

Chapter 12

“The Cruel Radiance of What Is”

The Reality of Things in James Agee and Walker Evans’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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In the contemporary digital culture that makes us fear that we have lost touch with the materiality of things (see Gumbrecht 2006, 306), it may be interesting to revisit the ideas of thingness in the era of American naturalism and classic photo-documentary practice. The aim of this chapter is to read material, nonhuman things and inanimate objects in the context of American literature, shifting the focus from anthropomorphic naturalism to materialistic naturalism. Richard M. Gale defines that in the American pragmatic philosophy (especially that of John Dewey), “anthropomorphic or humanistic naturalisms . . . depict nature as made to order for us human beings because it answers back to our deepest feelings and aspirations,” whereas “reductive materialistic naturalisms . . . strip nature of all the qualities that give it human meaning and purpose” (2010, 55). The main issue of the chapter is the reality of things themselves and those marginal details of the everyday, such as daily work and inanimate objects, which sometimes only photographs can capture. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941 = *FM*), a classic of the photo-documentary books produced during the Great Depression, depicts writer James Agee’s and photographer Walker Evans’s journey to Alabama in the summer of 1936 to record the lives of three white sharecropper families who were living in desperate conditions. It has conventionally been described as either “naturalist” or “modernist,” but these concepts, naturalism and modernism, are themselves questioned in Agee’s text.

James Agee defines the aims, purposes, and media of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* at the beginning of the narrative text: “The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families. . . . The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word” (*FM*, 10). Here, the authors (both Agee and Evans) present themselves as documentarists whose working ethics must be considered and negotiated by the readers. What is more, the “nominal” subject of the book—the life of tenant families—both shapes and is shaped by the “actual” subject, that is, the flesh-and-blood reality of the real people behind or beyond the text. We may note that Agee changed the names of the three families he depicted, not in order to make fiction, but to grant them their dignity and individuality (he indeed speaks of the “dignity of actuality” *FM*, 221). From this perspective, of course, the title of the book is quite telling, as it “praises” these people (not only men) who are not “famous” but forgotten. Conventionally, the book has been read as an “effort in human actuality” (*FM*, 11), following Agee’s guidance. As Jeffrey J. Folks argues, Agee responded instinctively with empathy toward the frail and vulnerable—the poor, the homeless, the sick, all of whom elicited his compassion (2007, 74). We may also note that the book’s title alludes to the lines from Ecclesiasticus. As Gavin Jones suggests, this subtext sets Agee’s work “within a familiar Christian dialectic that contrasts wise and powerful men with the silent but blessed poor” (2008, 192). These traditional readings of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* emphasize the book’s focus on the suffering of the poor and Agee’s way of seeing something holy and beautiful in that suffering; generally, these readings foreground the book’s *human* aspect. My own reading in this chapter also aims to situate those human lives and minds in the material reality of nonhuman lives and inanimate objects that constitute the tenant farmers’ world in the 1930s Alabama.

WORDS AND IMAGES: READING THE MATERIAL CULTURE

A materialist reading of literature is an approach taken in this chapter, while my analysis also argues that Agee and Evans’s documentary book is one of the seminal “object centred” texts in American naturalism and modernism. In his “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown explores the ways in which the late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of material culture studies and the vitality of material history as well as the accounts of objects in everyday life and the return of the “real” in contemporary art. According to Brown, in material literary and cultural studies the focus of analysis was turned “on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat” (2001,

2). However, as Brown clarifies, we only begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us, when, for example, the drill breaks or the window gets filthy—or, in my reading, when the tenant farmer’s shoes show their weariness after endless work on cotton fields. It is here that the human and social dimension of inanimate things comes to the foreground; the questions asked concern not so much whether things are (and what they are) but, rather, what they mean and what they perform to us human beings (7).

Speaking of “vibrant matter” and the “vitality of things,” Jane Bennett means the capacity of things to block the will and designs of human beings as well as to act as agents or forces with tendencies of their own (2010, viii). She therefore emphasizes “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” and adds a political dimension to her reading of inanimate objects and nonhuman actors by suggesting “the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (ix).¹ In this context, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* might be seen as an interesting elegy for the material things that constitute the lives of the poor in the age of capitalist consumption; indeed, the book celebrates the meaning of shoes, clothes, tools, and food that are an integral part of the daily work and everyday lives of the tenant farmers depicted in the narrative. In what follows, I will especially focus on Agee’s prose and Evans’s photography concerning a tenant farmer’s working shoes, their materiality and meaning in the world depicted in the book.

