Documentary Photography and Dignity

In 1936, writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans set out to document the lives of cotton tenant families in the South for an article in *Fortune* magazine. The publishers rejected the article, but the photographs and written work were finally released in 1941 as their groundbreaking book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. For several weeks during the height of the Great Depression, Evans and Agee lived with and photographed three different tenant families to provide an unflinching look at their daily existence and to “pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings” (5). The awareness of them as human beings, not just subjects, was what made their work different from every other treatment of Depression era poverty up to that point.

Other photographers of the era, such as Margaret Bourke-White, also tried to capture the hard lives of destitute sharecroppers, but Walker Evans’ photography went beyond just portraying the ugliness of poverty. Evans’ images show a deep respect for the people he was photographing. He was able to not just show the appalling conditions of the tenants’ lives, but also the inherent dignity, humanity, beauty, and pride that still existed even in the middle of all that hardship.

The compelling photographs he took are an integral part of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In the preface to the book, Agee tells us that we are really getting two books in one, just as there are two “immediate instruments: . . . the motionless camera and the printed word” (X). Evans’ photo essay is the first thing the reader encounters, with no introduction, preface, captions, or explanations. Agee lets us know that the images “are not illustrative. They and the text are co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative” (XI). Evans’ photos were not there to simply augment Agee’s text. They were meant to have a life and purpose of their own.
Agee had very strong ideas of what he wanted the photography in the book to be like. He specifically requested Evans, who at that point was not working for the magazine but was under contract as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), to be the photographer for his trip. Agee tells us the following about how he sees the role of the camera:

All of consciousness is shifted . . . to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is. This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time, and is why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so nearly universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen alive whose eyes I can trust even so much as my own. (9)

Agee didn’t want someone to go in with preconceived ideas and shoot photos that were meant to teach a lesson or hold the tenants up as objects to be pitied. He wanted his photographer to have the same objective that he had.

Evans was one of the few photographers whose work he respected and admired enough to trust him with this task. As author and professor Carol Shloss tells it, Walker Evans “exemplified the artist whose work was important because of its subject’s dignity, not because of the formal qualities imposed by the photographer’s shaping sensibilities. With this intense regard for the ‘object’ in front of the lens, Evans had made art in into a mode of mutual confidence that Agee found deeply admirable” (34). Agee and Evans understood each. They both were more interested in portraying real people than stereotypes. Journalism professor Norman Sims tells us that instead of painting all cotton tenants with the same brush, they made their book into “a case study. … Each person was unique rather than a symbol of a class of people”(151). Agee and Evans were interested in people as individuals, not as a class. They weren’t interested in
portraying “sharecroppers” as much as they were interested in portraying the Gudger, Woods, and Ricketts families, real people with real lives.

In a documentary photographer, Agee was looking for someone who would try to show “some single thing . . . as nearly as possible as that thing is” (205) According to Shloss, Walker Evans saw his role similarly to what Agee envisioned it to be – he “saw his role as an essentially self-forgetful one; and though he knew that photographers could create the conditions they photographed . . . he would act as the agent of other people’s experience, . . . as a conduit to realities not present to his audience except through the picture itself” (31). He was there to record someone else’s life, not direct it or pre-edit it. This role is in stark contrast to another photographer that Agee mentions in the “Notes and Appendices” section of their book.

It is only there that we find out which kind of photography causes Agee to “rage at its misuse” – under the heading “A Note on the Photographs,” he includes a full-length article on photographer Margaret Bourke-White, written by May Cameron for the New York Post (398). The title proclaims that “Margaret Bourke-White Finds Plenty of Time to Enjoy Life Along With Her Camera Work – Famous Photographer Who Took Picture for You have Seen Their Faces Discusses Experiences Among Southern Share-Croppers” (398). The articles begins recounting in a cutesy, jocular style her designer clothing, how much money she is making, her ambush-style photography techniques, bribing her subjects to obtain photographs, condescension towards her subjects’ religion and habits, and the fun she has when not taking photographs, such as swimming, ice-skating, and having her horse brought to her shooting locations (398-401). To Agee, her approach to photography would be the equivalent of him getting out of an air-conditioned limousine, waltzing in, recording a couple of interviews with the farmers using leading questions, and then returning to the comfort of his hotel room to have a nice whisky
while writing out copy for the magazine, instead of spending weeks sleeping on vermin-infested sheets so that he could leave an accurate record of his subjects’ lives.

