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Sex, Labor, And The American Way: Detroit Aesthetic In Mid-Twentieth-Century Literature

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**SEX, LABOR, AND THE AMERICAN WAY:
DETROIT AESTHETIC IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE**

by

JENNA GERDS

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved by:

Advisor Date

DEDICATION

To Louis and Beatrice.

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INTRODUCTION

Looking down Woodward from my window on the ninth floor—a light dusting of snow on the building tops, gray smoke leaving the smokestacks and blending into the gray sky—I am reminded that there is so much about Detroit that often goes unnoticed, understudied, and unappreciated. I did not plan to spend my career studying and teaching about Detroit. My focus has been primarily on literary modernism, postmodernism, and film and media. However, as I began this introduction, I realized that my investigation into the American literature and culture of the twentieth century all somehow pointed one direction: homeward. Studying literature at Wayne State University, I recognized aspects of American life conveyed in modern novels in a different way, relative to my environment. I heard the repetitive noise of industry and the deadening silence experienced when it stops. I saw choices individuals had to make about their homes and families in the wake of economic forces outside of their control. I trailed behind cars, stopped at traffic lights, and read bumper stickers urging me to “Buy American” or else soon we will all be out of a job. We tend to think of instances like these as symptomatic of the present time and specific to Midwest rustbelt cities, but the ways industry—and narrative—are structured, how characters’ lives unfold because of economy, and the methods by which culture is turned into consumable goods are wholly central to understanding American literature written during the time period that encompasses waves of urban migration and employment, the Great Depression, and the subsequent economic boom during World War II. In the past five years, however, I have noticed an unmistakable change in the public perception of this city, still rife with violence, racial discord, and poverty, left with the indelible mark of the auto companies and unions for both better and worse. For the first time in decades, it seems to be a city open to the need for reinterpretation and willing to accept that its aesthetic includes seemingly impossible contrasts, uniquely beautiful and integral to a version of an American identity that has, in fact, been explored by authors almost a century ago.

There are a wide range of contrasts within the works I examine here as well; these texts, written by American authors in the first half of the twentieth century, each appose different aesthetic modes, social perspectives, and concerns over artistic expression and audience reception. You will find within these pages my interpretation of the early short stories of Sinclair Lewis collected in *If I Were Boss*, the *U.S.A.* trilogy by John Dos Passos, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr. Lewis's works begin in 1916. Dos Passos writes about the teens and twenties from his position in the 1930s. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was compiled in the thirties and published in 1941. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is set in the fifties and published in 1964. The economic flux that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century shaped interpretations of American modernity, and these works span decades that saw peaks of prosperity and industry and valleys of poverty and idleness. During these decades in the United States, migration toward economic opportunity resulted in a demographic shift and competition over jobs, which accelerated conflicts between men and women and black and white laborers. Making, selling, and buying have often been the nation's collective solution to an entire host of social and political problems, and these authors are all skeptical of the viability of this solution. And yet they all write from within this culture. The publication of their work is no less susceptible to economic concerns. The producers of these works make negotiations between old and new forms of expression and choices regarding circulation, publication, and format. Some of these writers, such as Sinclair Lewis, find commercial success as an author while simultaneously criticizing the ways in which goods are sold. Others, such as James Agee, are openly wary of a large, uncritical audience that might misinterpret the stakes of his study and, therefore, misinterpret human lives that matter deeply. The tension between artistic and economic

concerns create texts that combine commercially accessible and avant-garde forms in each of these works.

The primary literature I have selected is juxtaposed with visual texts and archival, historic research with a locational and thematic basis in Detroit. *Ford Times* and early automobile advertisements, Diego Rivera's mural *Detroit Industry*, photographs of the Sojourner Truth housing project and ensuing riots, and accounts of gay union workers comprise a framework for and a connection to each of these central texts. Although at a cursory glance the connections to this city may at first seem surprising, my interest in Detroit coincides with the works in my dissertation on innumerable levels. The city is not typically perceived as a center for art and culture by those who live outside its borders; rather, it has been best and most widely known as a site for manufacturing and production. This attitude, however, underestimates the significance of the multiple forms in which, not only does design become inherent in industry, but industry designs the fabric of American life. The automobile is a central motif in American culture. It makes migration possible, alters urban planning, and generates production. Rum-runners, pin-up models, and teenagers at drive-in movies would have been endlessly frustrated without a car. I apply a Fordist critique to my primary texts and employ these secondary texts to illustrate how Henry Ford's vision of standardized production, advertisement, centralized distribution, and ideas about social organization extended well beyond putting automobiles in garages. For me, Fordist critique entails a nuanced and instance-specific analysis of how these modes and themes have been incorporated within the text and consequently shape the concerns of their authors, subjects, and readers.

My argument is that Detroit has a distinct aesthetic: gritty, realist, and both shaped by and in defiance of the organizational logic represented by the pairing of the social and economic policies of the Ford Motor Company. The combination of these two sets of goals were delivered to

and largely incorporated by the American public because Ford was so successful in its business model in the first half of the twentieth century. As others before me have suggested, this logic termed Fordism also represents an aspect of American cultural identity: fast-paced, standardized, and mechanized; obsessed with advertising, selling, and making a profit. Or to put it in the terms of a phrase that commonly appears just as often on the lips of its citizens as it does on the tee shirts sold in local shops: Detroit hustles harder. An author does not need to be from this city or undertake its history directly for us to observe the ways in which his narratives are constructed by production and manufacturing. Each text studied represents this Detroit aesthetic, both acceding to and challenging the rigors of Fordism simultaneously in four ways: 1) form—each work is published in a format distinctly shaped by commercial concerns that sometimes determined its content and distribution. Some of the texts comment self-reflexively about their ability to be consumed by a mass readership. The narratives are also composed of distinct components that often resist the temptation to be read as working together like a well-oiled machine. 2) Subject—labor, production, consumption, and advertising are all recurring motifs the authors use figuratively and literally. 3) Language—the authors examined here delight in experimentation with language. The words on the page are combined, and punctuation is eliminated as a representation of fast-paced modern dialect; the assemblage of signifiers holds new meanings that do not line up with the objects they traditionally signified in the past. 4) Portrayals of gender, sexuality, and reproduction—control and order often work to rein in desire and sexuality. When women enter the workforce, traditional gender codes have to be redesigned, resulting in a fear of the loss of efficiency and power maintained through the status quo. Masculine identity is as equally shaped by capitalism as women's roles are. Production and consumption are tied to sexual reproduction in differing and occasionally unexpected ways.

Fordism

Antonio Gramsci began examining the ways in which the principles of the Ford Motor Company shaped aspects of American identity from prison, and his ideas form the basis of the ways in which Fordism can be used to interpret literature. After Antonio Gramsci's death in 1937, his relatives, friends, and colleagues took care to preserve and publish his expansive letters and notebooks written from prison and containing his thoughts on what he termed Americanism and Fordism (Buttigieg 1). Gramsci observed that a specific form of American production, one highly organized to produce large quantities of uniform, standardized goods, was "reciprocally conditioning and conditioned by" politics, culture, ideology, and behavior (Forgacs 74). Gramsci's focus was on Detroit, and his analysis undertook the ways Ford Motor Company mechanized assembly to separate the worker from the larger whole of the process, simplifying and limiting his routine for the sake of efficiency and for the goal of increasing productivity and profit margins. Gramsci believed that North America had a more rationalized society than, in particular, Southern Europe. The United States "encourages and protects untrammelled private enterprise; it has the corporatist ideologies and practices of Roosevelt's New Deal, prohibition, and an officially encouraged conservative sexual morality and family life" (Forgacs 74). Punctuated by momentum created in the 1960s and 1970s and a period of theoretical development in the 1990s, Gramsci's analysis of the ways in which American business and culture inform one another has been taken up by a number of other theorists and applied in various ways.

In *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen and Ford* (1993), Martha Banta analyzes narrative and cultural production through the lens of rationality and control. Banta references Antonio Gramsci, writing, "The human passage through history, marked by the

patterns of Taylorism and Fordism, is an ‘uninterrupted, often painful and bloody process of subjugating natural (i.e., animal and primitive) instincts to new, more complex and rigid norms and habits of order, exactitude and precision, which can make possible the increasingly complex forms of collective life’” (99). She examines ways in which uncontrollable elements—such as emotionality and desire, often represented by women, children, and immigrants—were tamped down by a managerial class that believed culture could be directed by scientific theory. In her assessment of the Ford Sociological Department, Banta writes that it “insisted upon the tight fit between laborer, citizen, and homeowner” (215). However, applying the seamless cultural logic of Fordism to all of the texts here illustrates that the ways in which the authors make deviations from the pre-set pattern are the places that provide the most complex and meaningful interpretations.

In *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (1994), Terry Smith examines a modern American aesthetic in the 1920s and 1930s. His analyses “describe a single, obvious aspect of the ensemble: the evolution of visual images of American industry from an increasingly prolific picturing to a central theme within the iconology of modernity,” something he describes as a “new visual order” (Smith 2) that became increasingly invested in sleek and shiny images, machinery, and futuristic technological promise. For example, Smith interprets the design of the Ford Rouge plant as possessing this futuristic, industrial perspective, as captured in Charles Sheeler’s *Criss-Crossed Conveyors* (1927) and *Industry* (1932). Central to Smith’s interpretation is Ford’s efforts to create a centralized monopoly, controlling all facets of production, a “totalizing, modernizing machine” (52). Smith utilizes the works of Gramsci in his discussion of Ford’s “new social order,” which extended beyond work and wages in the factory to antiunion policies and an official company ideology regarding sexual behavior, alcohol consumption, and immorality (53).

My work with Fordism is influenced by Banta and Smith and seeks to adjust and expand their interpretations. I combine both narrative and visual analysis for an interdisciplinary interpretation that relies upon close textual analysis. In each chapter, my examination of language expands upon Banta's acknowledgement of form in narrative production, and her analysis of gender roles is the starting point for my interpretations of motherhood and domesticity. In chapter two, I specifically engage with Smith's reading of Diego Rivera's mural *Detroit Industry*. I would like to acknowledge an aesthetic beyond the sleek, utopian one that Smith identifies. What I term a Detroit aesthetic is one located in representations of lived experience, mixed forms, and the intermingling of the avant-garde and consumerism, opening up possibilities for interpretation that Smith prematurely closes off.

I use several other literary critics and historians in assembling an interpretation of these texts under the logic of managerial and social control signified by the Ford Motor Company. Alfred Kazin's essay "All the Lost Generations," published in *Alfred Kazin's America* (2004), supplies a Fordist reading of "Dos Passos's hard, lean, mocking prose, forever sounding that beat, calling [the characters] to their deaths, [which] has become the supreme expression of his conception of them" (152). Kazin's interpretation of Dos Passos's use of language and fatalistic narrative structure rings true for all the characters in *U.S.A.* except one, Margo Dowling. Margo learns to navigate the changing social and economic structure, eventually attaining many of her goals and establishing financial success in the face of difficult odds. Jeff Allred's work supports the ways in which *Fortune* and *LIFE* magazines created a simplified narrative for a mass audience that was contrary to James Agee's intent for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Allred's essay "Boring from Within: James Agee and Walker Evans at Time Inc." (2010) provides an analysis of the division of labor at Time that dictated the publishing aesthetic at magazines such as *Fortune* and *LIFE*, leading to

my reading of the photographs of Evans and Siegel. In this same chapter I also utilize the work of Detroit historian Thomas Sugrue. Sugrue's *The Origin of the Urban Crisis* (1996) provides a historical account of Detroit and is particularly pertinent in piecing together information about the housing riot that occurred over the Sojourner Truth Housing Project, pointing out the ways in which media coverage emphasized a racial narrative but eliminated more complicated details about class in order to simplify the presentation of the story in *LIFE*. In my last chapter, Miriam Frank's *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (2014) represents an under-researched aspect of American identity: queer labor union members. Her detailed, archived interviews relate the lived experiences of both closeted and openly gay laborers, and her account of UAW member Gary Kapanowski brings into focus the circumstances Selby writes for Harry Black in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, in addition to shedding light on changing corporate economy in the United States

An analysis of the culture industry provides essential ways for interpreting production and distribution; *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer is critical to my interpretation of understanding of the standardization of culture. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "advertising is its [culture's] elixir of life. But because its product ceaselessly reduces the pleasure it promises as a commodity to that mere promise, it finally coincides with the advertisement it needs on account of its own inability to please" (131). A number of the other theoretical texts I use also take up the culture industry, including those by Rita Felski, Paula Rabinowitz, and Andreas Huyssen. In her analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer, Felski writes that, for the pair of theorists, "the repressed feminine of aesthetic and libidinal forces returns in the form of the engulfing, regressive lures of modern mass culture and consumer society, which trades inauthentic pleasures and pseudo-happiness for acquiescence to the status quo" (5). In Lewis's "A Story with a Happy Ending," the narrative resolution provided by the coupling of the main characters amidst nature is

compounded by the *re*-humanizing of both characters, a reclamation and reversal of Adorno and Horkheimer's premise. In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen suggests that modernism attempts to distinguish itself from mass culture through exclusion as an attempt to avoid "contamination" from mass culture in a search for purity in art. I claim mass culture is in many ways inseparable from or intermingled with high art, despite the fact that the two are often positioned as opposing forces. In discussing Marx's ideas of use value versus exchange value, Adorno writes, "The more inexorably the principle of exchange value cheats human beings out of use value, the more successfully it manages to disguise itself as the ultimate object of enjoyment" (Huyssen 21), and the commodification of art ends up revealing itself in the aestheticization of the commodity. Huyssen disagrees with Adorno because function and use are not totally determined by corporate intentions, and exchange value has not totally supplanted use value. Rather than place high art and mass culture as binaries or relegate all culture to the position of commodity, I look to places where the relationship between abstract modernism and mass culture is complicated and creates creative tension. This has implications for the divide between realism and modernism, particularly where the depictions of everyday occurrences experienced by and accessible to the masses are concerned.

Starting in the late 1980s and the 1990s, a reexamination of works of literature and visual art produced during the 1920s and 1930s has challenged assumptions about these binaries. In her collection of essays *The Novel and the American Left*, Janet Galligani Casey credits Paula Rabinowitz with reinvigorating studies of this period, along with Barbara Foley and James F. Murphy. Michael North, Michael Denning, and Walter Kalaidjian have also made significant contributions. In *Black & White & Noir*, Rabinowitz uses film noir as the context in which to explore the modernism she sees inherent in Dust Bowl photography. She shows a "cultural process" that she terms "pulp modernism" (4), a modernism dusted with "the residue of documentary rhetoric clinging to

various artifacts of noir popular culture in America,” and how these photographs are in turn “en-crusted with pulp fiction” (106). Rabinowitz plays on the double nature of the word *pulp* as both a waste product of the timber industry and as the recycled stuff by which paperback novels are made. She writes, “A national popular culture developed from the intermingling of documentary forms and popular (front) sensibilities, most spectacularly through the images of poor rural Americans” (106). Looking at rural people’s problems brought a paradoxical respite from urban life to city dwellers. She sees in the FSA photography of the 1930s a desire to document and consume the images of poor, rural, white society. Errol Morris also presents several competing viewpoints regarding documentary photography in the 1930s. Using the essay “The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock,” published as a *New York Times* online editorial (2009), I am able to clarify my argument about the formal conflicts inherent in representation of lived experience. The culmination of Morris’s interviews with James Curtis, William Stott, and Bill Ganzel illustrates how blurred the line between fictive art and documentary as historical fact becomes. The serialized web format of the essay allows for an exchange between readers who arrive at Morris’s conclusion about this binary through their interpretation of the interviews prior to Morris delivering it; the interaction suggests new dynamics for the relationship of form to publishing managers and audiences since the advent of the Internet.