In his book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) Bill Brown develops his theory presented in the article “Thing Theory,” now especially attached to the readings of American realism, regionalism, naturalism, and early modernism (including authors such as Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James). Aiming at constructing a “materialist phenomenology of everyday life,” Brown’s book-length study concerns itself with various works of fiction that “dramatize the role of objects in American life, and how such texts dramatize the role of humans in the life of American objects” (2003, 3, 14). Referring briefly to the related aesthetics of photographer Walker Evans and poet William Carlos Williams, Brown notices Williams’s broken verse “the broken / pieces of a green / bottle” and speaks of “framing,” which enables Evans or Williams to “produce art out of quotidian waste” (213; see also Orvell 1989, 292). What interests me in this chapter are those marginal details of the everyday, which writers such as James Agee or William Carlos Williams also tried to “reach” in their prose and poetry—or, indeed, Walker Evans in his photos.

While a photograph is also perceived as resembling that which it depicts, it may be noted that a photograph is not only iconic but also *indexical* (to employ C. S. Peirce’s semiotic terminology). The notion of indexicality is the founding element of photographic representation: indexicality links the image to its

object through physical causality or connection. As Geoffrey Batchen notes, “as an index, the photograph is never itself but always, *by its very nature*, a tracing of something else” (1997, 9). Therefore, since the photographic image is an index of the effect of light on photographic emulsion, all unedited (or “analogical”) photographic and filmic images are, by their nature, indexical. Thus, we need to acknowledge that what distinguishes the photo-image from other forms of representation is its material link to reality, just as we have to pay attention to the tension between the culturally fabricated nature of the photograph and its fundamental indexicality, its status as “a trace of the real” (Hughes and Noble 2003, 4). In other words, “the photograph is a physical trace of (the light reflecting off) that which existed before the camera in the real world” (Horstkotte and Pedri 2008, 12–13). Photographs, in short, differ from other images on the basis of their photochemical process, mechanical production, and indexical connection to reality.

Studies of photographic art aim at foregrounding photographic specificity while relating that specificity to the concerns of a particular cultural and historical climate. Donald Pizer speaks about the interrelations of American naturalism and photography in their commitment to the depiction of hardship, poverty, and other forms of deprivation (2020, 35). While Jacob Riis’s photo-journalistic book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) marks the starting point of American photographic naturalism, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I would argue, represents its culmination point. In 1936, the U.S. government launched a large-scale documentary project called the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which worked hard to make the Depression easier to handle and understand through photographic images. It is important to note that the classic phase of American photographic art was born in this context and that these years saw a lot of collaboration between prose writers, poets, and photographers in their joint project to try to depict the events and faces of the Depression era.² The element of documentary representation of the social world—through fiction, poetry, film, photography and so on—is one significant element of American modernism (see Rabinowitz 2005, 264–66), but as the high modernist writers sometimes aimed at objective distance and formal aesthetics, they were, more or less, detached from the actual social concerns of their times. It is this kind of “hermetic” modernism—as well as sensational “naturalism”—which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* criticizes through Agee’s polemic discourse.

As the reader opens Agee and Evans’s book (a considerable material object in its own right), what she or he finds first is fifty pages of photographs without any text. Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble suggest that photographic images make their appeal to the viewer not simply on an intellectual level, since they can work against the culturally consecrated primacy of intellect over emotion, or of mind over body; thus, “as we engage with the realm of

the photographic we are given access to alternative ways of knowing" (2003, 6). As W. J. T. Mitchell shrewdly argues, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* works against text-image "exchanges" typical of photo narratives, as the book resists the straightforward collaboration of prose and photos. Evans's photographs are bereft of textual and literary elements, and thus they "force us back onto the formal and material features of the images in themselves" (1994, 239). Therefore, the very materiality, as well as indexicality, of the photograph makes it work differently from the written text; it requires the reader to respect the thing in itself.

