister, Joel. *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Plassis, Rachel Blau du. “Pater-Daughter: Male Modernists and Female Readers “ *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. U of Alabama P, 2006. 41-67. Print.
- Pollock, Sheldon, et al. “Cosmopolitanisms.” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 577- 89. Print.
- Pottage, Alain and Martha Mundy, eds. *Law, Anthropology, and the Constitution of the Social: Making Persons and Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Prelinger, Rick. *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*. San Francisco: National Film Preservation, 2006. Print.

- Provenzo Jr., Eugene F. "The Exhibit of American Negroes." 2003.  
 <<http://129.171.53.1/ep/Paris/home.htm>>. University of Miami. 3 Oct. 2008.
- Pulitano, Elvira. *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. Print.
- , ed. *Transatlantic Voices: Interpretations of Native North American Literature*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2007. Print.
- Rabin, Jessica G. *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Will Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. *Black and White, and Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. Print.
- . *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.
- . *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London: Verso, 1994. Print.
- Radway, Janice. *A Felling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997. Print.
- Raines, Howell. "Let Us Now Revisit Famous Folk." *New York Times* 25 May 1980: SM8. Print.
- Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992. Print.
- Ravitz, Abe C. *Imitations of Life: Fannie Hurst's Gaslight Sonatas*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1997. Print.
- Redding, Mildred. "WPA Statewide Museum Service, Oklahoma Records, 1938-1941." 1938-1941 WPA Statewide Museum Service.
- Revard, Carter. *Family Matters, Tribal Affairs* Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1998. Print.
- Rice, Walter and Carl Hovanitz. "From Panama to Poly; the Saga of the Overfair Railway Pacifics." 5 May 2011 <<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist9/overfair.html#TOP>>.
- Richardson, Rupert N. "[Review of] *Wah-Kon-Tah: The Osage and the White Man's Road*. By John Joseph Mathews." *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 37.3 (1934): 225-26. Print.
- Riggs, Lynn. *Green Grow the Lilacs: A Play*. New York: Samuel French, 1931. Print.

- Rivoli, Pietra. *The Travels of a T-Shirt in a Global Economy: An Economist Examines Markets, Power, and the Politics of World Trade*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2009. Print.
- Rodgers, Susan. *Power and Gold: Jewelry for Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines*. Geneva: Prestal-Verlag, 1985. Print.
- Rohrbach, Paul. "Necessity for an Economic Basis of International Peace." *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 108. American Relation to the European Situation (1923): 82-84. Print.
- Rooney, Monique. "My You: Fannie Hurst, Zora Neale Hurston and Literary Patronage." *Working Papers on the Web* 5 (2003). Print.
- Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. "Second Inaugural Address." (1937). 22 Mar. 2011.
- Root, Merrill E. "Ebony Hour-Hand, Pointing to Midnight." *Christian Century* 1928: 61-62. Print.
- Rosetti, Gina M. *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Fiction*. Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 2006. Print.
- Rothman, William. "Filmmaker as Hunter: Robert Flaherty's Nanook of the North." *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Eds. Barry Keith Grant and Jeanette Sloniowski. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998. 23-39. Print.
- Rubin, Martin. "The Voice of Silence: Sound Style in John Stahl's *Back Street*." *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. 277-85. Print.
- Rubin, William, ed. *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988. Print.
- Ruoff, A. LaVonne Brown. *American Indian Literatures: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review, and Selective Bibliography*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990. Print.
- . *American Indian Literatures: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review, and Selective Bibliography*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990. Print.
- Ruoff, A. LaVonne Brown and James Robert Payne. "John Joseph Mathews's *Talking to the Moon*: Literary and Osage Contexts." *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992. 1-31. Print.