In *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (2007), Seth Moglen suggests that one of the elements that unites texts that have fallen out of favor within the modern American literary canon—like Sinclair Lewis’s works, *U.S.A.*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—is the fact that they name the often political factors responsible for the failure of modernity to bring positive change to the United States. Moglen uses psychoanalytic concepts of mourning and melancholia to differentiate these two categories of works. Works that

mourn the loss inherent in modernism are able to identify the causes of the loss and memorialize that which has been lost. Melancholic works are unable to hold the forces of modernity directly responsible and are typically the ones canonized. They often naturalize the causes as innate human behaviors, and the response is characterized by numbness or anaesthetization rather than a confrontation of the issues involved. The disappearance of a “second side” of modernism that names those responsible for failure is located, then, in the suppression of ideas and materials related to communism through two eras of Red Scares—first in the late 1910s and early 1920s, then in the late 1940s and 1950s—due to the political implications tied to creating, then studying and circulating, such texts. Themes of class struggle and communism are present in many of my texts, and my interpretation of Diego Rivera’s mural *Detroit Industry* examines the delicate balance between political, artistic, and economic concerns. While in Detroit, Rivera spoke in front of audiences of Mexican immigrants and worked toward a repatriation effort that had lofty ideals but ultimately failed. At the time, the Communist Party believed that Rivera beliefs were not as aligned with the party as they should have been, and yet the mainstream American public was cautious of his work because of his affiliation with communism. The vast network of Ford Motor Company may be shown to have helped steer the negative public reaction against *Detroit Industry* toward religious themes, rather than maintain its focus on Rivera’s party politics. Ford’s overseeing managerial policies played a role in creating a lasting piece of art that is now a proud centerpiece at the Detroit Institute of Arts and represents the auto workers that live within the city. The e-mail communications of Linda Banks Downs and her work *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (1999) are critical in relating the mural to *U.S.A.* Her correspondence was essential to the formation of my arguments regarding the possibility of interpretation for Rivera’s child in the bulb of a plant. My interpretation of the East Wall of *Detroit Industry* suggests that Rivera’s panel of the fetus, buried

in the ground, represents reproduction as idealistic social and technological possibility, in contrast to the portrayal of reproduction in Dos Passos's *The Big Money*, which suggests foundering ideals with regard to revolution and desire.

While Fordism has been described in representational terms, the groundwork for interpreting gender and sexuality through Fordism has not been fully staked out. I hope my contributions have helped to theorize the dynamic between feminism, masculinity, and economic structure. To do so, I have used Betty Friedan's 1960 *Good Housekeeping* article "Women Are People Too!" to contextualize the role of women in the household as wife and mother. Stephanie Coontz's analysis of Friedan, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (2011), plays a critical role in my interpretation of the *Donna Reed Show*. R.W. Connell's comprehensive text, *Masculinities* (2004), explores the historical contexts of gender through a variety of academic disciplines, including psychoanalysis, anthropology, and sociology. Masculinity theories provide a lens through which we can view Selby's depiction of Harry as symptomatic of values that shape the identity of American men. Connell was influenced by Victor Seidler's early work in masculinity theory, and Seidler's later analysis *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory* (2013) supports Connell's interpretation of the ways in which gender roles were interpreted in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. The contemporary work *White Collar* (1951) by C. Wright Mills theorizes the ways in which post-World War II business practices changed American masculine identity. He holds that a shift from industrial capitalism to monopoly capitalism feminized the male subject position. My analysis of the *Donna Reed Show* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* juxtaposes *White Collar* with "Women Are People, Too!," illustrating the connection between the ways in which identity is intrinsic to gendered definitions of labor, which in turn are relative to postwar economic prosperity. Robert Corber's astute interpretation of Mills in

Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity (1997) is critical to the aforementioned application of C.W. Mills in chapter four. Corber suggests that the struggles of laborers, due to the shift in economy Mills describes, were due to an unskilled job force that could not compete in the new market.

Alongside gender classifications, I examine the ways in which queer identification is not easily assimilated into a cultural logic that insists upon standardization and control. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's essay "Queer and Now" forms the basis of my argument that the modern world dislodges signifiers from their signified, creating new interpretations. Adapting to these new interpretations causes a lack of efficiency that is counterproductive to economic interests and undermines social ideals that prioritize the formation of the nuclear family. In chapter two, Margo Dowling learns to reinterpret her Cuban husband. The miscommunication they face when Margo is submerged in a Spanish-speaking world foreshadows her misinterpretation of his sexual desire. Sedgwick's works *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) also underpin my theories of male same-sex desire in chapter four. Her reading of the closet informs my interpretation of the ways in which Harry Black fights to control his queer desire, which is ultimately manifested in his literal fights with his wife and his boss. Lastly, George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World* (2004) and Christopher Nealon's *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (2001) provide definition, historical context, and periodization for relating same-sex desire to culture and work. In *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Harry is attracted to fairies, and I utilize Chauncey's account of fairies' inclusion in gay subculture and his descriptions of saloons as central meeting spots in order to support the argument that Harry's world became inverted when the workers at the Corporation go on strike. Mary's, a local bar, becomes the substitute location for Harry's domestic life, rather than at home with his

wife, named Mary. Nealon's careful analysis of queer culture in the postwar period provides the evidence for my argument that Selby's narrative inversion is used only as a trope to facilitate the relationship between sexual desire and labor; Selby does not portray Harry's attraction to feminine men as a simple substitute for women. Instead of depicting Harry as a sexual invert, he illustrates the complexity of his desire and, therefore, comes closer to the ethnic model of gay culture that Nealon describes. Blending these two models illustrates a shift in queer identity during the postwar period that would not be fully realized until the Stonewall riots catalyzed the gay liberation movement several years after *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was published. These historical, theoretical, and cultural texts form the basis from which I approach my analysis of the primary literature and secondary archival texts.

Advertising the Automobile: An American Love Story

The first chapter positions the short fiction of Sinclair Lewis alongside articles published in the *Ford Times*. *If I Were Boss* is a collection of fifteen of Sinclair Lewis's short stories published in periodicals like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Metropolitan Magazine* between 1915 and 1921. Writing within the genre of business fiction, Lewis shows an admiration for the ingenuity required to sell products to the American public, but his analysis of this ability always results in the exposure of the veiled methods used to manufacture desire within the hearts of the consumer masses. Lewis portrays advertising techniques as a dirty trick and casts the characters who resist the urge to sell at any cost as heroes. My analysis of "Honestly—If Possible" (1916), "A Story with a Happy Ending" (1917), "Slip It to 'Em" (1918), and "Jazz" (1918) illustrates how mechanization of mass production carries over into the office environment, and in fact underpins much of American culture through the ways Lewis emphasizes the places in which behavior becomes standardized. Capitalism is portrayed as an American tradition, profit is to be generated by any

means, and honesty or integrity within this system is a nonstandard practice. Lewis mocks Horatio Alger's version of the American Dream, implicating the stories that were often woven about great barons of business in the first half of the twentieth century alongside Alger's nineteenth century narrative. Lewis's fiction often suggests that for most people it takes much more than hard work and determination to succeed; the system is often rigged against the interests of both the individual and the collective good by the managing class. There is a code of behavior that needs to be learned and employed, and those who don't fit the model are positioned at the margins. Even as Lewis writes from within this system, his characters shine light on the possibility of how an individual or a pair of individuals can potentially escape its circuitry.

Lewis's form was structured by his publication format in many ways. Serially published in business or lifestyle magazines, his stories needed to be short and his narrative plots resolvable. These qualities aided the consumption of Lewis's stories and helped develop his writing skills, eventually helping him to cultivate recognition as an author and fine tune the techniques that would make his longer novels successful. Despite his commercial appeal, Lewis also incorporated snippets of less conventional text and ideas that contradicted some of the interests of advertisers and publishers into his narrative structure. His narrative moves are often in line with mass readership's expectations; however, his portrayal of the roles of consumers, workers, and societal expectations about the roles women played often undermined the dominant mode of thought. The tension between a narrative keyed to a somewhat passive audience and Lewis's encouragement of active societal participation creates narratives that are at once predictable and unexpected. In each story, the narrative unfolds around the act of selling—the struggle to persuade consumers to buy is the primary conflict and provides the setting within which characters fall in love. Many of Lewis's short stories provide little nuance in the way of the traditional love story; however, he uses the

love story to do unexpected things. When couples work to resolve the miscommunications in their relationship, they discover more equitable ways of working en route to falling in love.

Lewis creatively and playfully experiments with language in order to mimic and satirize both the jargon of advertising and production. Through alliteration and onomatopoeia, he projects the feel of a car breaking down and shows how language and narrative are productions; using invented words, he demonstrates the creativity advertising requires while pulling back the curtain on its deception of the public. In Lewis, the ways in which Adorno and Horkheimer show that culture and advertising merge become undeniable, and yet Lewis's characters often illustrate that the actions of one or two individuals are significant and can reveal the often concealed mechanisms behind the culture industry. A comparison with the language of *Ford Times*, Ford Motor Company's house publication, suggests that Lewis's satire is barely an exaggeration. Conversely, *Ford Times* communicates to its readers that change is also created on the individual level, but through obedience to the system and the following of managerial orders. Sell harder for a better life is the message that is conveyed. In "Jazz," Lewis provides commentary on the ways in which managers attempt to control workers through advertising techniques in house publications like *Ford Times*. In one of the newsletter's articles, the Ford Motor Company uses a fictional character, a somewhat bizarre photograph of a doll referred to as "colored lady," to provide testimony about the company. The fact that the lady is a doll is not disclosed to the readers until the next issue and the company ascribes dialogue to the doll in order to advertise the Ford Motor Company. The doll becomes a marionette, spouting company praise in Southern African-American dialect. In "Jazz," the fictional character Uncle Jerry Ginger uses folksy dialect to promote Universal Grocery through that company's house organ, but William John, the character writing Uncle Jerry Ginger, ultimately uses the same publication to criticize the company to all of its employees and urges for change.

One subject that Lewis takes up is the concept of the everyday working man in comparison to the man of epic proportions. For example, in “Honestly—If Possible,” he uses motifs that are common in Arthurian legend and fairy tale narratives in order to satirize men’s roles as heroes and women’s roles as passive princesses waiting to be rescued. He further uses this technique to emphasize that there is rarely anything noble in business, and if there is, it is a small and quiet thing undertaken by individuals who are working contrary to the way the American business machine is expected to run. In “Giving ’Em the Slip,” Lancelot Todd, whose name is ironic given his less than chivalrous behavior, is an automobile advertiser whose dishonorable intentions toward a wealthy widow coincide with his unethical standard of business. The satirization of gender roles enacted in fairy tales counterbalances the sentimentality inherent in Lewis’s love stories and suggests to the reader that falling in love is special but not uncommon. Likewise, Lewis reinforces the idea that the individual, working hard every day, contains within him the possibility for creating change and this change can come about due to a series of small decisions. Bravery, in Lewis’s estimation, is continuing to make these small decisions time after time without giving up. Asserting this portrayal works against American culture’s idolatry of men whose stories portray them as larger than life—men like Henry Ford—whose specialness, as told through sentimental biographies and autobiographies, makes them seem more fit for the managerial class than the average man. These stories valorize and mythologize their subjects, despite their narrative accounts often beginning with the legend of business in humble, average initial circumstances.

The portrayal of gender throughout *If I Were Boss* is more complicated than the narrative of a conventional story might suggest. In “Honestly—If Possible,” Susan Bratt’s presence in the workplace throws the status quo into upheaval. She doesn’t have to do or saying anything in order to cause a disturbance. Though we find out that the expectations about how she is supposed to

behave are even more structured and rigid at home. In the same story, Terry is also viewed as feminine by his coworkers because he doesn't participate in office activities that are upheld as masculine: cigar smoking, flirtation, and the manipulation and deception of consumers in order to generate sales. "A Story with a Happy Ending" follows the trajectory of a woman's rise through the ranks of an automobile accessories company. Arroford is only able to succeed because she rebuffs flirtation, represses her own desires, and eliminates signifiers of femininity. In doing so, she can be accepted in the work force, not as a woman, but as a mechanization. Only after she has fully earned her leadership by successfully navigating and exceeding the workplace codes written by men can she be seen as an equal, a partner, in the eyes of her love interest and colleague, Mr. Price. The narrative clearly illustrates the complete power reversal between a man and a woman, and that reversal makes her capable of being desired by a partner, an atypical position for characters presented in the mainstream media. So the possibility of love is sentimental but coincides with hope, team work, partnership, and the possibility for change. Real life parallels these short stories in a few ways. For example, Lewis's publisher, George Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post*, believed that women occupied a separate cultural sphere from men, and for a while this impacted the *Post's* approach to advertising. However, as women began to be recognized for their buying power and advertisers wanted to target them in ads, the logic of the American dollar outperformed the logic of separate spheres. Although Lewis would have certainly critiqued the turnaround, the *Post* ultimately expanded beyond the scope of the business man in order to advertise to more women.

Rebirth of Interpretation:

John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* and Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry*

U.S.A., a trilogy of novels by John Dos Passos, has been interpreted as the narrative depiction of a large machine, the American system that pushes individuals through on an assembly line to their inevitable demise. The first novel, *The 42nd Parallel*, was published in 1930, *1919* in 1932; and the final novel, *The Big Money*, in 1936. The trilogy was released again as a bound collection with a new introduction titled “U.S.A.” in 1938. A study of *The Big Money* comprises the majority of my investigation into Dos Passos. Like Lewis, Dos Passos is skeptical of the possibilities that the American Dream promises, but the characters he portrays are much less capable of asserting their individual will over the circumstances before them. Although Lewis’s serial stories with neat narrative conclusions seem to differ greatly in form from Dos Passos’s expansive, and some might say pessimistic, work, they are not entirely opposites. *U.S.A.* is comprised of seemingly discrete components: the “Newsreel,” “Camera Eye,” “Biography,” and narrative chapters based on a period of time in each character’s life. Each segment has a distinct style and function. But when this interpretation of *U.S.A.* as a churning machination is pressed further, it reveals that not all of the gears turn in the same direction—the components are not as discrete as they first appear. Just as Lancelot Todd appears in several of Lewis’s stories, which take up recurring themes, and to a much greater extent, Dos Passos’s characters’ trajectories are also perpetuated from narrative to narrative. On the other hand, comparing *U.S.A.* to Diego Rivera’s mural *Detroit Industry* highlights ways in which form can translate to different textual mediums—both sprawl across the page and the wall, both combine multiple techniques used within different genres, and both present themselves as being discretely organized, modeled after the auto industries’ impeccable systems of organization. Painted in 1931 and 1932, Rivera’s massive mural on the wall of the Detroit Institute of Arts combines panels painted with the techniques of varying genres. Each panel can be interpreted on its own, but the mural can also be read as a whole. My analysis of the East Wall, a

depiction of child in the bulb of a plant and images of female fertility, includes an interpretation of the empty spaces in the wall. The reading is paired with the ways in which Dos Passos uses orphaning and childbirth as a tropes for American identity and idealism in the *U.S.A.*

Dos Passos uses language similarly to Lewis in that he combines words and uses onomatopoeia to depict the fast pace of modern American life. He eliminates the space between words in phrases like “deadrunk” to not only combine them but to underscore key elements of the plot, such as foreshadowing that Mary will find her alcoholic father dead. Dos Passos’s use of language also foregrounds miscommunication and misinterpretation. His view of the modern world is one in which signifiers have changed and become uprooted from their original objects, leaving characters prone to confusion and creating tension within relationships. In order to escape her troubled home life, a young Margo Dowling gets married and moves with her husband Tony to Cuba. Here she is unable to speak the language and Tony refuses to translate for her. The deliberate miscommunication Tony causes is a precursor to his deliberate deception of Margo regarding his sexuality. Tony desires other men and, once Margo realizes this, she is forced to interpret the signs that she previously noticed to recognize the true nature of his desire. Dos Passos also combines language with unconventional form in a “Newsreel” section of *The Big Money*. Detroit is portrayed through a poetic language compiled as a list news titles, song lyrics, and names of manufactured goods. The words on the page shout the city’s importance in capital letters, “DETROIT IS FIRST,” which is trailed by a rhythmic list of manufactured goods cascading down the page. Here Dos Passos writes with irony from a point after the Great Depression to illustrate how dependent upon consumerism the city’s economy was in the decade prior when “the big money” was to be made.