However, according to John Tagg, there is an ontological distance between the hard material presence of real things and the observing yet subjective photographic eye. In its demand for realism, photo-documentary art is always limited; it never reaches "the unforgettable forgotten that does not lend itself to signification" (2009, xxxiv). In Tagg's phrasing, the "overwhelming thing" presents continuous challenges to verbal and visual representation (178). We should, however, also recognize photography's remarkable ability to put the viewer in perceptual contact with the world, "an ability which can be claimed even by a fuzzy and badly exposed snapshot depicting few details and offering little information" (Walton 2008, 49). While it is obvious that a photographer can choose to add or remove objects in the front of the camera, photography always also records random details in the natural environment:

The photograph works to alter our perception of the world by drawing attention to a marginal detail, one that would go unnoticed if it were not for the fact that it was photographed and thus framed. . . . Through the everydayness of photographic aesthetics, the familiar (and oftentimes overlooked) aspects of the real world are more readily perceived and thus gain in importance. (Horstkotte and Pedri 2008, 14–15)

Evans's photographs are visibly separate from Agee's prose in the book's structure, and they are also devoid of all textual features that conventionally accompany this kind of photo-essay: there are no captions, legends, dates, names, locations or any other subtexts or textual guides which would help us to "read" these photographs (cf. Mitchell 1994, 290). One of the questions the reader/viewer of the book must face is the ways in which prose and photos are communicating with each other.

What is obvious is that inside the covers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* we have two different artists working in different ways and with different media but with the same subject matter. Agee sometimes wants to shock the reader, give his readers new perceptions through defamiliarization of objects, while Evans's more simple and austere sensibility leads him to attempt to construct new visions from ordinary or conventional lines of sight.

As T. V. Reed notes in his analysis of Evans's working habits and his ethics of photography, Evans usually refused to move any of the objects he was photographing; instead, he wanted to take pictures of those objects, people, animals, and things, in their natural contexts of everyday living; and for the most part he avoided unnatural angles, preferring to shoot from normal height and straightforward angles (1992, 48). There is simple poetry in Evans's silent, unmoving images; the style of Agee's text is sometimes similar, sometimes more subjective, angry, and polemic. As John Tagg has argued, instead of a certain manipulative rhetoric of some other Depression era photographs, which aimed at constructing an explicit meaning through spectacle, irony, and symbolization (Tagg's primary example is the aestheticizing art of Margaret Bourke-White), Evans's poetic images are more obscure and more difficult to fix into a definite time, place, and event. Thus, in Evans's photographs, "the relationships of image to image are not those of thesis and antithesis, but of rhyme, repetition, discrepancy, and reversal," "the process of reading is not curtailed in advance," and "no spatial setting is given, no wider explanatory frame, no supporting ground" (2003, 27–28). In Tagg's view, it is precisely *the problem of meaning* that is visible in Evans's photographic art.

HUMAN AND NONHUMAN REALITIES IN *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

In the cultural scheme of the Great Depression and photo-documentary art, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* still appears a radically idiosyncratic work. The book aspires, in James Agee's own words, to a "non-artistic" view of its real subjects in an "effort to suspend or destroy imagination," so that without its mediation there may open "before consciousness and within it, a universe luminous, spacious, inculpably rich and wonderful in each detail" (*FM*, 25). Famously, he speaks of his "effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is" (*FM*, 24). Actually, Agee does not want his text to be thought of as a work of art; this is because regarding it as "art" will, in Agee's view, diminish the weight and power of the actual existence of its subject and thus tame the force of reality in the text (*FM*, 11).

Agee protests against the flatness of realist representation, but also against modernist art, which "is hermetically sealed away from identification with everyday 'reality'" (*FM*, 217). Discussing the textual means of representation and the handicaps of naturalism and documentary, Agee writes in his characteristically complicated prose style:

I doubt that the straight "naturalist" very well understands what music and poetry are about. . . . So that, if you share the naturalist's regard for the "real"

but have this regard for it on a plane which in your mind brings it level in value with music and poetry, which in turn you value as highly as anything on earth, it is important that your representation of “reality” does not sag into, or become one with, naturalism; and in so far as it does, you have sinned, that is, you have fallen short even of the relative truth you have perceived and intended. (*FM*, 215)

As we may note, Agee regards the representation of reality a highly *ethical* act, one that must take as its main goal at least a relative truth, and one that does not sink to the lower depths of “naturalist” documentation. Here, it seems, Agee understands “naturalism” as a mode of sensational and sentimental melodrama and rhetoric (see, e.g., Newlin 2011, 5–6). In this sense, he is critical of the emotional plotting of events and characterization of people, as if the vast amount of verbal and visual documentation of the Depression era, done in the framework of the Farm Security Administration, seemed to have obscured reality rather than clarified it.