- Ryan, Terre. "Creation Stories: Myth, Oil, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." *Journal of Ecocriticism* 2.1 (2010): 81-86. Print.
- Rydell, Robert, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle. *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*. Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution, 2000. Print.
- Rydell, Robert W. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Institutions, 1876-1916*. Chicago: U of Chicago P 1984. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- . "Permission to Narrate." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13.3 (1984): 27-48. Print.
- . *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- Saposs, David J. "Labor." *The American Journal of Sociology* 37.6 (1932): 889-95. Print.
- Sarat, Austin, Bryan Garth, and Robert A. Kagan, eds. *Looking Back at Law's Century*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2002. Print.
- Sarat, Austin and Thomas R. Kearns, eds. *Identities, Politics, and Rights*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.
- Sass, Ann. "Picturing Business: The Photography of *Fortune*, 1930-1965." 2000. <<http://museum.icp.org/museum/exhibitions/fortune/brochure.html>>. International Center of Photography. 19 Mar. 2011.
- Scandura, Jani. *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Scandura, Jani and Michael Thurston, eds. *Modernism, Body, Memory, Capital*. New York: New York UP, 2001. Print.
- Schatzki, Theodore R. and Wolfgang Natter, eds. *The Social and the Political Body*. New York and London: Guilford, 1996. Print.
- Schedler, Christopher "Formulating a Native American Modernism in John Joseph Matthews's Sundown" " *Arizona Quarterly* 55.1 (1999): 127-49. Print.
- Schweninger, Lee. "Irony and the 'Balance of Nature on the Ridges' in Mathews's *Talking to the Moon*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures* 9.2 (1997): 41-56. Print.

- Scott, Bonnie Kime, ed. *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.
- . *Refiguring Modernism: The Women of 1928*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995. Print.
- Scott, Walter Dill. *The Theory of Advertising*. 1903. Print.
- Seaman, Donna. "The Stories of Fannie Hurst (Book)." *Booklist* 101.9/10 (2005): 821-21. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. Print.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machines*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Sharpley-Whitting, T. Denean. *Negritude Women*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Print.
- Sheehan, Arthur J. "Hallelujah." *America* 70.15 (1944): 413-14. Print.
- Shepherd, William G. "Lo, the Rich Indian." *Harper's Weekly* Nov. 1920: 723-34. Print.
- Sherman, Mrs. John Dickinson. "The Woman's Clubs in the Middle Western States." *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 28. Woman's Work and Organizations (1906): 29-49. Print.
- Simmel, Georg. "Fashion." *The American Journal of Sociology* 62.6 (1957): 541-58. Print.
- Simonsen, Jane E. *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006. Print.
- Sinclair, Upton. *Oil! A Novel*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007. Print.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Smith, Terry. *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993. Print.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

- Spiegel, Alan. *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*. Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 1998. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense J., ed. *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Steinbeck, John and Edward F. Ricketts. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. 1941 ed. New York: Viking, 1969. Print.
- Stephen Colbert. "Interview with Cornel West." *The Colbert Report* (18 Jan. 2011). 5 Apr. 2011.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- , ed. *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- . *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. Print.
- Strathern, Marilyn. *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988. Print.
- Sullivan, Edward J. *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2007. Print.
- Sweeney, Carole. *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernisms, and Primitivism 1919-1935*. Westport: Praeger, 2004. Print.
- Szalay, Micheal. *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. Durham & London: Duke UP, 2000. Print.
- Taylor, Christopher. "'Inescapably Propaganda': Re-Classifying Upton Sinclair Outside the Naturalist Tradition." *Studies in American Naturalism* 2.2 (2007): 166-78. Print.
- Taylor, Winslow Fredrick. *Principle of Scientific Management*. Ed. American Council of Learned Societies. 1947. 16 Mar. 2011.
- Thaggert, Miriam. "Divided Images: Black Female Spectatorship and John Stahl's Imitation of Life." *African American Review* 32.3 (1998): 481-91. Print.

- Thompson, Michael. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979. Print.
- Thompson, Ralph. "Books of the Times." *New York Times* 19 Aug. 1941: 19. Print.
- Thompson, Stephanie and Kecia Driver McBride. "An Imitation of Life: Deconstructing Racial Stereotypes in Popular Culture." *Visual Media and the Humanities*. Tennessee Studies in Literature (TStL): 42. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2004. 205-28. Print.
- Thompson, Stephanie Lewis. *Influencing America's Tastes: Realism in the Works of Wharton, Cather, and Hurst*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002. Print.
- Thrailkill, Jane F. *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- Torgovnik, Marianna *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1990. Print.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982. Print.
- . "Walker Evans's Contrapuntal Design: The Sequences of Photographs in the First and Second Editions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Ed. Caroline Blinder. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 71-77. Print.
- Trilling, Lionel. "Review: Greatness with One Fault in It." *The Kenyon Review* 4.1 (1942): 99-102. Print.
- Tsing, Anna. "Globalist Projects Come into Being as Aphids." *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 143. Print.
- Tucker, Robert C., ed. *The Marx Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.
- Turner, Bryan S. *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*. London: Sage, 1990. Print.
- Tygiel, Jules. *Oil!: A Novel by Upton Sinclair*. California Fiction. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.