Clearly, *U.S.A.* deals more directly with Detroit, the auto industry, and Henry Ford than Lewis does. Rivera’s subject matter explicitly addresses all three as well. The mural is literally

located in Detroit, the largest panels teem with workmen in a factory representative of the Ford Rouge Plant, and the imagery of the panel of the manager suggests surveillance and control as business practice. My reading of Rivera's depiction of the child in the bulb of a plant suggests that Rivera was hopeful for the future by illustrating that the fetus depicted is a viable one, representative of a future generation that has a choice between using technological advancements in a way that builds community or in a way that destroys it. However, I suggest the architecture of the Detroit Institute of Arts was restructured while Rivera undertook painting the mural, making the space less conducive to a binary choice and creating the possibility for observers of the mural to choose different, unplanned paths throughout the space. Unlike the hope conveyed by fertility in Rivera and Lewis's happy romantic endings, Dos Passos does not permit the possibility of fruitful relationships. For Dos Passos, this dissatisfaction between men and women is rooted in unhappy child/parent relationships, which lead to unhappy romantic relationships. In turn, these ultimately repeat the pattern of unhappy child/parent relationships. Parenthood is a trope used to examine American identity, and success becomes embedded in the possibility of shedding the trauma created by past failures and negative experiences, learning from them, and adapting new ways of acting in the world. Breaking the ties to one's parents, and subsequently one's children, proves advantageous as a way of disconnecting from the past and freeing the future for alternate possibilities. Margo Dowling becomes a success despite the challenges she faces, due to her ability to take advantage of her experiences. The figure of the orphan has distinct advantages, free of the previous generation's burdens. Unlike the poor Southern men, women, and children in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* who are unable to escape the cycle of reproduction that ties them to work and anchors them to the land, Margo is able to keep moving and realize some of her desires. For Dos Passos, abortion and miscarriage highlight not only the clear problems in a relationship that stem from

misinterpretation between characters, but they also signify failed idealism. Only Margo is able to process the early death of her infant in a way that increases her social and economic opportunities. In contrast, I argue that *Detroit Industry's* child in the bulb of a plant does not reference the tragic miscarriage Frida Kahlo experienced in Detroit. In light of the fact that the infant in Rivera's mural must be seen as a positive, life-affirming symbol, I argue that the empty spaces behind the East Wall represent absence and a lack of production that create an aesthetic stillness in comparison with the active composition of the laboring men that dominate the adjacent walls.

The roles men and women play with regard to sexuality and gender are ever shifting and interpretable in the first half of the twentieth century. For queer characters, sexuality is a subtext that lies beneath the traditionally written codes of sexuality. In *U.S.A.*, Dick Savage has to learn how to navigate these new grounds in order to recognize his desire and has a difficult time doing so. Margo's husband, Tony, also desires men, a fact that Margo could not interpret until she learns that Tony gave her a disease he contracted from having sex with men. In light of this information, Margo reviews the previous instances during which she misinterpreted the signs of his attraction, learning how to read desire more clearly from that point on. She uses this information to her advantage by avoiding unwanted sexual advances and manipulating her own image to profit from the desire of her audience as a film star. Mary French, on the other hand, cannot separate political goals and sexual desire. Her compulsion to pair politics and sexuality leads to two unwanted pregnancies and a string of failed relationships with men on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Like an automaton, Mary repeats the pattern ingrained in her since childhood. Unable to adapt, she is, perhaps, the best representation of a character who was conveyed along Dos Passos's narrative to her ultimate destruction. Margo, however, defies most critics of Dos Passos's work by accom-

plishing her personal goals and becoming the novel's greatest, though most often critically under-examined, success. Mary's character trajectory upholds previous interpretations of *U.S.A.* as a churning narrative machine that processes characters through to a desperate conclusion, but Margo's path defies a totalizing analysis of the work.

**Black and White: Displacement and Race in the Rural South and Urban North through
Print and Photography**

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men introduces a new setting, the rural South, to illustrate Agee's interpretation of the lives of sharecroppers, which is in part a reaction to the ways in which production has shaped American culture, despite the absence of mechanization in the text. The project that became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was originally undertaken by Agee and photographer Walker Evans as an assignment for *Fortune* magazine. However, the documentary of three sharecropper families never made it to magazine's pages, in part because the combination of Agee's text and Evans's photographs takes a purposefully complicated form. The photographs do not provide a clear illustrative interpretation of the text; they have a distinct set of separate goals and aims. Agee's text is dense and self-critical, it is also critical of its potential readership. Abstract concepts are developed and positioned alongside heavily detailed descriptions that read like an inventory list, comparable to Dos Passos's itemized list of manufactured goods. Just as Rivera combined artistic modes, Evans's composition also draws from multiple techniques typical of other photographic genres. For Agee, representation of lived experience is a near-impossible task, one that fills him with sympathy for his subjects. He warns his audience: treat the sharecroppers with respect. The complex form frustrates the attempt of a passive readership who might make their circumstances a form of entertainment. Agee's overt skepticism about the possibility of reaching an objective truth through documentary form is also revealed in his self-referential text.

My analysis of Evans's photos are supplemented by Arthur Siegel's photographs of a Detroit housing riot. Unlike *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Siegel's photos are published in a Time, Inc., magazine: *LIFE*. Like Evans's work, Siegel's is also archived in the Office of War Information. My analysis of Siegel's photo of the back of a newspaper photographer suggests that his collection was, like Agee's observations, also self-referential about his position on the margins as a documenter of someone else's struggle. Like Rivera and Dos Passos, Agee positions himself within the narrative of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and in doing so, may be interpreted as arriving at a more accurate truth than if he had remained outside the diegesis.

As with Dos Passos, miscommunication and the inability to form a common language because of the difference between subjects of different classes and races lead to misunderstanding and awkward and sometimes traumatic experiences. Like Dos Passos, Agee alternates styles of form and language; the tireless recording of the inventory of rooms in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* may be read to satirize the belief that recording a series of objects, commodities, is an act that is somehow capable of providing insight into the weight of the life of a man. The primary text indicates confidence about Agee's own ability to record, but the footnotes indicate that he may have forgotten or made up some of the information. In my analysis of writer and filmmaker Errol Morris's "The Case of the Missing Alarm Clock," I suggest that for documentary to get closest to the truth that is its mission, aesthetic may mar the boundaries between fact and fiction. Following the bare itemized deductions in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee often lapses into lush, philosophical prose. Hard facts give way to the aesthetic exploration of a sunrise that wakes and connects all life as it spreads across the country or the formation of human identity, both collective, like a flock of birds, and individually delicate, like a bubble floating down a stream. For Agee,

combining poetic prose with blunt description is an attempt to reach a combination of language forms, the sum of which is hopefully more expressive than the components.

In order to leave behind the sharecropping system and severe racial discrimination that were integral to the way of life in the rural South, many African Americans left and traveled to the industrial north with expectations of economic opportunity and greater racial equality. The onset of World War II and the conversion of auto factories into plants for wartime production led to a job boom in Detroit. Southern blacks migrated northward alongside Southern whites, joining those whose lives were already established in the urban North. The result was social conflict, intense competition over jobs, and a housing shortage. In 1941, the year *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published, the federal government attempted to house displaced African Americans by creating the Sojourner Truth housing project. A riot over the housing project ensued, and Arthur Siegel's photographs of the conflict appeared in *LIFE* magazine. The photographs and text created by Siegel, Agee, and Evans illustrate the disparity between both sets of tenants, the tenant farmers and tenants of the Sojourner Truth project, in terms of privilege, class, education—and especially mobility. An analysis of Siegel's photos of the clash point out the streamlined apolitical narrative created by the photographs in *LIFE*, one that fits an editorial style symptomatic of a rift between the publishers as managers and the photographers and writers. Detroit legislators were also willing to overlook the complexities of the housing project riot, a historical reality that was almost as much about class as it was about race, and set forth a pattern of legislation that would ensure racial segregation as a pattern to follow.

Like Lewis, and particularly Dos Passos, Agee writes relationships between men and women as representations of work or production. As Agee depicts it, the choice of whether or not to be a mother is a privilege that belongs to the middle and upper classes. Women in the poor, rural

South are stuck in a perpetual cycle of giving birth, an act that exhausts them and keeps them entrenched in poverty. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the burden of childbearing is only relieved once the children leave to start a family of their own, an act which brings no happiness to either party. Reproduction replicates a doomed and inescapable pattern: dependence on the unpredictable land and a circuit of working to pay off debt, which requires investment that only incurs further debt. Here motherhood and childbirth correlate, inversely, to similar themes in Dos Passos. For both authors, child bearing—or a lack of it—is intrinsic to the likelihood of economic success. Thus, Annie Mae Gudger, her sister, Emma, and daughter, Louise, cannot succeed because their conditions and their class dictate they will follow the pattern set out before them. Both Dos Passos and Agee present motherhood as a disadvantageous anchor to collective experience. In each text, the untethered individual has the best chance of survival according to the rules of American culture.

Picket Lines and Picket Fences:

Work and Desire in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Donna Reed Show*

The final chapter of my dissertation illustrates the social shift that occurred in the United States after World War II but also argues that many of the hallmarks of American culture associated with the postwar period began prior to the war. While Hubert Selby, Jr. wove his dark narratives of violence, rape, and alcohol and drug abuse in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) flickered on television sets across the country, advertising a version of the American Dream. *The Donna Reed Show* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are posed as opposites, but my analysis of them illustrates that masculine and feminine identities were shaped by similar political and economic concerns in the postwar period. World War II may suggest a turning point in

previous economic organization and patterns of domesticity, but earlier trends in defining gay culture and feminist ideals gained momentum and began to take revolutionary form that would make definitive breaks after the feminist movement and gay liberation movement, as marked by the Stonewall riots. My analysis of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Donna Reed Show* theorizes this period after the war and before the civil rights movement as a period of overlap and transition that looked backward even as it looked ahead.

The format of *The Donna Reed Show* was largely dictated by the concerns of corporate sponsorship, while Selby sought to frustrate the kinds of audiences that would appreciate just such a television show. The form of television, in theory not far removed from that of Lewis's publications, was brief, serial, introduced, plotted, and happily resolved in a half hour. Also like Lewis, Selby's chapters were initially published as discrete stories in magazines, but the loosely related series of narratives eventually collected as *Last Exit to Brooklyn* promised from the outset that no character would receive a happy ending. My analysis focuses on the chapter "Strike" and the character Harry Black, a lathe operator at a "Corporation." The chasm of stylistic and thematic differences between *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Donna Reed Show* illustrates a level of thematic control in each. Not only did corporate backing dictate the actions of the actress Donna Reed, but the character of Donna Stone had to correct her impulses in order to work efficiently. Selby, on the other hand, depicts Harry Black's violence as an inability to shape his sexual desires to the expectations of the culture of his workforce.

Selby's narrative world is one of entropy, collapse, and destruction, and his language choices indicate disorder and dissonance. If in Lewis's "Honestly—If Possible" the dialogue trips along in a hyper-efficient chorus of words, Selby uses the breakdown of language to highlight dysfunction in both the factory environment of the Corporation and in Harry's perception of his

own identity and sexuality. The perspective of Harry's union becomes indistinct from the position of the company and the division of labor insisted upon by the union leads to inefficiency. As in Lewis, the relationship to work is indicative of the nature of sexual relationships, and Selby's language choices help to indicate the breakdown of both: sentences are endlessly strung together, the addition of commas mimics the rhythm of work during a strike, and the elimination of apostrophes in favor of slash marks—for example I/m instead of I'm—indicates the sharp dissonance between the subject and the action. More like Agee and Dos Passos's lists than they first appear, the sequence of objects that Harry brags about are women and cars; possessing them is a symbol of mid-century American masculinity. But in listing these desirable commodities, Harry is led again and again to list what he truly desires: other men.

The motif of control is central to understanding both *The Donna Reed Show* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Harry Black is unable to control his same-sex desire, but once workers of the Corporation go on strike and social expectations of his work environment are lifted, Harry feels able to act on his attractions. Sex was, of course, never openly discussed on the *The Donna Reed Show*. But the final product of sex, children, is central to the plot. For the Stone family, parenting can be accomplished via a template—parents ideally reproduce smaller versions of themselves. Donna's relationship to her daughter, Mary, and Alex's relationship to his son, Jeff, illustrate this reproduction in reproduction. According to *The Donna Reed Show*, careful managerial instruction from parents can correct and guide willful but well-meaning children, and the stability of the middle-class, nuclear family as an American ideal relies upon caring, educated parents effective enough to resolve every problem their child has. Producers worked to contain and eliminate from *The Donna Reed Show* anything that would offend viewers and sponsors. On the other hand, *Last Exit*

to Brooklyn addresses sex, violence, working-class tension, and homosexuality head on, taking part in an avant-garde movement intentionally opposed to such conservative, middle class values.

In both texts, this motif of control is furthered through interpretations of gender and sexuality, and both the novel and the television show illustrate that there are consequences for women and gay men whose willful expression of their gender and sexuality lies outside of the previous tradition of social expectations. In the episodes “Just a Housewife” and “The Ideal Wife,” Donna Stone experiences a need to assert her will because she believes she is being perceived in a way that is inconsistent with how she sees herself. However, when she decides to step outside of her normal routine and allow these opinions to surface, the result is domestic turmoil. Because all of the sitcom’s plots revolve around Donna’s ability to solve the crises of that episode within the span of a half hour, it becomes clear to Donna in both instances that the easiest way to manage the problem is to control and change herself, rather than wait for each family member to adapt to her new expectations. Harry, however, does not possess Donna’s self-discipline. He cannot meet his wife’s sexual demands, nor can he rise to his boss’s expectations at work. Furthermore, in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, no one patiently waits for women to correct themselves. The husbands in Selby’s fiction do not throw passive aggressive jabs at their wives, they throw right hooks instead. Mary, Harry’s wife, is regularly beaten when her autonomy and sexual desires invade Harry’s personal routine. Some of Harry’s aggression, however, is also directed at his work, and Selby links sexuality and labor through the trope of inversion. The strike at Harry’s Corporation creates an inversion of the work day, but the activities of the strike become more task-orientated than Harry’s work performance ever was, something I call anti-work. Inversion suggests a medicalized model of same-sex desire that was popular at the beginning of the twentieth century and coincided with both the growing popularity of psychoanalysis and the professionalization of the medical profession.