The book shows some serious doubt about any textual artefact’s ability to achieve immediacy in its representation, and it makes this constantly by drawing attention to conventions of textual, both verbal and visual, production. In the preface of the book Agee writes as follows: “We are trying to deal with our subject not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously” (*FM*, 10). In Agee’s view, then, each of these discursive positions remains trapped in one narrow set of conventions, reducing the complex inter-play of language and the world to some single frame of category (see Reed 1992, 34–35). According to T. V. Reed, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* represents “novel journalism that calls its own representational practices into question,” and the book’s “questioning of representational capacities within each of the two media the prose and the photos is intensified by comparative cross-mediation” (35, 39). Written mainly against the conventions of the genre inside which it is produced—the thirties documentaries of rural life and their claim to give the reader a real picture of that life—Agee and Evans’s book aims at shaking the readers’ pre-conceptions by problematizing the relationship between a verbal/visual text and the harsh realities of the actual world.

Agee’s style of self-negating his own writing, as well as his way of stressing the materiality of the book, is illuminated by his comment on the early pages of the narrative: “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pictures of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” (*FM*, 26). Here, material objects partake in the construction of the book. The juxtaposition of the prose and the photos, with their equal inability to reach the real, therefore enhances the critical

self-reflexivity of the book.³ Agee insists both on the reality of the referent and on the inevitable failure of any representation to capture the real. Thus, he believes that “the language of ‘reality’ . . . should have and impart the deftness, keenness, immediacy, speed and subtleness of the ‘reality’ it tries to reproduce” (*FM*, 208). He also writes that “the cleansing and rectification of language, the breakdown of the identification of word and object, is very important, and very possibly more important things will come of it than have ever come of the lingual desire of the cow for the horse” (*FM*, 209). Agee further stresses that “words cannot embody; they can only describe” (*FM*, 210). Nevertheless, Agee’s prose in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is filled with realist observation and visual allusions as if he were trying to capture the photographic sharpness with his verbal imagery. Thus, Agee’s text contains several allusions to various other media, including poetry, painting, photography, film, theatre, and music.

While Agee’s textual self-reflexivity is probably the most visible aspect of his prose, his narrative does contain more descriptive passages as well, as in his photographically realist observations of material objects that constitute the reality of the tenant farmers’ world:

I helped get camera ready and we stood away and I watched what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized, in the leisures and shyness which are a phase of all love for any object: searching out and registering in myself all its planes, stresses of relationship, along diagonals withdrawn and approached, and vertical to the slightly off-centered door, and broadside, and at several distances, and near, examining merely the ways of the wood, and the nails, the three new boards of different lengths that were let in above the left of the door, the staring small white porcelain knob, the solesmoothed stairlifts, the wrung stance of thick steeple, the hewn wood stoblike spike at sky, the old hasp and new padlock, the randomshuttered windowglass whose panes were like the surfaces of springs. (*FM*, 49–50)

Here, Agee’s almost painful attempt to grasp the material essence of things in his language results in imaginatively blended words (“solesmoothed stairlifts,” “randomshuttered windowglass”), which also simulate the simultaneity of photographs. Indeed, some of the objects depicted in Agee’s prose are also recognizable in Evans’s photographs.⁴

Agee’s focus on everyday details—such as clothing to which he devotes dozens of pages—contributes to his notion that everything is meaningful. Describing the main character George Gudger’s Sunday dress, Agee notices that “the hat is only timidly dented into shape” and that “the crease is still sharp in the trousers” (*FM*, 257). As Victor Kramer suggests, “details about the mutations of cloth of common work clothes provide insight when what is ordinarily considered unimportant is observed carefully” (1991, 41). The

actuality of George Gudger, whose real name was Floyd Burroughs, is something that baffles Agee, disturbing his aesthetic vision: "George's red body, already a little squat with the burden of thirty years, knotted like oakwood, in its clean white cotton summer union suit that it sleeps in" (*FM*, 51). Here, Agee refers to George's body as "it," a material entity that resembles oakwood. Agee's spiritual closeness to George as well as his physical, almost sexual, interest in him is juxtaposed with the voices of the upper class, like those of landowners: "George Gudger? Where'd you dig *him* up? I haven't been back out that road in twenty-five years" (*FM*, 71). Through these other voices, George is represented and dismissed as a piece of muddy earth, as something that should not be touched. Soon after these discourses, Agee borrows the lines from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (*FM*, 73).