In other words, it is easy to see how much of her personality and approach to documentary photography would have rubbed Agee completely the wrong way. Paula Rabinowitz, an expert on modern American women’s art and literature, has this to say on Agee’s inclusion of the article:

It stands as the only place where middle-class women enter the text. May Camerons’s breezy article described Bourke-White’s presence as flamboyant and flashy; her entrance signaled by the ‘reddest coat in the world’ she sports. After the thousands of words Agee has used to detail the meager wardrobe hanging on the nails of the Gudgers’ bedroom walls . . . this flagrant display of wealth and female sexual allure is intended to stun and more to discredit the most popular and widely known female photographer of the decade. (68)

She also says that “Bourke-White made her living as a voyeur, as a . . . tourist among the neediest people, sending dispatches back to the comfortable living rooms of Life Magazine’s readers” (69). Whereas Evans and Agee wanted to record and experience what the real lives of these three families were like, Bourke-White was there with an agenda.

It’s an agenda that Agee scathingly rebukes when he sarcastically writes about “a book written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance” (11). His and Evans’ goal is to remove the distance, to place the reader right there with them, to make the actual lives of these people palpable and direct. As American Studies professor William Stott says, Agee treated “his subjects without condescension and without trying to amuse. He took their lives, customs, aspirations, and woes
no less seriously than they did” (262). This was in stark contrast to the work of Bourke-White, who used photographic techniques and camera angles to “overdramatize virtually everything she treats” (270). Instead of letting the tenants determine how they wanted to be photographed, she took photos to express a certain, predetermined idea.

Even the tools used by Bourke-White’s and Evans’ were very different. Bourke-White favored the small 35mm camera, which allowed her to ambush her subjects and take picture of them when they were not expecting it. The resulting images had a very different feel to them than Evans’ images. Burke-White’s photos were more voyeur-like, making the subjects seem more like oddities or creatures being observed than equals of the photographer (see figure 1).

![Figure 1: Margaret Bourke-White’s photograph Revival Meeting](image)

Evans was one of her main critics. In a conversation with William Stott in 1970, recorded in his seminal book *Documentary Expressions and Thirties America*, Evans says about Bourke-White:
It [was] a double outrage: propaganda for one thing and profit-making out of both propaganda and the plight of the tenant farmers. It was morally shocking to Agee and me. Particularly so since it was publically received as the nice thing to do, the right thing to do. Whereas we thought it was an evil and immoral thing to do. Not only to cheapen them, but to exploit them. . . . You notice that Agee is saying ad nauseum almost throughout the book: “For God’s sake, we must not exploit these people, and how awful it is if we are. (222-223)

Evans did not believe in a stealth approach, instead relying a the large, unwieldy 8x10 view camera as the source of most of his published work for the Let Us Now Praise Famous Men project. As Stott puts it, Walker Evans’ photography “is not a stolen shocking glimpse, a candid expose. There is nothing candid in Evans’ best photographs; . . . he does not glimpse, but frankly, interminably stare” (268). Evans does not try to hide the fact that he is going to take his subject’s pictures from them. After all, there is nothing secretive or subversive about a very large camera mounted on a tripod.

In James Curtis’ analysis of Walker Evans’ photos in his book Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth, he notes how the 8x10 view camera’s main purpose was to take portraits. When “it was set up, people gathered before it to have their picture ‘taken’” (28). Agee describes a scene where “Walker was setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback, of the camera, stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth” (322). The people were completely aware that they were about to be photographed, and due to the long exposure times, would have had to have held their poses for quite a while to get a sharp shot.
In addition, virtually all his photos are taken at face level— he doesn’t get above or below his subjects, but places himself (and thus the reader) at the same level they are at. The subjects are often looking directly at the camera. The resulting images are strong, memorable, connect on a personal level, and are not at all exploitive (see figure 2.)