However, in *Last Exit*, inversion is primarily a trope—Harry’s sexual orientation during the strike more closely resembles the ethnic model of homosexuality that Christopher Nealon describes and is characteristic of later interpretations of gay identity. Alongside Harry’s fictional account, I position the accounts of several real men, gay union workers interviewed by Miriam Frank in her newly published work *Out in the Union*. Frank has told me that she sees the experience of gay union workers before and after Stonewall as the difference between seeing in black and white and color. Thus, the experience for queer laborers in the 1970s was vastly different from the one that Harry would have experienced in 1950s and early 1960s; and yet, according to Frank, the UAW member Gary Kapanowski’s sexual desire was a fact that his union, not his company, tried to control. Through Kapanowski’s story, we can also see the shift in economic structure that C. Wright Mills describes as having an impact on masculine identity in America. Kapanowski worked for Beautyware, a company that made bathtubs and became part of the UAW during an incredibly tumultuous time for Detroit unions because of corporate consolidation; and for Mills, the transition in business modes directly relates to a shift in cultural ideals, placing value on a different set of not just work habits, but personality traits. In this chapter, I undertake a reading of Mills as an interpretation of masculine identity applicable to Harry Black and utilize Betty Friedan in an attempt to theorize the feminine identity of the housewife in Donna Reed.

Rhythm

What I hope I have put forward in this dissertation is a logic by which these texts can be read that brings into focus unnoticed commonalities in form, language, subject, and the treatment of gender and sexual desire. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, these authors criticized a system they necessarily participated in through active choices in words and publication. Their texts show that American culture was shaped in accordance to and in defiance of a social

and economic system based on control and compartmentalization, a system designed to increase efficiency for the ultimate goal of making a profit. The logic behind the driving principles of Fordism are difficult to resist. Even this dissertation can be read under its structure: it is organized by chapter, each chapter highlighting a chronologically organized primary text. Through my interpretation, I have tried to make the pieces of disparate works fit together, to bend them to my will under the organization of four simple, discrete principles: form, subject, language, and representations of gender and sexuality. The organizing logic is absolutely necessary to making this analysis comprehensible and to illustrate the connective elements between each text that form the basis for my entire premise, but of course there are more differences between these texts than similarities. There are inherent overlaps between the categorical distinctions I have imposed because how can you have literary form without language? The categorization of subject bleeds into gender and sexuality throughout these chapters. The commonalities between unlike objects are so much more interesting than rows of color coded similarities—but only by comparison. When I read Dos Passos, it is Margo Dowling who comes to life in contrast to Mary French. Donna Stone's everyday perfection only makes it that much more delicious when she slyly breaks the rules. The short sentence in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, "Harry was happy," only carries the weight of a great sadness because he had never felt happy before. Despite the unlikeliness of these texts appearing side by side in collections of works based more closely on genre or written within conventional periodic breaks or provided as classic examples of modern form, there is a thread that strings them all together. A rhythm. It is the representation of the pace of American life as read through a Detroit aesthetic.

CHAPTER ONE

ADVERTISING THE AUTOMOBILE: AN AMERICAN LOVE STORY

Gathered together in a collection called *If I Were Boss*, a selection of Sinclair Lewis's short fiction originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Metropolitan Magazine* between the years of 1916 and 1921, sets the events of the lives and practices of white-collar characters in an office environment to explore themes of work, love, and advertising. Throughout his short stories, Lewis makes careful choices between expected and experimental narrative form. His fiction navigates the complex territory between themes and forms represented in both high art and mass culture, and he writes about the world of advertising while acknowledging that he cannot write from a position *outside* the culture of commodification. Anthony Di Renzo notes that the business fiction Lewis wrote for periodical publication served not only artistic but practical purposes and helped the author accrue a popular audience (Lewis xv). Despite the commercial accessibility of his work, the form is frequently untraditional, including the text of office memos, complaint letters from annoyed consumers, and phonetically spelled dialect. Di Renzo argues that Lewis is the first American author to use business writing experimentally in this way (Lewis xvii). In this chapter, I examine Lewis's short stories for places where the tension between upholding masculine, capitalist convention and undermining it become productive in terms of form, language, subject matter, and gender identity. A juxtaposition of these fictional texts alongside selections from historical narratives such as Henry Ford's autobiography *My Life and Work* and *Ford Times*, the house publication of Ford Motor Company, illustrates not only how Lewis's satire of similar modes of writing occasionally pales in comparison to the reality, but also highlights the ways in which Fordist

principles shaped both lived experience and narrative production in uniquely American ways in the first half of the twentieth century.

The subjects of Lewis's short stories experience a changing modernity in the early twentieth century as they engage in age-old internal and external conflicts. They wrestle with the ethical compromises of job requirements and struggle to maintain a sense of self within relationships as they debate the best way to sell the company product to the public and discover how to interact with—or to be—the only woman in the workplace. Lewis satirizes mass production and marketing techniques in these short stories, despite the fact that the publication of his work engages him in business transactions that require participation in the practices he criticizes. As grounds for developing and experimenting with the subject matter that would establish his reputation as an author in his later novels, these stories reached a wide audience due to the circulation size of the publications for which they were written. The combination of Lewis's experience with marketing, his admiration for the tenacity and ingenuity required to sell products to consumers, and his distaste for the requisite deception of the public inherent in doing so create an intricate layering of the glorification and, ultimately, criticism of American profit-making techniques. In his introduction to *If I Were Boss*, Anthony Di Renzo writes of Lewis: "His background in journalism, advertising, and public relations, his uncanny grasp of demographics, popular trends, and the mass media made him the shrewdest marketer at the George H. Doran Company. Nevertheless, he still smoldered with dissatisfaction" (xiii).

In some ways, the form dictates the content for Lewis: short, consumable stories published in popular magazines have resolvable and easily understood narratives. Although the fiction follows some well-trodden narrative patterns, the protagonists of Lewis's stories are made to represent unexpected cultural beliefs that are often contrary to the principles supported by the American

advertising industry. Furthermore, Lewis's embrace of the old-fashioned love story ultimately functions to undermine old-fashioned perspectives on gender and the roles women are expected to play in a working environment, representing an emerging modern perspective on the relationships between men and women. Plot sequences align fairly routinely with readers' expectations in terms of character development and narration, but they challenge the readers' beliefs about what it means to be a consumer and a laborer. In doing so, Lewis advocates for people to be active participants in their relationships as readers, in their roles as consumers, and throughout their work habits rather than accept and assume the passivity that dominant, masculinized, consumer culture would otherwise cultivate. Most of Lewis's characters are either selling something or being sold something, and the act of selling is the trope through which the rest of the action in the plot comes into being: the conflict, the resolution, and, often, a love story.

Women in the Workplace(s)

Lewis illustrates the relationship between office work and factory modes of production by emphasizing the standardization and serialization that underpins much of American culture. Lewis's characters are often in the business of making or marketing consumer goods; they are salesmen, car dealers, and advertising agents. The thematic tension throughout most of these short stories occurs when Lewis exposes mass culture for what Andreas Huyssen has argued "is standardized, organized, and administered for the sole purpose of serving as an instrument of social control" (21) by revealing the scheme of selling for what it is: a scam. One frequent component of Lewis's narrative pattern is the traditional love story: a man and a woman meet, they face obstacles in the workplace, have difficulties communicating with one other and negotiating their respective roles in the relationship, but eventually fall in love and live happily ever after. Unless, of course, the love between the two is really a false advertisement: just another swindle. The romantic thread

throughout these stories follows a conventional blueprint, but Lewis unexpectedly uses sexual desire between the characters in order to illustrate how advertisers manufacture desire to sell their products.

Advertising and love comprise the dominant discourse in the short story “Honestly—If Possible.”¹ The central character, Terry Ames, writes advertising copy for a mail-order real estate company. Terry finds his job tedious and morally compromising, as he deals with requests to pitch land to would-be buyers by selling blatantly false claims. Terry strives to perform his work with integrity, despite the fact that his company finds honesty in advertising to be a ridiculous waste of time and energy, a nonstandard practice. Initially, Terry is characterized as an average working man: “He was neither a success nor a failure. He was making thirty-two dollars and a half a week with the mail order real estate firm Hopkins & Gato. He wrote advertising copy, dictated correspondence, and occasionally was sent out to close up a prospect” (86). However, he can’t seem to “get the philosophy of the job to hang right” (86). He asks around for advice at work, he signs up for business seminars and buys self-help books. He doesn’t understand; when he first came “to New York Terry had solemnly attended instituted lectures that told him to be good and he would be happy, or to work hard and he would be rich, or to study shorthand and he would be famous” (87). Terry soon discovers that none of these words of wisdom actually make good on their promises, particularly in the advertising industry.

Lewis undermines the Horatio Alger myth of the American Dream by discrediting the assumption that to achieve success you simply have to be earnest and work hard. The addition of studying shorthand to become famous mocks the connection between hard work and success and

¹ First published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 14 Oct. 1916.

reveals its absurdity while simultaneously addressing the American desire for fame at the beginning of twentieth-century celebrity culture. In all of Lewis's works, the business of selling is shown to be particularly full of half-truths and outright lies, and when it comes down to it, nearly every character is a salesman, regardless of his occupation.

The office environment of Hopkins & Gato enforces a standard of behavior through hostility, and the expectation to behave in ways that signal masculinity is socially enforced. Lewis writes that Terry's coworkers "went the rounds of one another's desks, making beastly little jests. And they played jokes, hid hats and arranged humiliating fake telephone calls. After a few years in Hopkins & Gato's fine, solid, prosperous office you were qualified to go right out to the trenches and join the poison squad" (88). The office flirt and practical joker, Mac, teases Terry about his cigarette smoking, as do his other coworkers. Lewis writes, "Watkins asked Terry why he didn't smoke cigars, like a man, and Peter had some light elephantine pleasantries about a pipe. In fact, Terry's general childishness was the office joke, till they had a new topic in the expected arrival of a woman to try to do a man's work" (91). The gang of male employees at Hopkins & Gato enforce the status quo and maintain the office hierarchy through bullying, and Terry is feminized because of his ethics—neither cigarette smoking nor honesty are considered "masculine" in this environment. Honesty is seen as sentimental and unnecessary; a liberal application of creative spin in advertising increases profit, the ultimate indication of clear winners in this office competition. For Lewis, established business practices are linked to the patriarchal systems that support them, a good ol' boys' network of coded language and habits. Exposing the encoded practice of advertisement is akin to hiring a woman, an outsider, a traitor—like Susan Bratt.

Terry is the focus of his office's enforced behavioral codes until Susan Bratt enters the narrative as the new female officemate and has to cope with gendered expectations in a male-

dominated environment. Upon hearing of Susan's imminent arrival at the office, all of the employees assume she will be matronly and unattractive. Once they discover she is, in fact, young and beautiful, all vie for her attention, flirting mercilessly with her as she tries to maintain an unwavering focus on her office tasks. Susan Bratt's insertion into the narrative creates office upheaval, and she combats the old-fashioned expectations of the male-dominated workplace, marriage and social conformity placed upon her by her family. She and Terry resist one another, but eventually resolve their conflicts and fall in love. The conclusion of the narrative sees the young couple through to a mutually happy, if predictable, ending together.

One element that complicates the depiction of gender in "Honestly—If Possible" is Lewis's use of language evocative of fairy tales. The narrative of "Honestly—If Possible" is split into four separate parts. The first section presents no major surprises to readers until the transition at the end which is directed at the audience:

You—philosophers and poets and iron-jawed statesmen, foreign observers of America, and clever ladies of the literary tables d'hôtes and soldiers who demand that we take your military training—you know what our offices are—just desks and cigars and rubber bands, and derby hats over a slight baldness. Yes, you know there isn't any grave and quiet nobility or glorious struggle of youth among us who are dollar chasers. Oh! Oh, you do, do you? Then listen. (89)²

This signifies the beginning of what will end up being a push and pull between the ordinary and fantastical throughout the rest of the story. Lewis uses exaggerated historical lore and themes from Arthurian legend to describe Terry's role in the evolving office romance as heroic and chivalrous, while the beautiful Susan waits to be rescued. Ultimately, both characters realize their everyday lives are not as fantastical as the lives of knights and princess and accept that they feel much more comfortable being themselves rather than playing a role. The understanding they develop about

² Note the narrator's use of the phrase "you know what *our* offices are" and "*us* who are dollar chasers"—implying the story is being told by someone like its characters *to* someone like its characters.

the artificiality of their roles within the relationship then extends to understanding the roles they perform at the office.

One example of language that evokes tales of heroic adventure is observed when Susan starts working at Hopkins & Gato. Lewis writes, “All the Sir Walter Raleighs in the shop galloped up to help her, while the old dependables, the stenographers who had been with the firm since Hopkins was a yearling, somehow managed to struggle with their sateen-lined, tabby black jackets without assistance” (93). The concept of chivalry is exposed as paltry self-interest when young, beautiful, capable Susan is offered help she doesn’t want while older female employees are left to fend for themselves. Likewise, Terry struggles to be heroic, but cannot ever be convincing as a knight in shining armor. Terry is upset with himself when he discovers he’s attracted to Susan, like the rest of the superficial men in the office, but “he already knew that his overnight fervor about Miss Bratt was a dream; that she was merely a business female, not a princess of romance” (94). Throughout the narrative, images initially appear as if they’ve been lifted from a storybook tale, and then are immediately regrounded with mundane realism. Despite the fact that the love story is central to the plot, Lewis creates some tension around the concept of a fairy tale romance that renders its telling problematic.

The gender codes of the office prove to be equally obvious in the domestic sphere, and Lewis carries the complicated motif of the princess and white knight into Susan’s home. In the fourth quarter of the story, a frightening thunderstorm strikes the office, and Terry gathers enough courage to ask Susan if he can walk her home because he—not she—does not want to be alone. Initially Susan protests, “Oh, not—not now. Terry, I’m—I don’t like myself at home. Really! I prefer the Miss Bratt of the office. I’d rather have you know her” (104). Susan must maintain two distinct selves in order to deal with both office pressures and domestic ones. Eventually acceding

to his requests, Susan allows Terry to visit. But once there, he is startled at the way she engages with him, her mother, and Mr. Meehan—“a thin, indigestive, baldish business grinder of thirty-eight” (105). Terry had not anticipated the presence of Meehan, who had come to Susan’s house with the intention of courting her. Susan acts properly, daintily, superficially throughout the entire interaction. Terry thinks to himself, “Why the deuce can’t she be frank, the way she is at the office” (106). He is appalled by her small talk and her attempts to act like a genteel hostess.

This scene creates a comparison between the ways in which Susan is compelled to act at work and the ways in which she is compelled to act at home. At Hopkins & Gato, Susan has to fend off sexual advances in order to be taken seriously. Like Arroford, she must maintain a cold distance in order to conceal a sexuality that would undermine her ability to perform her job in the eyes of her bosses and co-workers. However, once she is at home under the watchful gaze of her mother and forced to confront the amorous intentions of the undesirable Mr. Meehan, it becomes clear that the behavioral expectations enforced at work are vastly preferable to those at home. Not only does Terry wish Susan could speak and act without the gender-coded coyness he witnesses, but she states she doesn’t like herself at home, either. Although she is not able to truly be herself in either environment—there seem to be few places where women are not isolated and constrained into something vastly different from what they want to be—the modernized woman in the workforce is preferred by both to gentle domestic goddess. Just as notions of the medieval fairy tale pervade expectations about romance, perceptions of women’s relative worth as emotional beings saturate courtship. In *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory*, Victor J. Seidler examines perceptions of what it means to be a man. Seidler writes, “As far as Kant was concerned, it was only through seeking the guidance of men through marriage that women could learn to steer their lives through reason. So it was that the subordination of women and the devaluation of their

experience was written into the terms of modernity, through challenging the abiding distinction between reason and emotion” (iii). If Mr. Meehan could woo and marry Susan, perhaps her ideas about independence and work would be curtailed and channeled into more domestic ambitions.

Ultimately, though, Terry and Susan are able to escape Susan’s mother and Meehan, climbing to the rooftop together once the storm has passed. As they leave constructed domesticity, Terry imagines himself as a knight scaling a tower for his maiden’s honor. However, “Then he changed from a romantic lover into a realistic and abashed young man calling on an ordinary girl. The Sue Bratt, in a white frock coat with a broad blue ribbon filleting her hair, who met him at the door, was not the keen and self-dependent comrade of the office, nor was she any sort of a lady of dreams. She was just a young lady, who was not so very different from the young ladies he had known back home” (105).