Agee solidly places George and other human figures in the reality of the earth, which appears to *resist* a formalist conception of art and fiction:

The dead oak and pine, the ground, the dew, the air, the whole realm of what our bodies lay in and our minds in silence wandered, walked in, swam in, watched upon, was delicately fragrant as a paradise, and, like all that is best, was loose, light, casual, totally *actual*. There was, by our minds, our memories, our thoughts and feelings, some combination, some generalizing, some art, and science; but none of the close-kneed priggishness of science, and none of the formalism and straining and lily-gilding of art. (*FM*, 199)

In other words, no amount of formalism can capture the reality of an oak, whether a real tree or George's worn-out body. Accordingly, Agee's attempt at describing the life of tenant families, the land they work, and the earth they belong to, is constantly interrupted by the difficulty of actuality.

While *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* focuses on human life and work, surrounded by houses and shelters, tools and furniture, and other material objects that are an integral part of the tenant farmers' world, that world is also peopled (so to speak) with nonhuman animals, as Agee presents in his catalogue:

In fact each of the families owns and is drawn-round with animals, for work, for food, or by more vague functions: a mule as one kind of centre and leverage, a cow as another, a hog as still another, a dog in different meanings of his own, the tolerated tramp's and robber's life of the cat, the three generations of chickens, the peripheral or parasitic or almost unmagnetized spheres of rats, vermin, insects, and serpents, all in turn sprung round with tended and with random vegetation, and finally, those with lounge in the fields, and the many birds, and those who are hunted; and in any proper account it would be necessary to

give such a full record of all these in themselves and in their mutual and human meanings and relationships as is impossible here. (*FM*, 195)

It is possible to see that Agee's prose pays more attention to the presence and individuality of nonhuman animals as compared to Evans's photos, which (among fifty printed images) only capture a dog and two mules. Agee's phrasing, according to which "the human animals . . . live in an immediate and most elaborate texture of other forms of existence" (*FM*, 195), sounds surprisingly contemporary in our age of posthumanist concerns. Stacy Alaimo, for example, writes about "trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2010, 2). Or, as Susan McHugh argues, we should be able to read non-human animals against the grain of anthropocentric structures of human thought and feeling (2011, 9). Animal stories—or, as I would have it, even stories with animals as marginalized figures as in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—may open the reader's consciousness to new, alternative modes of knowing beyond humanist epistemologies (19). Nevertheless, in Agee's prose nonhuman animals are an integral part of the reality of the world that the text tries to depict—they are real things just as human beings, buildings, and tools are—whereas they are conspicuously almost absent in Evans's photos. In this sense, the writer and the photographer are working with different modes of knowing with their different media.

THINGS AND TRUTHS OF THE EARTH

Even though words and images work differently, it may still be argued that in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, both prose and photos must face equal problems of reality representation. In the production of the book, it appears that both Agee and Evans wanted to challenge their own devices and media by pushing them to certain limits; thus, Evans is experimenting with photographic techniques (lenses, frames, lights, angles, etc.) while Agee painfully—sometimes painfully also for the reader—includes in his prose all the motives and devices of his writing. The result is a book, which is "a meditation on the limits of what, among the things we see and recognize, we can directly record or indirectly evoke with images and words" (Minter 1996, 201). As mentioned, sometimes Agee makes clear that he is trying to write "photographically," as if the written word could not reach the complex reality well enough. The "cruel radiance of what is" is the very thing that Agee tries to capture in his prose, even as he knows that perhaps only photography can lighten up that reality.