- US Census Bureau. "Fifteen Census of the United States -1930—Population." Washington, 1931. United States Printing Office. 8 Dec. 2008. <<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/03815512v1ch02.pdf>>.
- US National Archives and Records Administration. "Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs." 1995. Web. 9 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/075.html#75.19.74>>.
- United Nations. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." 1948. <<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>>. 23 Mar. 2011.
- US Constitution*. <<http://topics.law.cornell.edu/constitution/overview>>.
- Vescia, Monice. *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera-Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Vestal, Stanley. "Wah'kon-Tah: The Osage and the White Man's Road by John Joseph Mathews." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 20.1 (1933): 153. Print.
- Virilio, Paul. *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*. London: Sage, 2001. Print.
- . *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Trans. Patrick Camiller. London & New York: Verso, 1989. Print.
- Virno, Paulo and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- von Struve, A. W. "Two WPA Projects of Historical Interest." *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 42.2 (Oct. 1938): 117-21. Print.
- Wald, Priscilla. *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel and Etienne Balibar. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London and New York: Verso, 1999. Print.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2005. Print.

- Warrior, Robert. "Intellectual Sovereignty and the Struggle for an American Indian Future." *Wicazo Sa Review* 8.1 (Spring 1992): 1-20. Print.
- Warrior, Robert Allen. *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.
- . *Tribal Secrets: Vine Deloria, Jr., John Joseph Mathews, and the Recovery of the American Indian Intellectual Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995. Print.
- Washington, Booker T. "The Atlanta Compromise." *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*. Ed. Josh Gottheimer. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004. 128-31. Print.
- . *Up from Slavery*. 1901. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's 2003. Print.
- Weaver, Jace. *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2006. Print.
- Weiner, Anette. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Print.
- Wensberg, Erik. "Remembering James Agee; Let Us Now Praise a Famous Men." *New York Times* 29 Dec. 1974: 7. Print.
- Wentick, Charles. *Modern and Primitive Art*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1978. Print.
- West, Cornel. *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*. New York: Hay House, Inc., 2011. Print.
- Widmer, Kingsley. "Timeless Prose." *Twentieth Century Literature* 4.1/2 (1958): 3-8. Print.
- Wilentz, Gay. "White Patron and Black Artist: The Correspondence of Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston." *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* 35 (1986): 20-43. Print.
- Williams, Fannie Barrier. "The Club Movement among Colored Women of America." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarret. Princeton and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 54-65. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia UP, 1958. Print.
- . "Ideas of Nature." *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. Ed. Raymond Williams. London: Verso, 1980. Print.

- Willmott, Glenn. *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, the Market, and the Gift*. Toronto; Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 2008. Print.
- Wilson, Terry P. "Osage Oxonian: The Heritage of John Joseph Mathews." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 59.3 (1981): 264-93. Print.
- . *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985. Print.
- "Woman Denied Divorce, Starts Hunger Strike." *Chicago Daily Tribune* 15 Feb. 1925: 1. Print.
- Wonham, Henry B., ed. *Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996. Print.
- Woodward, Robert H. "Jack London's Code of Primitivism." *Folio* (1953). Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. "American Fiction." *The Saturday Review of Literature* 1.2 (1925): 1-3. Print.
- Wranovics, John. "Chaplin in the Art and Life of James Agee." *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee*. Ed. Michael A. Lofaro. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2007. 157-67. Print.
- Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. 1941. New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1969. Print.
- Yeziarska, Anzia. *Bread Givers*. 1925. New York: Persea Books, 2003. Print.
- . *The Open Cage: An Anzia Yeziarska Collection*. New York: Persea Books, 1979. Print.