The negation of the trope of the knight in shining armor works as a counterweight to the sentimentality inherent in the love story. The “average” nature of both characters and the situation itself is a recurring motif. In this way, Lewis suggests the story could be commonplace, could represent people’s lived experiences. Sometimes, partners find each other and decide to build a life together, regardless of somewhat typical obstacles. The urge to position Terry as exceptional is frequently undermined: “But—Terry wasn’t a Galahad; he was about like the rest of us. He wanted to be honest and also to get that little envelope next Saturday. So he studied a bulletin on orange growing till he had an artistic inspiration” (90–91). On the one hand, the Everyman qualities Terry possesses, and his happy, fateful union with Susan, are a false promise created by the culture industry in relationship to the ordinariness of the audience of “Honestly—If Possible.” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that the insertion of an average Joe into the narrative functions as just another managerial element of control:

For the planners it serves as an alibi, giving the impression that the web of transactions and measures into which life has been transformed still leaves room for spontaneous, immediate relationships between human beings. Such freedom is symbolized in the various media of the culture industry by the arbitrary selection of average cases. In the detailed reports on the modestly luxurious pleasure trip organized by the magazine for the lucky competition winner—preferably the shorthand typist who probably won through contacts with local powers-that-be—the powerlessness of everyone is reflected. (Horkheimer and Adorno 117)

But on the other hand, these are faint threads of realism in an unexpected place—a middle-class realism for a middle-class readership relating common experiences: job dissatisfaction, frustration with a boss, an inevitable marriage to an average person who, nonetheless, makes you happy for a time.

If there is even a hint of revolutionary tone in this text, it is a quiet one, taken in half steps by people who are still concerned with paying their bills but are nonetheless self-conscious about the ways in which capitalism and gender codes can obscure a larger truth. Once on the rooftop, Terry suggests leaving the office and moving somewhere new, but Susan says, “No, that would be running away. Do you know, I’m going to hang onto my job for a while, even after we’re married.... And so, my little man, you won’t have me depending on you, and you can put on your Boy Scout uniform and go tell Mr. Hopkins to change Tangerine Springs from an orange development to truck farming. Do that! Do it tomorrow!” (111). To this Terry replies, “Um. Maybe I’d dare to buck him now with you backing me. But—suppose he fired me? Now? When I need the job for— for us?” She says, “Let him! That’s why I’m going to keep my job. Oh, you won’t be like the others—get cautious when you fall in love. You started me wanting to be honest, and I’m afraid you can’t stop that sort of thing, once it’s really started. You will fight it out with him! If you don’t, I will!” (111). They decide the way to convince Mr. Hopkins of this is to show him how he would make more money listening to Terry. Noble idealism is undercut by practical concerns and profit is the way to Hopkins’s heart. By the story’s end, participation in the capitalist system is still

critical to success. Terry still wants “to get that little envelope next Saturday” (90) and make enough money to support himself and Susan. Although the story can be ideologically problematic, the coupling of Terry and Susan creates professional and financial support, yielding a somewhat realistic solution to Terry’s dissatisfaction with his job that entails swindling consumers. The implication of the narrative events is that small, practical decisions could potentially create change in the office and at home. Susan retains some agency and asserts her intention to continue to work and to confront the boss if Terry doesn’t. And false advertisement is equated with the fairytale, which in turn is related to unequal power structures in male/female romantic relationships. It’s a “rotten, petty victory” in Terry’s words, but according to Susan, “I guess there’s nothing but petty victories in life, that and the real big thing of going on fighting” (111).

“Honestly—If Possible” was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1916. Lewis had a long, complex relationship with the *Post* and its editor, George Lorimer. Lorimer had a clear vision for the editorial philosophy behind the *Post*, one that occasionally conflicted with the ideas that Lewis expressed about advertising and gender within his fiction. In *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950*, Tom Pendergast explains how the *Post* shifted its target audience over the years to try to draw in advertisers. Despite increased sponsorship aimed at women, the *Saturday Evening Post* still saw itself as a publication for businessmen, both those who were trying to make it and those who had already carved out a place within middle-class capitalist culture. Pendergast indicates that “in pieces like ‘Making a Living by Literature,’ ‘The Business End of Baseball,’ and ‘The Business Side of the Church,’ the *Post* made it clear that the logic of the businessman of character was the logic of all America. Common sense was, as the *Post* practiced it, as American as apple pie. But it was not necessarily the logic of modernity, or at least of modern publishing” (56). All of Lewis’s short stories addressed in this chapter make sense

within this context; they are set in the workplace and deal with themes that businessmen in the working world would likely face regularly. Yet Lewis's stories often illustrate that "the business end" of American culture is often a dirty business. His narratives illustrate that often success is not dependent on how hard a person works.

The fact that Terry tries to get ahead by honest means, being good and trying hard, yet cannot seem to advance in the office hierarchy is contrary to the philosophy that Lorimer often repeated to himself and others. Pendergast writes,

Lorimer's rise to success bore just enough resemblance to what was expected of the self-made man that he was able to adopt the ideals and values associated with that masculine norm. While he had not built a business up from scratch by hard work and unstinting sacrifice—in fact, his one attempt at building his own business failed—he had risen up through the hierarchy of other organizations through those very methods, methods that men had long been taught to value. As the son of a famous Baptist minister, born into some privilege, he had not had to travel the path of Horatio Alger, lifting himself up from his bootstraps. (54)

And yet, the Horatio Alger myth was one that Lorimer championed and believed in. The concept was *close enough* to what he experienced, after all. When Terry confronts the fact that his bosses want him to lie to customers in order to increase profits, the reality of the American Dream is presented in contrast to what Lorimer claimed to believe.

Several of the stories I introduce here have a central conflict established by the presence of a woman in the workplace; Lorimer also expressed clear views regarding the appearance of women in advertisements in the *Post*. In "Honestly—If Possible," Susan Bratt is met with negative expectations about her ability to perform the tasks that will ultimately be assigned to her, ideas that were formed before she even arrived to meet her coworkers. Once on the job, she is immediately sexualized and becomes the object of unwanted male desire. In both scenarios, she is subject to pre-established belief systems about who she is or what she'll become, regardless of how she actually performs. Pendergast notes that "neither Lorimer nor his ideology were antiwomen," per se, "but

they did hold that women were to occupy a separate space in culture from men. This was a view that Lorimer shared with many in his day” (59). The separate spheres of men and women are constantly colliding in Lewis’s fiction, and Lorimer also soon found that the *Post* had to make some concessions in terms of gender as well. The publication, intended to reach American businessmen, soon realized that advertisers were often trying to target women as primary consumers and that larger, more comprehensive ad campaigns were selling products for the home, the domestic space under women’s management. In an article run in the *Post* in December 1910, Lorimer writes that advertisements ““are the great world-market in which every one may display his wares on equal terms and secure customers in fair competition, according to the merits of his goods and the brains in his arguments.’ But by the end of the first decade of the 1900s, increasingly professional advertisers must have recognized that the *Post* offered a market that excluded the very people they assumed were the primary consumer of goods, women” (Pendergast 57). And so, in 1908, the *Saturday Evening Post* decided that it would not remain a men’s publication exclusively and started running articles and ads that appealed to women.

A woman’s presence in an office environment could halt production and throw the workplace into chaos, and yet the presence of women’s advertisements on the pages of the *Post* were, according to Pendergast, a contributing factor to the publication’s ability to make a profit and experience long-term success. In *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen and Ford*, Martha Banta writes, “Whatever their racial and ethnic background or class and status, women and children added yet another disordering element to disrupt the hope of installing efficient management systems” (27). Change to the preexisting routine required managers to adapt; the codes of behavior for women working in typically male spaces had to be written and this made the profit-making machines a little sluggish. Banta continues, “An American scene

mapped out in terms of binary divisions between the intelligent who manage and the stupid who obey was further complicated by the pressure of the ever-increasing public presence of women and non-‘Americans’” (27). Here the “ever-increasing public presence of women” is a problem to be solved. And yet, for Lorimer and the *Saturday Evening Post*, increasing the public presence of women between its pages was a solution. Prior to the 1920s,

women might be convinced to purchase a new dress because it flattered her figure or a new kind of cereal because it offered to boost the energy and vitality of her entire family, men were asked to purchase typewriters for their office because of their efficiency and speed, to buy carriage tires because of their price and durability. In short, while women were being taught the logic of desire, a logic that was based on what the product could do for them, men were schooled in the more familiar logic of reason, a logic based on the intrinsic quality of the merchandise. For women, goods could transform; for men, goods would perform. (Pendergast 60)

Thus, women were necessary to the workplace when they were positioned as consumers and could help generate a profit. The logic of advertisements helped to enforce gender codes by positioning women as sensuous and desirous, in opposition to men’s rational, evidence-based perspective, in order to sell consumer goods. Of course, the desire for increased social status marked by profit and success is equally prevalent in this appeal to rationality targeted at men. When a woman becomes a worker, however, gender roles are confused. Resistance to the need to adapt to new ways of behaving in the workplace can be read as a fear of lost productivity anticipated in the transition to change.

Worker, Woman, Machine

Relationships that develop based on working conditions are central to the short stories in *If I Were Boss*. Characters’ integrity is often revealed through their attitude toward the company for which they work or the product they sell. This measure of integrity, then, is a direct indicator of the strength of the romantic bonds characters form throughout the narrative. In “Honestly—If Possible,” Terry is worthy of our admiration because he refuses to accept the unethical business

practices at Hopkins & Gato. Susan shuns the attention directed at her by her coworkers and remains focused on effectively completing her tasks. Therefore, according to the logic of *If I Were Boss*, Terry and Susan make a perfect romantic match, united through the common bond of business ethics.

Terry is the protagonist of “Honestly—If Possible,” and Susan’s role is as his sidekick and the catalyst for office tension. However, Lewis puts a more complex and independent female protagonist at the center of another short story that explores conceptions of equality in the work place and in relationships. “A Story with a Happy Ending” is set at the Motor Accessories Department of the Magnus Machining and Electric Company, where parts and accessories for the “horseless carriage” are made.³ Just as Susan’s arrival at the office is cause for upheaval, the stage for a clash of genders is set from the very beginning in this other story. The proprietor, Magnus, owner and namesake of the company, has asked his general manager, Leonard Price, to secure a position for the recently widowed relative of Magnus’s wife. Price is immediately skeptical of the relative, Mrs. Arroford, just as he is of all women in the workplace. He believes that women are only capable of accomplishing work by poorly aping male behaviors and dumping responsibility onto someone else. He says the “office is no place for women. Trouble with them is, they can’t create. Just imitative. And they are natural born intriguers and flirts. Instead of taking a job and carrying it, like a man, they try to shift it onto some goat of a man” (113).

However, like Susan, Arroford shocks the office by being unexpectedly industrious and business-minded. The ambitious Arroford climbs the business hierarchy further than Susan ever had the chance to, eventually running most aspects of the office as Price’s assistant. The narrative details of her “climb to control” (117) are marked, first, by the curt repudiation of an office flirt—

³ First published in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 17 Mar. 1917. I read the title of this story as Lewis’s acknowledgement of his own plot conventions.

nicknamed Mac, also the name of the unwanted Casanova in “Honestly—If Possible”—and, secondly, by her ability to take charge of the office when Price is sick. Arroford’s total lack of tolerance for flirtation and her ability to run the business “like a man” (113, 130) prove to her coworkers that she can be in charge, despite the unfortunate fact of her sex, and soon “Mrs. Arroford [becomes] the best man in the shop” (123). We see the opinions of the men in the office begin to change, and even as they still feel compelled to announce that a woman can’t do a job well, they are simultaneously forced to acknowledge that Arroford can—and is. This cognitive transition is facilitated for the reader by fact that Arroford is increasingly stripped of feminine characteristics as her authority mounts, and she increasingly becomes the “man” in charge and is referred to as such.

Unable to share the spotlight with Arroford, Price eventually takes a job at another company where he has total control. But once there, Price realizes how much he had come to depend on Arroford to keep him on task. Soon he begins to flounder under the weight of responsibility; ultimately he is unceremoniously fired from the new position. Meanwhile, Arroford rises in the ranks and now holds Price’s former position as manager. Perhaps Magnus has found the best man for the job after all, “especially when that man was a woman” (128). However normative Lewis’s narratives may appear juxtaposed to some of his more socially conscious or formally avant-garde contemporaries (arguably, Upton Sinclair, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Theodore Dreiser, for example), the reversal of gendered power structures enacted in such an obvious and complete way, and made accessible to mainstream audiences, seems remarkably bold when compared with the example of *The Donna Reed Show* that I introduce in chapter four. In a post–World War II culture that

reclaimed tradition through the nuclear family and celebrated consumerism as a signifier of prosperity, it is difficult to imagine Donna Stone working outside the home, let alone toppling male expectations to rise to control in an office environment.

Arroford enacts one particular modern view of women's role in the workplace that, as Rita Felski writes, belonged to a "range of female as well as male thinkers, [in which] women could enter modernity only by taking on the attributes that had been traditionally classified as masculine" (18-19). Arroford does not perform her job in any uniquely feminine way; rather, her success is due to her ability to quash all opposite-sex attraction and take advantage of every opportunity to seize control. She "got acquainted with motor salesmen in a sexless, enthusiastic, friendly way that made them respect her" (116). Felski continues, "Like the work of art, woman in the age of technological reproduction is deprived of her aura; the effects of industry and technology thus help to demystify the myth of femininity as the last remaining site of redemptive nature" (20). However, Arroford is not merely imitative of the masculine worker who is assumed to be naturally better suited to the job in the way that Price initially suggests. She has some agency, she creates, and she is better at her job than the men who trained her. Arroford is not a poor copy of male ability; she adapts to accepted masculine practices and exceeds previous models of leadership.

In "A Story with a Happy Ending" Arroford is dehumanized into a mechanical woman, designed for office efficiency. Once mechanized to perform her tasks, Arroford's "natural" state, one that can accept or reciprocate male desire, is merely switched off: "When she had been his [Price's] secretary, Arroford turned all her femininity into discrete loyalty" (136). Her physical body is jeopardized as an increase in efficiency correlates with a decrease in vitality: "She became paler and less round of cheek and her voice was more nervous" (116). However, Arroford's duties are not what exhaust her; it is working alongside men, constantly having to fend off their advances

and render herself sexless in order to be treated as an equal. Lewis writes that she was “less wearied by the toil than by the shrinking from the noisy young men who had been working beside her and dutifully seeking whether she would let them make love to her” (116). She turns her eyes away from storefront windows and resists buying commodities that might feminize her or distract her from her work. In doing so, she also resists the temptation to fall into the binary role assigned to her sex as a desirous consumer, refusing goods that feminize her. Instead, Arroford chooses the opposite binary typically ascribed to men: calculating, rational, business-minded, and concerned with goods that perform.

This binary also insists she is isolated from other women. There is no comparative basis for Arroford’s personality, work ethic, and behavior among groups of men or women in the workplace. Arroford fits in nowhere and is accepted by neither sex. She sacrifices personal relationships and social interaction in order to succeed. The narration states, “Ten years ago, this was; and even today women are accidents in business, except for certain classes—stenographers, store buyers, nurses, teachers. Arroford had no standard, as has the young male, who can in half a city block find a dozen business men after whom he can, wisely or foolishly, model himself. She was enormously alone” (116).