In this context of reality representation, let us take a closer look at a single photo by Evans, printed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. First, we may think that there is an allusion to Vincent van Gogh's famous painting of peasant shoes (1886) in a picture of a tenant farmer's shoes taken exactly fifty years later. We may also recall that van Gogh's painting stimulated Martin Heidegger to write his famous essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936), written, as we can see, about at the very moment Evans was taking the picture. In his poetic essay, Heidegger explains the essence of art in terms of the concepts of being and truth and writes about art's ability to set up an active struggle between what he calls *earth* and *world* (1971, 39–50).⁵ The possibility of its earth aspects is due to the fact that the reader of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is able to connect the photograph of the shoes with the very particular body and existence of a farmer, namely George Gudger, a man whose specific human weight can be felt in these working shoes. In one of the rare instances where Agee's text and Evans's specific photograph actually communicate, Agee writes of these shoes as if they were a Cubist artwork (and obscure like Charles Bovary's hat), and still firmly rooted into the hard work on cotton fields:

They are one of the most ordinary types of working shoe: the blucher design, and soft in the prow, lacking the seam across the root of the big toe: covering the ankles: looped straps at the heels: blunt, broad, and rounded at the toe: broad-heeled: made up of the most simple roundnesses and squarings and flats, of dark brown raw thick leathers nailed, and sewn coarsely to one another in courses and patterns of doubled and tripled seams, and such throughout that like many other small objects they have great massiveness and repose and are, as the houses and overalls are, and the feet and legs of the women, who go bare-footed so much, fine pieces of architecture. . . . The shoes are worn for work. (*FM*, 241–42)

The literary text also aims to make ordinary, everyday objects significant and perceptible through the aesthetic process of defamiliarization.⁶ Agee's poetic rendering of the working shoes potentially reminds the reader of Heidegger's vision of the shoes depicted in van Gogh's painting. Heidegger writes that in those shoes "there vibrates the silent call of the earth, it quiet and ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field" and that "this equipment the shoes belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman" (1971, 44). Of course, Evans's probably intentional allusion to van Gogh's famous painting may also remind us that our vision is being directed aesthetically by the photographer, his choice of framing, angle, and perspective. As T. V. Reed notes, the contrast between Heidegger's and Evans's "readings" of van Gogh's painting is illuminating,

since where Heidegger mystifies the land and romanticizes peasantry, Evans's approach to the painting has the effect of making it appear more concrete and rooted in a specific life (1992, 47–48). That is, in Evans's pictures, just as in Agee's prose, we are made to feel the hard realities and the resistant earth of the Depression era Alabama, even though neither words nor images never really capture that real earth.

The indexical nature of “analogical” photography has a relation to what Agee calls “unimagined existence” (*FM*, 10), a notion representing his belief that there is an extratextual world, nonhuman nature, and a resistant earth. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes in the context of American naturalism and environmentalism, “while Nature with a capital N is certainly a product of human thinking, an ideological construct, the earth continues to be one thing that resists” (2004, 8–9). Killingsworth further argues that “ecopoetics has an interest in preserving the concept of nonhuman being, that which exists outside language and culture and which hints at something larger and more lasting than the products of human hubris” (9).

In a phenomenological sense, in the photograph there remains a kind of natural “being-there” of objects.⁷ The photograph is thus connected to the physicality of the past; it is not simply a reconstruction of that past. As Roland Barthes puts it, “In Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (1981, 76). Our feeling that real objects (people, animals, trees, buildings, etc.) are actually distant from us make us mourn for them, and in this sense, a photograph can never replace the real thing (see Silverman 2003, 340; Walton 2008, 14–21). Indeed, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is full of mourning and melancholy, as well as longing for lost things, while it is also a brave attempt to document and retain the world of the tenant farmers, with their faces, work fields, houses, animals, clothes, tools, and other things—all those things that are still shining when we read the text and look at the photos.