Figure 2: Walker Evans’ photograph *Allie Mae Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama*

Yet Walker Evans did carry a 35mm camera, and according to Curtis, the percentage of photos he took with the smaller, handheld camera in Alabama was much larger than those he took elsewhere (34). Agee describes at least two instances in the text where Walker Evans is taking pictures surreptitiously. In one of those instances, he was taking photos as the family was getting ready to pose for a group shot. Two of the girls are getting their hair fixed up (see figure 3), and Evans “under the smoke screen of our talking made a dozen pictures of you using the angle finder
(you never caught on)” (320). What is remarkable and to his credit is that he actually chose none of those pictures to include in the book.

![Walker Evans' photograph Tingle Children, Hale County, Alabama](image)

**Figure 3: Walker Evans’ photograph Tingle Children, Hale County, Alabama**

I think that he believed too strongly in the dignity of the subjects to put in photos where they are completely unguarded and unprotected from the camera, or to include photos that he took on the sly. While later in life Walker Evans did take photos without his subjects’ knowledge, many of them published in his book *Many Are Called*, those were taken with a different objective in mind and of a different group of people. Evans’ contribution to the *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* project was not about candid street photography – it was about giving a real voice to the voiceless, and giving them a say in how they would be perceived by the world at large. I believe that these people were so damaged and used already that he did not want to add to that abuse.

Instead of sneak-attack shots of the downtrodden, the portraits we see in his photo essay beautiful and purposeful. When I first looked through the portraits, what I felt was not pity, but respect. There is so much beauty, pride, and dignity in the photos, in spite of the ragged clothing
and dirty bodies. Their eyes meet mine – defiant, puzzled, sad, angry, but always human and strong. These people aren’t objectified. They are valued.

The same aesthetic carried over to the shots he took of the tenants’ homes. Evans could easily have focused on the squalor. There surely was plenty of dirt, mess, and ugliness to photograph. What we get instead are carefully composed photographs that focus on the beauty and simplicity of those homes. We get enough of an idea of the poverty and living conditions without the artist wallowing in those. So many of his interior and object photos show the human element – snapshots they have hanging on their wall, the careful arrangements on their mantles. For example, Evans shows us Annie Mae Gudger’s paper cut-out that decorates the mantle in the first set of photos – something that she later “speaks of as her last effort to make this house pretty” (143). That sad little decorative element in such a bleak house helps me know something about Annie Mae and allows me, even from decades away, to relate to her on a very human level.

Evans has been accused of manipulating some of the photos to get an effect he desired (or improve the composition) and this charge is almost certainly true. While Evans in a conversation with Stott says that “the word ‘documentary’ holds: you don’t touch a thing,” he qualifies that shortly thereafter with “you don’t stick anything in it” (269). He may have moved a bed to get a better angle or view of it, and he may have removed some newspaper from a fireplace before photographing it, but, as Curtis points out “he made these alterations not to mislead the public and certainly not to betray the tenants, but rather to show the order and beauty that he believed lay beneath the surface of their poverty” (25). Whatever he did to arrange the photos was not meant to deceive or further an agenda, but only to make what was already there more visible.

It was this that made Walker Evans an ideal “partner in crime” for James Agee. They shared this goal in common. Instead of feeding the viewer photos of the poor, to-be-pitied
“sharecroppers” they let us have a look into the real lives of real people. As Curtis says, what makes *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* so great is “the unique blend of Agee’s sympathy and Evans’ realism” (22). But there is sympathy in Evans’ photographs and realism in Agee’s prose. They both portrayed reality, but unlike other journalists and photographers of their era, they didn’t disregard the dignity and beauty that exists even in the most humble of circumstances. They celebrated it.
Works Cited