Lewis characterizes this precarious position in the office as *dangerous* several times. It is dangerous for Arroford as it is for the men who must adapt to her success. First, “There was danger in this severe, clean application of hers” (116) and then the meetings between Arroford and Price become “dangerously polite” (133). Not only is it difficult to be a woman in an all-male work environment, it threatens her humanity. In *Taylored Lives*, Martha Banta examines the character of “The Good Anna” in Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*, where Anna is constantly trying to mid-level manage others as best as she can:

Ultimately, Anna faults on one of the main principles of good management theory: she becomes “too weary with the changes to do more than she just had to, to keep on living,” and thus “the good Anna with her strong, strained, worn-out body died.” But then all of Stein’s women die in this tripartite narrative, bruised by their inability to make a truce with an ethos that (thriving as it does on binary oppositions) prefers regularity to carelessness, habits to nature, predictability to mystery, decent conduct to romance, and rational principles to wild facts—oppositions that Stein herself liked to play with in her writing and to live with in her loving. (Banta 12)

And, initially, this is the fate Arroford faces, too, choosing regularity, habituation, predictability, proper conduct and rationality over their opposites. Lewis paints a working world in which these are the conditions a woman must adhere to in order to succeed and be taken seriously. It becomes clear that this is a dangerous position, indeed, when Stein’s character cannot survive it.

As Arroford rises within the ranks of Magnus Machining and Electric Company, Price’s worth to his new company plummets. Without Arroford by his side, Price fails at his job. Desperate, he has to grovel before Arroford, asking for the job that she once held. “I suppose this serves me right for making you a machine,” he says (122). Accepting his plea, Arroford depends on Price to work for her and they reverse the traditional male/female office hierarchy. Lewis makes this narrative’s gender swap further apparent at the social club Price frequents when he refers to the other club patrons as “the male old women” (135) at the club. Masculine social exclusivity centered on gossip at the country club exposes the hypocrisy of men’s treatment of women. Once Price and Arroford have exchanged positions in the work place, they become equals in each other’s eyes, referring to each other as “comrade[s]” (138). Once the power structures have been reversed, Price and Arroford can view each other as partners, symbolic of a reciprocal romantic relationship. The narrative closes as the couple finally expresses their desire for one another under the moonlight on a riverbank. By succumbing to nature, to desire, to romance, Arroford escapes the fate of the Good Anna, even if she remains caught in the binary order.

Inside/Outside

Although Price and Arroford may seem a less likely pair than Terry and Susan, the resolution to “A Story with a Happy Ending” is at least partially provided through the primary male and female characters falling in love, and Arroford and Price follow Terry and Susan’s romantic pattern. First, negative expectations about what it is like to have a woman working in the office are overturned. But second, the trajectory of the love story in both narratives takes romance outside of the structured office environment. Once the codes of acceptable office culture have been lifted, the couple in each story is able to recognize their desire for one another.

At one point earlier in the narrative, Arroford tells Price she was “married” to auto accessories, a virtual nun for commercial production; she is now able to replace her relationship to work with that to a human being. And once under her authority, for the first time Price comes to see her as a “woman,” not a “tool” (121). In her analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer, Felski writes that, for the pair of theorists, “The repressed feminine of aesthetic and libidinal forces returns in the form of the engulfing, regressive lures of modern mass culture and consumer society, which trades inauthentic pleasures and pseudo-happiness for acquiescence to the status quo” (5). In “A Story with a Happy Ending,” the narrative resolution provided by the coupling of the main characters amidst nature is consequent upon the *re*-humanizing of both characters, a reclamation and reversal of Adorno and Horkheimer’s premise. The status quo is upset when the producers and consumers of modern mass culture give up its compulsions to embrace human connection. At first, Arroford is “all business” unable to desire anything for herself in order to better manufacture desire in consumers, but eventually she upends the hierarchy and her female-ness is restored through her rise to power. In *Making the Modern*, Terry Smith writes, “And the Ford Company mass production networks became a natural order, the new Nature, a man-made machine for controlling both Nature and Man” (35). Lewis, however, acknowledges the artificiality of the environment produced by

mass culture and its ability to control, standardize, and order the office space. Using a narrative theme prominent in romanticism—which, as a literary movement, could be viewed in part as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution—Lewis juxtaposes *his* era’s modernizing forces alongside an unregulated experience in the natural world. In “Honestly—If Possible” the heavy rainstorm brings the couple together. An uncontrollable natural act breaks the dam of emotion and sets the scene for the personal connection that culminates post-storm on the roof of Susan’s apartment building, rather than curbed in the artificial parlor setting with Susan’s mother and Mr. Meehan.

The association with women as natural, irrational, emotional, unpredictable is a long-standing one, which helps to explain the societal mandate for a woman to act in binarily opposite ways if she wants to be taken seriously in the office. In *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory*, Seidler writes that, starting with Enlightenment, “There was a crucial sense in which masculinity occupied a central space within modernity and in which reason and progress were to be tied with the control and domination of nature. Some of these identifications came to define the dominant forms of reason and rationality, so that to bring their historical and cultural formations into question would set you beyond the pale of reason” (i). Rationality, reason, and predictability are highly prized qualities in Fordist managerial systems. They create efficiency; unpredictable elements slow down the process and create waste. Martha Banta refers to these incalculable “problems,” including women, as “the human element,” and managers in the first half of the twentieth century were constantly trying to find ways to rein in the random nature of this “human element”.

Seidler continues:

Within an Enlightenment vision of modernity, to lack reason is to lack humanity for there is an identification, centrally expressed within Kant’s writings, between reason, morality and humanity. So it is that our humanity has been centrally defined by what separates us off from nature, which is supposedly an independent and autonomous faculty of reason. As reason is defined in fundamental opposition to nature within our moral lives, so culture is

set up in opposition to nature. This becomes a defining moment of modernity that has shaped the dominant traditions of philosophy and social theory. (Seidler ii)

The difference between this reading of Enlightenment's modernity and the one being enacted in Lewis's twentieth-century America then is that, according to Seidler's view of Enlightenment theory, reason made us human and distinct from the natural world. But the fact that we *are* human is the problem, according to Banta's interpretation of Fordist modernity. Within this view, humans, especially women, are subject to whim. Machines, on the other hand, are reliable, indefatigable, and efficient. These are the qualities increase productivity and lead to an excess of created capital.

In *Taylored Lives*, Banta analyzes narrative patterns in terms of the managerial and economic theories outlined by Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford, and Thorstein Veblen. She describes the pervasiveness of the mythmaking instituted in Ford biographies like the one written by Rose Wilder Lane in 1917, *Henry Ford's Own Story*. The subtitle of the biography, *How a Farmer Boy Rose to the Power That Goes with Many Millions Yet Never Lost Touch with Humanity*, succinctly describes the heroic plot trajectory and romanticized interpretation of Ford's character traits portrayed within the work. Banta writes,⁴

Lane's telling shapes the Ford legend from materials assembled from the tradition of the virtuous domestic romance—interchangeable parts that still appealed to a large segment of the American public, whose own notions of household arrangements were soon to feel the consequences of the automotive age. All the pieces for the assemblage are in place: the hard work expected of the average man who is also the all-American genius with the force to make exceptions; the loyalty of the 'capable' and cheerful 'little woman' who puts aside her (infrequent) bursts of rebellion (here called 'hysterics') in order to hasten to her husband's side; the sequence of familiar home settings—from the substantial farmhouse in the rural landscape to the cozy bungalow in the industrial city—where soon the River Rouge plant with its criss-crossed conveyors will throw its "shadow across the land." (211)

⁴ In an interesting twist of fate, Rose Wilder Lane and Dorothy Thompson, Sinclair Lewis's second wife, became lifelong friends. Their correspondences are documented in *Dorothy Thompson and Rose Wilder Lane: Forty Years of Friendship*, ed. William Holtz.

Banta goes on to connect romanticized biographies like this one with the actual expectations placed upon thousands of Ford workers and enforced through the Ford Sociological Department (212). Lewis's female characters—Susan Bratt, Nancy Arroford—are not what we read in Banta's description of Clara Ford here. They are capable; they are cheerful. But they do not sit idly in the background providing emotional support for the pursuits of their male love interests. Instead, they repeatedly defy the expectations that are openly placed upon them by their coworkers. Resistance from the top down to women in the office can be located in institutionalized practices like those placed upon the families of Ford factory employees. In his key formulation of Fordism, Antonio Gramsci asserts that

It is worth drawing attention to the way in which industrialists (Ford in particular) have been concerned with the sexual affairs of their employees and with their family arrangements in general. One should not be misled, any more than in the case of prohibition, by the 'puritanical' appearances assumed by this concern. The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized. (Forgacs 282)

Lewis takes the parts of the romantic fiction that Banta suggests Rose Wilder Lane has reassembled and mixes them up further, keeping some and tossing others aside. The traditional love story readers are familiar with what is there, but romance results in an overturning of typical business practice.

Love and Form

Like "Honestly—If Possible," another short story titled "Slip It to 'Em" contains the same correlation between the integrity of the worker and the integrity of the romantic relationship, except in reverse.⁵ Romance is Lancelot Todd's undoing when he is undermined by his own product, tricked into false confidence by his belief in his own clever advertising. Lancelot Todd has the

⁵ First published in *Metropolitan Magazine*, Mar. 1918.

personality of the archetypal used car salesman at a time before most cars were old enough to be resold. In ironically naming the character Lancelot, Lewis underscores the character's ignoble traits and the total lack of a resemblance he bears to Lancelot of the Round Table. Readers can admire the ingenuity Lancelot displays as he sets up his slimy business deals almost as much as they can revel in his inevitable undoing. He appears in a number of Lewis's works, but in "Slip It to 'Em" he is hired by Ballard Coach Works to advertise, manufacture, and distribute a new vehicle, which he names the Vettura. Through Todd's escapades, the commonalities between auto work and office work—indeed, all of American work—are made evident. All products need to be advertised, and advertisement always implies a series of lies to the consumer, which—if they are to be "good" advertisements—requires ingenuity in language. Lewis writes, "You can't expect [the Vettura] to stand rough pounding, as though it were a truck, for it is the creation of the poet of pep, the superman of snappy displays, the father of slap-'em-on-the-back style of advertising—Mr. Lancelot Todd" (187). The car is described as a fashion accessory, not valued for function or durability, and the brand name and advertising campaign are created before the car even exists. In this story, the language Lancelot uses to sell the Vettura and fleece both consumers and love interests alike is paralleled by the third-person narrator's poetic language. The parallel creates a tension between the narrator's perspective and Lancelot's, illustrating the similarity between the two and exposing the skill with which language is manipulated in both to persuade consumers to buy products and to weave a story like Lewis's.

Lewis's use of poetic language emphasizes the nature of Lancelot's intentions in advertising and romance. In "Slip It To 'Em," Lancelot Todd courts an elderly, wealthy widow. Interested only in her money, Lancelot hopes his excessive romantic displays will convince her that his love is true. The widow, who also happens to own a Vettura, asks Todd to drive her to the train station

in an emergency. The trip ends up putting both the quality of the Vettura and Lancelot's intentions toward the widow to the test. Lewis writes, "Mr. Roget, the author of that book of whimsical ballads, the Thesaurus, must have been thinking of a damp Vettura when he rapturously trilled: '*Sudden and violent sounds: V. rap, snap, tap, knock, click, clash, crack, crackle, crash, pop, slam, ban, clap, brustle, burst on the ear, crepitate, flump.*' Especially flump. Flump exactly indicates the noise of the axle as it came down hard in mud holes" (204). Lewis's poetic use of onomatopoeic language here develops momentum through alliteration in the sequences of synonyms. When the series ends with flump, the action being described is recreated: the buildup mimics the motion of the vehicle and even though they are all "sudden and violent sounds," flump, *especially* flump, halts the roll of words with a poetic thud dead in its tracks, after faltering a little at "on the ear, crepitate." The Vettura, too, breaks down short of the train. Lancelot knows how to sell the car but not how to fix it, so he loses the woman and her money, as both he *and* his Vettura are revealed as what they really are: slick advertisement for a shoddy product. For Lewis, falsehood in business exposes falsehood in love, and vice versa, just as the sincerity of emotion between Terry and Susan translates to a desire for sincerity in advertising.

Lewis often breaks up the traditional narrative with experimental forms that mimic business documents and correspondence. "Honestly—If Possible" contains memos and complaint letters from annoyed readers, for example. In offset type, portions of the ad copy that Terry is trying to work out, persuading readers to purchase the clichéd swamp land in Florida, is inserted: "Do you know that the orange industry has just started? Do you know what a kumquat is? Do you know that the whole world is begging for the chance to give you money for the kumquats you could grow at Tangerine Springs?" (91). But the hallmark of Lewis's writing is really an exuberance of language, creating puns and double entendres, making use of multiple interpretations. He satirizes

the techniques of producers and marketers, exposing it as chicanery for the wide readership of these popular magazines. In doing so, he cannot help but tip his own hat to the fact that his stories are also a product, as Walter Benjamin suggests. Like the previous excerpt from “Slip It To ‘Em,” the narratives are rife with onomatopoeic words that evoke the fast paced intrusion of the mechanization of everyday life, emblematic of language used in both commercial advertisement and the avant-garde modernist novels written by Lewis’s contemporaries: “The charm was broken by the rrrr-ram-slam of the elevator” (101). Language in Lewis is often poetic, always interpretable. Take, for example, the title: “Honestly—If Possible.” It is derived from a conversation that occurs between Terry and “old Harry.” Harry “defended the Hopkins system of exaggerating in advertisements, using much retouched half tones, hypnotizing old-lady customers, and selling jerrybuilt houses from which the concrete peeled the first winter” (88). Terry’s fellow employees chip in to support Harry in a conversation that runs as follows:

“Why, if you did tell the people the truth they wouldn’t be satisfied.”

“I guess we’re as honest as the next fellow.”

“Yes, sure, honestly—if possible.”

“When you’re as old as I am—”

“Get the dough first—” (88–89)

This transaction works on a number of levels. First, it is an example of corporate dialogue, where the wheeling and dealing can’t be prolonged by the completion of sentences; one line flows into the next, regardless of who is speaking it, because everyone has conformed to the same concept of success. It begins with a discussion of the truth, contorting what it means to be responsible and placing the emphasis on what the consumer actually wants. Adorno and Horkheimer write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The shamelessness of the rhetorical question ‘What do people want?’

lies in the fact that it appeals to the very people as thinking subjects whose subjectivity it specifically seeks to annul” (116). This section of text exposes this concept as a reality by not even pausing before assuming that consumers would prefer to be lied to about the products that are sold to them. Lastly, in the line from which the title is derived, “Yes, sure, honestly—if possible,” there is a gap in signification. Alone, it is a broken, interrupted sentence. However, when read with the other lines, it becomes clear that “honestly” is replacing “honesty,” suggesting something like “Yes, sure, if honesty is possible.” The implication is that honesty in advertising is not a reasonable or attainable goal, and Lewis manipulates the dialogue to convey this. When applied to the story as a title, however, it could also refer to Terry and Susan, who resist the temptation to acquiesce to the systemic pressure to step in line and instead search for a different possibility, if an alternate possibility is possible. This segment ends with the corporate mantra that underscores all of American business and makes the system run: “Get the dough first.”

Lewis creates a slick conveyor belt of words that are spat out to illustrate the shared, standardized belief system. All the rough edges and incongruences are buffed off, and when one word doesn’t fit the mold, it is bent slightly or discarded in order to bridge the gap in signification so that the lineup can continue to roll onward. The individuality of each speaker has been absorbed into a unified chorus of voices. This is the kind of environment in which those who describe a product truthfully are scanned and identified as a problem to the rest of the well-oiled machine.