As Caroline Blinder suggests, by cinematically animating the objects in the world he documents, Agee is able to connect “the sacred with the vernacular, the divine with the mundane” (2010, 147). In Agee's view, human beings are beautiful because they exist; and also nonhuman animals, inanimate things, and material objects are illuminated by light. Agee thus believes that the beauty he sees in the natural world is not a human projection or abstraction but inheres in the world he perceives and experiences (see Jones 2008, 128). Agee writes about “the profoundest and plainest ‘beauties,’ those of the order of the stars and of solitude in darkened and empty land” (*FM*, 280). In a sense, then, what we need to do is to show humble generosity toward the world and its mysteries are remain open to the possibility that even the most “common” and mundane things have intrinsic value and importance.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have suggested a new kind of reading of James Agee and Walker Evans’s classic photo-documentary book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the context of materiality and object culture. As I have argued, in his description of the daily existence and environment of three poor tenant families in the Depression era America, James Agee protests against the flatness of realist representation, but also against modernist art, which, in his words, is hermetically sealed away from identification with everyday reality. In other words, it may be suggested that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* celebrates the aesthetics of the everyday (e.g., Saito 2007, 2–8). Agee speaks of his effort to perceive “the cruel radiance of what is” by focusing on human bodies, nonhuman animals, the surrounding environment, agricultural tools, plants, buildings, and weather. The text is filled with descriptive catalogues or inventories of material things, and Agee’s focus on everyday details (clothes, work tools, houses, and their interiors) contributes to his notion that everything is meaningful. Agee’s prose, which tries to capture all incidental things that usually get unnoticed in our everyday living among them, is accompanied by Walker Evans’s photos of the material world. These include a famous photograph of a tenant farmer’s shoes, which can be read as an allusion to Vincent van Gogh’s painting of a peasant’s shoes, also discussed by Martin Heidegger in his essay on the “earth” and “world” aspects of things. My analysis of Agee’s prose and Evans’s photography has especially focused on these shoes as material objects and how their existence and meaning can be captured verbally and/or visually.

It has also been suggested in this chapter that there is an interesting interrelationship between American naturalist fiction and photographic journalism in their mutual commitment to the representation of the poor and the vulnerable. However, in his polemical prose James Agee understands “naturalism” as a literary mode that easily veers toward sensationalism and sentimentality, which is arguably a limited conception of naturalism. Agee’s version of nonhuman naturalism nevertheless downplays human-centered melodramatic plots and, instead, celebrates the reality of things and the existence of material objects and nonhuman lives as an integral part of the tenant farmers’ world in the era of the Great Depression.

NOTES

1. While Bennett bases her theoretical approach on French poststructuralism, she maintains that her attentiveness to things and their affects stems from her reading of

American writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Barry Lopez, and Barbara Kingsolver (2010, xiv).

2. In addition to the collaboration between Agee and Evans, the following works are worth mentioning: Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937); Archibald McLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938), a collection of poems including the work of various photographers; Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939), and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). We may also note the influence of the FSA photographs on the narrative style of what may be the most famous of the Depression era novels, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

3. David Minter gives the following description of the book's generic modes: "It employs a wide range of discourses—ethnographic, sociological, phenomenological, theological, historical, autobiographical, poetic, novelistic—and utilizes an astonishing range of styles—realist, naturalist, impressionist, expressionist, surrealist, cubist, and visionary" (1996, 200). T. V. Reed, for his part, labels this almost unclassifiable work as "cubist sociology" and "postmodernist realism" (1992, 35).

4. Brian McHale has paid attention to descriptive catalogues or inventories in post-modernist long poems, as in the work of John Ashbery, but he adds that this poetic practice goes back to the American naturalist and modernist tradition; indeed, he suggests that "the reality of rural poverty acquires 'thickness' through James Agee's inventorying of a sharecropper's possessions in his and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" (2004, 143).

5. Fredric Jameson somewhat clarifies this by saying that Heidegger's theory is "organized around the idea that the work of art emerges within the gap between Earth and World, or what I would prefer to translate as the meaningless materiality of the body and the nature and the meaning endowment of history and of the social." Jameson adds that "Heidegger's account needs to be completed by insistence on the renewed materiality of the work, on the transformation of one form of materiality—the earth itself and its paths and physical objects—into that other materiality of oil paint" (2005, 7–8). Jameson also refers to Walker Evans's photograph of the tenant shoes in his own analysis of van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes.

6. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht discusses "those cases in which aesthetic experience is an unexpected interruption in the flow of the everyday," and he refers to those familiar, everyday moments "when an object that has long been familiar, all of a sudden and without any obvious reason, looks or feels strange" (2006, 308).

7. Still, photography poses problematics of its own. According to Heidegger's criticism of "framing" and "picturing" the world, modern times and visual culture have replaced the attitude of *wonder*, which lets things be as they are, with that of *curiosity*, which is based on the desire to know how things can be used for human purposes (see, e.g., Jay 1993, 270–75).

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