Language again highlights the correlation of how the performance of work productivity anticipates difficulty adjusting to new gender norms. To be a woman is noticeably, universally, an offensive deviation. If a woman will not or cannot conform to male expectations in the office so as not to interrupt production, then at least her sexual difference can be exploited, in the case of Susan Bratt, or so diminished as to become unnoticeable, in the case of Mrs. Arroford. Banta

writes, “The masculine-feminine question is sometimes hidden, sometimes exposed, in the narrative productions of the culture of management, but it is always there. Males are expected to bring rational practices to an industrialized, mechanized, business-oriented society while females are designated as one major source of that potentially uncontrollable energy surge subsumed under the all-purpose term ‘the human element’” (12). Lewis’s anonymous dialogue highlights the anonymous collection of workers that contribute to the system to keep the conveyor belt rolling; among those voices it is rare for a woman’s to be heard.

Lewis does appreciate the work involved in the creative aspects of advertising and points out his characters’ ability in crafting language by demonstrating his own skill in these areas of text. “Slip It To ‘Em” examines the task of creating a slogan for a product. Lancelot Todd speaks to the dealerships that carry the Vettura about what a strong “talking point” the car’s slogan is—“You can remember the price: fifteen hundred flat” (193). So basic, accurate, and—most importantly—easy to remember; starting with the slogan allows Lancelot to enter into a conversation with customers, and from there he can work his persuasive magic. The first advertisement for the Vettura came to him in a trance-like stroke of genius: “*Silk and steel, couleur de rose and crashing power, luxurious as a powder puff and mighty as a locomotive, foreign grace and handmade honesty*” (191). Then, “for a touch of romantic fiction, Lancelot brought right out of his magic brain cells a picturesque but most unpleasant person, the Old Garage Man” (192). The third-person narrator—sarcastic, witty, and often speaking directly to the reader—then goes on to describe the Old Garage Man as a fleshed-out character, showing how Lancelot’s mind worked in creating the advertisement but also, somehow, giving credence to the Old Garage Man as the convincingly real figure Lancelot wants his readers to see: “A sarcastic, disagreeable carl was the dear Old Garage Man, but he had a tender heart beneath his gruff exterior” (192). Lancelot even convinces himself of the

product's quality through his own brilliance in drafting the Old Garage Man's product endorsement. Upon rereading this divinely inspired advertisement, "Lancelot wanted to go right out and ride in a Vettura, when he had read over his psychic report, and was restrained only by the remembrance that there weren't any Vetturas to go riding in" (192).

The Old Garage Man's personal testimony works many angles at the same time. Here is his portion of the ad in its entirety:

Old friend o' mine, 'tain't no fun t'hump Bennie Back under the cars that most of these here Sunday automobilly-goats brings in, with the bearin's all loose and like, and the bolts a-droppin' off. But when I crawls under a Vettura, I know I'm gonna find the Works in O.K. shape, allee same like when it left the shop. That's my luxury and reward, old hoss! I know that the wust wheel-yanker can't put a Vettura on the fritz. And then the ladies—God bless 'em—they all sez to me, 'Dad,' they sez 'we ain't uncomfortabilious o' dawn, and the clutch is soft as a chiffon veil beneath the dainty tootsie-toe,' they sez. I'm mighty much 'bleeged to Boss Ballard because the firm that's been his'n and his foredaddies for a hundred honorable years have took a whole century makin' plans and ripenin' 'em 'fore turnin' out their brand of buzz-buggy, 'stead of 'goin' off half-cocked. Well, old friend o' mine, must get to work again. Where's my rim-stretcher? Good day to ye. Wait! O boy! Have a look! See that shiny miracle sky-boomin' down the road, steady as a clock and swift as an aeroplane? It's a Vettura! (192–193)

The sense of familiarity begins immediately with the reference towards the consumer as a friend and the translation of verbal vernacular dialect into phonetically spelled language. The fictional mechanic also testifies to the fact that the not-yet-created Vettura is immaculately and solidly built. At the same time, the auto also appeals to the more luxurious creature comforts that ladies desire, which, needless to say, would interest male consumers looking to impress ladies, illustrating that male desire is also a component of advertising. This advertisement's last contribution is, of course, a hallmark of Lewis's own writing. Clever word creations appear, such as "automobilly-goats," and appeal to the reader's sense of humor, both Lewis's readers and Lancelot's consumers.

The ad utilizing the Old Garage Man is a condensed and intensified model of Lewis's own prose and a satire of automobile advertising practices at the time. Ford Motor Company began

marketing the Model T in 1908, the year the first one was assembled at the Piquette Plant in Detroit. The automobile's advertising campaign was so successful that by 1917, Ford saw little reason to advertise at all and pulled all of its ads (Lanier Lewis 57). "Slip it To 'Em" was published in 1918, and the effects of the enormous marketing push for the Model T had taken hold in American car culture. The precedent for ways to achieve success in the auto industry was set prior to the publication of Lewis's story. One of the most enduring of Ford Motor Company's slogans is "Watch the Fords Go By." In brevity and simplicity, it beats "You can remember the price: fifteen hundred flat," and the slogan was used all the way until the 1940s (Lanier Lewis 37). In his autobiography, *My Life and Work*, Henry Ford describes the principles behind marketing Ford automobiles and provides a portrayal of the thinking behind Ford's advertising:

We did not make the pleasure appeal. We never have. In its first advertising we showed that a motor car was a utility. We said: We often hear quoted the old proverb, "Time is money"—and yet how few business and professional men act as if they really believed its truth. Men who are constantly complaining of shortage of time and lamenting the fewness of days in the week—men to whom every five minutes wasted means a dollar thrown away—men to whom five minutes' delay sometimes means the loss of many dollars—will yet depend on the haphazard, uncomfortable and limited means of transportation afforded by street cars, etc., when investment of an exceedingly moderate sum in the purchase of a perfected, efficient, high-grade automobile would cut out anxiety and unpunctuality and provide a luxurious means of travel ever at your beck and call. Always ready, always sure. Built to save you time and consequent money. Built to take you anywhere you want to go and bring you back again on time. Built to add to your reputation for punctuality; to keep your customers good-humored and in a buying mood. Built for business or pleasure—just as you say. Built also for the good of your health—to carry you 'jarlessly' over any kind of half decent roads, to refresh your brain with the luxury of much 'out-dooriness' and your lungs with the 'tonic of tonics'—the right kind of atmosphere. It is your say, too, when it comes to speed. You can—if you choose—loiter lingeringly through shady avenues or you can press down on the foot-lever until all the scenery looks alike to you and you have to keep your eyes skinned to count the milestones as they pass. I am giving the gist of this advertisement to show that, from the beginning, we were looking to providing service—we never bothered with a "sporting car." (55–56)

Within this excerpt, the contradictions inherent in being a lifelong salesman reveal themselves. Even though "we never bothered with it" a depiction of a sporting car is portrayed, as you "keep

your eyes skinned to count the milestones as they pass.” Ford began building the company’s reputation through automobile racing, winning so many contests that there was essentially no one left with whom to compete (Lanier Lewis 15). And despite his initial denial, Ford’s example does appeal to pleasure directly—“built for business or pleasure”— stressing, as the Old Garage Man does, both the function and the comfort of the vehicle. Ford touches on a variety of selling points, appealing primarily to the sense of the buyer as a savvy business man. According to the ad—or, the autobiography, rather—buying a Ford car only makes logical business sense, a conclusion arrived at through a short narrative that appeals to many other senses simultaneously. Richard R. Lingeman writes in *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel From Main Street*, “Lewis is bent on showing how advertising conned consumers into buying often useless products because the hucksters made them feel socially inadequate if they didn’t have them” (107). And there is a sense in Ford’s description here that one could not truly be successful without owning an automobile made by the Ford Motor Company.

Advertisements manufacture desire and promise status. But, as Horkheimer and Adorno write regarding culture, “Advertising is its [culture’s] elixir of life. But because its product ceaselessly reduces the pleasure it promises as a commodity to that mere promise, it finally coincides with the advertisement it needs on account of its own inability to please” (131). The promise that owning a Ford equates to success is an empty one; Ford the man and Ford the product merge in complex ways in *My Life and Work*, a text that is ultimately a kind of advertisement for both. Banta undertakes a reading of Progressivist texts, “narratives of suffering, which record the wrongs done by those in power to those under their control” (24), and compares them to narratives like *My Life and Work*, which she suggests

have become valorized because of a belief that special powers are bestowed upon those who get to tell their own stories. We seek relief when faced with texts that “narrate,” texts

like those produced by Henry Ford and Theodore Roosevelt, which instruct good Americans how to conduct themselves within an ever-expanding industrial society...they may merely replace pessimism with depressing forms of optimism; they might simply substitute their own authoritarianism for that of another. (24)

Thus, for Banta, both types of narration become managerial in a sense. The muckraking narrative of the naturalists calls for reform, claiming to speak for those its pages portray, yet denying the characters any possibility of opportunity or change while hoping to inspire the possibility of change in its readership. Narrations like Ford's, on the other hand, overtly suggest that change is entirely within the realm of possibility for the individual, as long as he works hard enough, obeys corporate orders, and buys the commodities to help him achieve success.

One of the shared narrative qualities that comes into focus with the juxtaposition of this excerpt from *My Life and Work* and Lancelot's ad featuring the Old Garage Man is the blurring of lines between narrator and author, advertisement and narrative, seller and consumer. Throughout Ford's description, the tone is one in which he could be speaking to a man assumed to have ideals nearly identical to his own. His target consumer values efficiency and understands that it is intrinsically linked to profits, as is punctuality. Ford's enthusiasm is evident and it would be easy to believe that Ford wholeheartedly accepted everything he said. We might even imagine that, upon rereading his own *autobiography*, he was so convinced of the value of his own product that, like Lancelot, he wanted to immediately go out and ride in a Ford automobile. Although not quite as clever as Lewis, Ford even invents "snappy" words like "jarlessly" and "ourdoor-ness". More importantly, though, Ford writes to a consumer who wants to "keep customers good-humored and in a buying mood." He is speaking to another businessman who has other products to sell to other consumers, just as Ford himself is doing.

Similarly, Lewis writes about Lancelot Todd with a tone indicative of affection and understanding, even more than his narrator sympathizes with the Old Garage Man, despite the fact that

Lancelot is made out to be the fool in every story in which he appears. Di Renzo writes of a conversation Lewis had once with a traveling salesman on a train. Lewis's companion could not understand his interest in the man: "How could Lewis waste his time on, risk missing their train because of, such an obnoxious, shabby character? 'That's the problem with you, Bill,' Lewis replied. 'You regard him as a hoi polloi. He doesn't even represent the cause of labor or anything dramatic. But I understand that man. By God, I love him!'" (Lewis xiv). Lewis writes about a character—just as Ford writes to a reader—with whom he can identify. Even though Lancelot Todd is the villain of every story in which he appears, his fervor and energy, his ability to turn every situation to his advantage, are admirable. At the end of each story he is always ultimately punished for his misanthropy, yet in the next story he is once again back on his feet with a new scam.

Uncle Jerry Ginger and the *Ford Times*

One of the short stories in *If I Were Boss* that illustrates the connection between periodical circulation, marketing, and Fordism in Sinclair Lewis's fiction is "Jazz."⁶ Here *jazz* doesn't refer to a musical genre; it is a word that, for Lewis, represents the changing vocabulary of the modern era after the turn of the century. Lancelot Todd is once again at the company helm, orchestrating schemes to divest consumers of their dollars. Lancelot hires William John Buckingham to write a newsletter for a chain of stores called Universal Grocery. Originally titled *What's Up, Boys?*, William John suggests they rename the newsletter *Jazz*. Todd eagerly snatches up the title, believing that *jazz* is a word that readers will gravitate toward regardless of whether the contents of the publication have any substance. In the role of managerial overseer, Lancelot supervises *Jazz* but "permits an assistant to do the actual work" (229). William John, a mild-mannered man with a

⁶ First published in *Metropolitan Magazine* in Oct. 1918.

weakness for alcohol, runs *Jazz* with success and can turn a clever phrase. The most popular column in *Jazz* is written by a character he invented and named Uncle Jerry Ginger. The character is quaint, relatable, and rife with sage advice—as his name implies, Uncle Jerry is virtually a member of your own family. Thus, Lewis invents a flawed but honest and well-intentioned character, who in turn invents a likable huckster character in order to get the company’s message across. Using Uncle Jerry as his mouthpiece, William John has the confidence to achieve the goal of the corporate newsletter disguised as a lifestyle magazine: to motivate sales clerks through personalized stories and colorful language in order to increase profits. And essentially, William John’s job was to “devote all his days and evenings to searching for new and more splendidly nauseating ways of saying. [sic] ‘Work hard, you clerks, hear me?’” (240). The “most esteemed of these comments” by Uncle Jerry was William John’s description of the sales achievements for the grocery branch in Lima, Ohio:

My Land o’ Goshen, ef Pop ain’t gonna take us all out Sunday P.M. ridin’ in the flivver. And who’s that in the front seat beside him? Why, it’s Lima, Ohio! But come on all you other neat-wases! Where’s Gramma Hartford’s bonnet? Jax, have you got the cold tea—no, not feet, *tea* I said! Tell lil Eau Claire to crank the bus—he’s one bright enfant, and oughta climb into the top-prize-winning class P. awful D. Q. All you birds, pin the hustle-buttons on your chist, shake up, wake up, and come on. With the Big Boss driving, we’re all riding to the town that’s built for dollars! (240)

One of William John’s techniques is to single out a small town success in Lima in order to portray the possibility of accomplishing something similar in all the chain’s stores. Lewis cleverly has William John write this into the metaphor of catching a ride to success, to the “town that’s built for dollars,” in the passenger seat of an automobile. But also, just as Lancelot Todd picks the word *jazz* to convey some kind of slick, evasive definition of modernity, Uncle Jerry uses slang, abbreviations, and modern catch phrases in this excerpt.

This critique of the use of house publications for internal marketing may actually present itself most clearly in the definition of the word *jazz*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists several definitions chronologically before *jazz* becomes associated with music in 1915. As a noun, there are two listings: “U.S. slang. Energy excitement, ‘pep’; restlessness; animation, excitability” (1912) and “Unnecessary, misleading, or excessive talk; nonsense, rubbish” (1913). Both definitions are clearly visible in this excerpt: the first is the reason Lancelot Todd picks “Jazz” as his title and the second is the way that the reader, and eventually William John, are to view the contents of *Jazz*. The layering of Lewis onto William John onto Uncle Jerry illustrates the sort of mise-en-abyme of caricatures that Lewis utilizes so cleverly throughout his stories, and the double definition of *jazz* underscores the ability to embrace and critique facets of language use at the same time. *Jazz* isn’t just the name of Todd’s house organ; it’s the name of Lewis’s short story as well.

Like Lewis’s Universal Grocery, Ford Motor Company had its own “house organ,” a publication detailing the company’s activities and interests, called *Ford Times* (fig. 1). Exceeding the scope of even Lancelot Todd’s ambition, this monthly newsletter was exceptionally successful. The first issue was published in 1908, the year the first Model T was produced, and it ran, amazingly, until 1993, pausing production only for World Wars I and II (Rosenthal F34). The magazine was “part employee news outlet, part marketing tool, part dealer-loyalty program, part literary and artistic medium, part chronicle of Americana. *Ford Times* was launched in 1908 as an employee publication, but it soon morphed into a general-interest magazine specializing in travel and popular culture” (Rosenthal F34). The audience of *Ford Times* varied throughout the years. Sometimes only Ford employees and dealerships received it, while at others it was read by millions of Ford

owners and potential customers, whose names were supplied by the car dealers (Rosenthal F34).⁷ In its early years, *Ford Times* clearly marketed the automobiles and created a tightly crafted public relations image for the company. The issues contain suggestions, tips, and insight for dealers on how to move their supply of vehicles; poems, sayings, folkisms, and bits of wisdom; photographs of Ford vehicles in exotic, rugged locations; personal testimonials; and both fiction and nonfiction short stories (fig. 2).

One example of advice for dealers can be seen in this sample rebuttal for salesmen to be used against potential customers who would debate the validity of the Ford name or its products:

Disgruntled competitors in search of an argument against Model T cars find fault with the design of the cylinder head, the water jacketed head being detachable. Ten years ago there might have been some reason to doubt the efficacy of a gasket—today any man who has taken the time to inform himself knows that the art of gasket making has progressed to such a stage that it is easily possible to make as tight a joint with a gasket as if the head and cylinders were a unit. (4)

The expectation throughout is that you could easily plug any problem into one of the Ford advice templates for the best solution. Beyond the technical advice, *Ford Times* also offers up suggestions for the improvement of the disposition of its employees. It supplies “The Law of Obedience—The first item in the Commonsense creed is Obedience” (8). The article explains that every employee needs to be subservient to the parent company in order for the company to run efficiently. Like

⁷ “The magazine’s format varied, too, shifting from tabloid newspaper size to standard magazine size, back to tabloid format, then to pocket size in the 1940s (Henry Ford decreed it should fit into the pocket of a man’s suit) before finally settling on a slightly larger size in the early 1980s...’Ford Times’ heyday was the mid-1970s, when circulation topped 2.1 million and readership was estimated at 8 million. But by 1980, interest flagged, and circulation had dropped to 1.2 million. Corporate executives decided the magazine needed a more modern look and approach. So in 1981, it was relaunched in a larger format (an unconventional 7 in. by 10 in.), primarily for better display of photos, which replaced artwork as article illustrations. In addition, editorial content was perked up with more articles on celebrities and popular culture. Features on personalities (William Shatner, Minnie Pearl, Jimmy the Greek) and articles on trends (Thai cooking, exotic flower-growing, historic re-enactments, home uses of personal computers) joined the magazine’s traditional articles on travel destinations, adventure trips and recipes” (Rosenthal F34).

disobedient children, employees need to be reprimanded by the dealership management who otherwise may face reprimand themselves. However, if the dealership owner reads and takes to heart the advice in the *Ford Times*, then punishment is deferred and efficiency—and profit margins—are increased. Workers are not to revolt, but to work with their whole heart: “There are boats that mind the helm and boats that don’t. Those that don’t get holes knocked in them sooner or later. To keep off the rocks, obey the rudder. . . . Obedience to the institution—loyalty!” (8).

Like Uncle Jerry Ginger, *Ford Times* uses a transportation metaphor to convey progress. However, Lewis’s satire is often less extreme than the historical realities printed in the early years of *Ford Times*. The tone of the latter is darker, and as we see here, vaguely fascist, demanding obedience to the corporation with the threat of some kind of karmic punishment if the dealerships waver in their devotion. Horkheimer and Adorno write,

However, the pursuit of prizes has already left its imprint on consumer behavior. Because culture presents itself as a bonus, with unquestioned private and social benefits, its reception has become a matter of taking one’s chances. The public crowds forward for fear of missing something. What that might be is unclear, but, at any rate, only those who join in have any chance. Fascism, however, hopes to reorganize the gift-receivers trained by the culture industry into its enforced adherents. (131)

The authoritarian directives of *Ford Times* clearly outline the personal and social benefits for dealership employees entailed in reading and adhering to its own advice, then indicating how those cultural bonuses will be handed down to the consumer. Lewis’s satire of such messages is likewise direct. The narrator of “Jazz” fervently echoes sentiments that are almost identical to the principles demonstrated throughout the Ford newsletter: “They [all house organs] should start out with essays on the power of the will, on the value of courtesy in selling, and the duty of never letting a customer who has come in to buy a box of matches leave the store before he has also bought an eggbeater, a pair of shock absorbers, a box of Gloucester codfish and a three-volume life of McKinley” (Lewis 228–229).

Clerks' letters interrupt the narrative form in "Jazz" and are clearly relatable to the dealership and customer letters printed in *Ford Times*. One letter William John receives states, "Our good friend Miss Mamie Fallups, the capable cashier of Birmingham store No. 3, writes us there's a new clerk down that-away as oughta chase the rest the bhoys offn the map. He's a wonder at handling milk, and has some idees about a lil side line of safety pin. Notherwords, Local Manager Martin is grinding and passing the seegars. Bring him up to the Universal ideals of Service, Hustle and Increased Sales, Brer Martin" (238-239). Lewis's vivid and exaggerated slang and misspellings mark the fictional house organ as satire. However, language such this is almost equally prolific in *Ford Times*.

For example, two branch salesmen are featured in a 1908 article of *Ford Times* titled "Ford Representatives in Baltimore." It describes these "two hustling young men" as "from the city of Baltimo'." And "this pair of hustlers, by name, Robert F. Kaehler and A. Maurice Eastwick...did so well last year that they feel as though we should give them everything south of the Mason & Dixon Line for 1909, and even send a colored lady clear up here from Baltimo' to intercede in their behalf for Virginia, etc. (The lady's picture will be shown later)" (17). The next issue contains a picture of the "lady" in question (fig. 3). It is a photograph of a doll with a sign tacked to her reading, "Go' Mawnin'. Ma' folkse in Vaginie went t' buy a autermobil foe dat Baltim' Fo'd Auter Compny wot 'spece to staht a sto'in Richmon' an' I'se just' dyin' ob suspens waitin' t' ride in dat air modl T toorin' car."

Placing Uncle Jerry Ginger's folksy dialect alongside the photograph of this doll and the racialized Southern dialect in the letter ascribed to her and printed in *Ford Times* makes for an interesting juxtaposition. Lewis demonstrates both a satire of and an appreciation for non-standardized language and its uses, while *Ford Times* cannot really be doing either. Michael North

describes the possibilities of African-American dialect when used by modernist writers like T.S. Eliot, enabling them to “play at self-fashioning” through choosing a language that is not ancestrally one’s own. The language utilized by the ambitious salesman’s note is far different from that of experimental authors, however, and the outcome can be read as closer to the effect that North describes for modernist African-American poets when whites use black dialect. He argues that “in the version created in the white minstrel tradition, [dialect] is a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural repression that followed emancipation. Both symbol and actuality, it stands for a most intimate invasion whereby the dominant actually attempts to create the thoughts of the subordinate by providing its speech” (11).

In *Ford Times*, the dialect stands as a *reinforcement* of standardization represented by the bestowing of a consumer voice upon this, frankly, bizarre, symbol of African-American culture. The depiction of the “the lady in question” to be revealed later is an inside joke. The reader is not contextually informed in any way that the reference is to a doll and not a real person until they see the photograph in the next issue. Here, Ford Motor Company maintains a position of authority over the readership through depriving them of the information they need to “get” the inside joke. The doll’s note advocates for consumption through the African-American voice, parroting the wishes of the white salesman. The story of the salesman, the doll and its note, are then reprinted and distributed as an example of clever and tenacious sales technique. The doll’s “desires” don’t belong to an actual, systemically marginalized, human being; they primarily benefit Ford Motor Company and the salesman, who have appropriated language that is not their own by coopting a dialect rooted in a historical reality pervaded by objectification and subordination.

In contrast, “Jazz” ends with a somewhat anticipated David and Goliath upset, like many of the short stories in *If I Were Boss*, and the long-kept desires of the underling worker are finally

actualized. William John Buckingham's in-office competitor and nemesis is the effeminate and inept Eugene Hicks. Lancelot Todd employs Eugene to write a yet another house organ, *Aux Dames*, for the company Dimpletoe Stockings. Lancelot allows Eugene, not William John, to play Uncle Jerry Ginger at a Universal Grocery clerks' convention because he believes Eugene looks more like the way he imagines Uncle Jerry to look. William John feels betrayed because he has found a sense of pride and connection to the clerks through writing as his character, and now someone else will be representing the character he invented and speaks through. And so, William John and the disgruntled office secretary, Miss Melody, devise a plan to upset the convention by revealing Eugene *and* Lancelot as frauds to the entire readership of *Jazz*. Although the short story is comedic nearly all the way through, it actually ends with an almost revolutionary tone. To enact justice, William John hands out special convention copies of *Jazz* to each employee, mailing two additional copies to their homes. The last page includes these final words of advice from Uncle Jerry: "And let's analyze this glorious philosophy of hustle-jazz-pep. It sounds like heroic progress, this working twenty-four hours a day; but what it means is never taking time for friendship, courtship, reading, music, the fineness of leisure. The firm wants you to become machines, and for what? If you increase their income a thousand percent they may give you back, as charity, a ten percent increase" (250–251). William John leaves the clerks with words that undermine the American capitalist mantra first spoken in "Honestly—If Possible": get the dough first. He and Miss Melody attempt to unveil the machinery of the house organ and liberate the workers from their lives as robot employees, or at least make them aware of the fact that they are. While this story is assembled using many of the same components as the others short stories in the collection, the ending is more unsettling and difficult to anticipate than most. It exposes the tension inherent in the hierarchy of the workplace to the Lewis's readers in a way that mimics the same exposure to

the readers of “Jazz” and leaves open the narrative opportunity for positive change. The *Oxford English Dictionary* list a third definition behind the two I’ve previously mentioned for *jazz*. As a verb, *to jazz* also means “to make a mess of; to ruin; to confuse; to interfere with” (1914).

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The reprint of the photograph of “the colored lady” in *Ford Times* manufactures desires for the marginalized, but Lewis at least attempts to pull the curtain away to unveil the machinery in his short fiction, even as he acknowledges his own role in making the machinery run. In *Black & White & Noir*, Paula Rabinowitz writes of Adorno’s perceptions of Hollywood, a massive managerial system unto itself: “The danger Adorno saw in film was precisely its ability to concretize the reactionary shift of the modern into a regressive sentimentality through the reification of subjectivity, ‘a mere function of the production process,’ in art into saleable goods that administer to the public its own inward emotions (214–215). This sentimentality was precisely what made American desire so perverse. It turned everything into ‘catchwords for a hit song, designed to boost it’” (10). Lewis seems self-aware of the sentimental components of the culture he produces. And yet he does not try to write in a realm that somehow exists outside of a capitalist system because “narratology [cannot] ever free itself completely from systems-making, no more than any of our efforts to break loose can” (Banta 18). Instead, Lewis’s art is one that shows the characters writing these catchwords intended to ensnare others in the trap Adorno describes. Then, in turn, these managers’ and bosses’ efforts to manipulate the public are foiled by ordinary workers from the middle rungs, former cogs in the machine.

The romantic threads in Lewis’s narratives such as the ones contained in “Honestly—If Possible” and “A Story with a Happy Ending” pose an analytical problem as far as sentimentality

is concerned. What should we make of these predictable, saccharin conclusions other than understand they serve a commercial purpose for Lewis and publications like the *Saturday Evening Post*—to entertain the masses, to write for the systems that are simultaneously critiqued between the pages? Banta introduces an argument presented by Floyd Dell against Theodore Dreiser for writing fiction that justifies pessimism rather than supports rebellion, suggesting that sentimentality is problematic politically and problematic within the labor force. She concludes that if we choose a side in this debate, “This means making selections among possible narrative modes, but heaven forbid that they be as simplistic as the choices just cited. Why duplicate the error of making binary distinctions, say, between pessimism and optimism?” (Banta 22). In *If I Were Boss*, Lewis attempts to position himself somewhere between these two binaries, with varying degrees of success. Rather than the pessimistic sentimentality of Progressive texts, the concept of heterosexual love injects optimism and camaraderie into scenarios that would be otherwise dominated by oppressive odds in the face of capitalism. So the possibility of love is sentimental, but at the same time ensures a perspective in that it coincides with hope, team work, partnership, and the possibility for change, rather than the compulsion toward defeatist conclusions. Furthermore, in 1903 a supporter of the National Association for Manufacturers asserted, “All this talk about love in business is rot. The only way to carry on business is...with all sentiment eliminated” (Banta 22). Just as the insertion of a woman into the office environment has the potential to upset the male-exclusive hierarchy, the presence of romance, desire, sexuality—ultimately, humanity—can undermine business and decrease efficiency.

Ford Times

Vol. II

NOVEMBER 1, 1908

No. 3

Model T Coupe

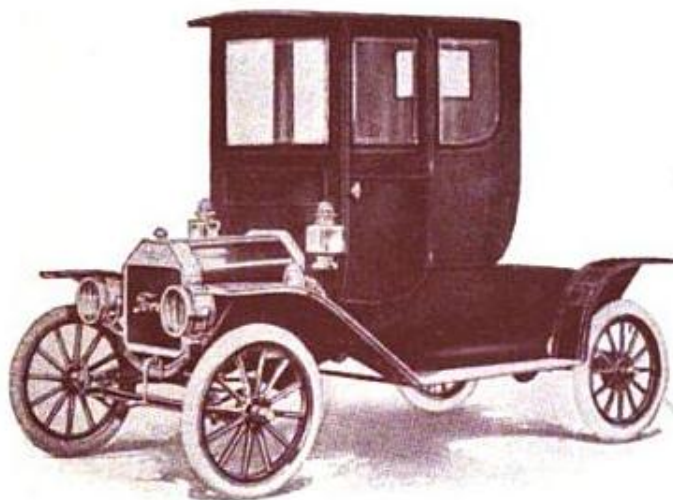


Figure 1

Ford Times, Nov 1, 1908

Another shipment of Model T's to India to be used at Delhi during the Coronation of King George of England as Emperor of India. The ceremony takes place in December



Figure 2

Ford Times, Shipment of Fords to Coronation of King George, Emperor of India

A Personal Solicitation



This is the colored lady we referred to in our last issue. "Ma folkses in Vagina can now buy the cars they want from that Ford Auter Company, who opened a Virginia branch."

Figure 3

Ford Times, A Personal Solicitation from the Colored Lady in Question

CHAPTER TWO

REBIRTH OF INTERPRETATION:

JOHN DOS PASSOS'S *U.S.A.* AND DIEGO RIVERA'S *DETROIT INDUSTRY*

In this chapter, I analyze John Dos Passos's trio of novels, *U.S.A.*, focusing particularly on the last novel in the collection, *The Big Money*. By interpreting it alongside another work in an entirely different medium—Diego Rivera's mural series, *Detroit Industry*—what at first might seem an unlikely pairing elucidates a number of interesting parallels under close examination. Both *Detroit Industry* and *U.S.A.* present large swaths of realist imagery interspersed with smaller, compartmentalized sections that utilize more experimental techniques. In addition to sharing its epic scope and mixed modes with the murals, the relationship between the spectator, the artist, and the artwork is also reconfigured. Rivera insists that the spectator be a present participator in the work, and in a Hitchcockian move, paints himself into the mural in the position of spectator: a tourist at the factory. Likewise, *U.S.A.* constantly refers to the filmic, the biographical, and, it has been argued, the autobiographical. Rivera's massive walls of men lock into place, and the snake-like conveyor belt of the Rouge winds its way through the various rooms on the factory floor. Likewise, Dos Passos's characters are made to create a large network. Their lives intersect on a superficial level as they search for deeper meaning that seems ultimately unattainable. The assemblage of these parts for both works creates something that is, as Terry Smith writes of Rivera, “unleashing a whole unimaginable from a combination of these parts[.] Many theories of modernity take precisely this form” (29). Dos Passos weaves together his vision of the fabric of America in a similar way. In his own two-and-

a-half page “pre-chapter” to *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos writes: “U.S.A. is the slice of a continent. U.S.A. is a group of holding companies, some aggregations of trade unions, a set of laws bound in calf, a radio network, a chain of moving picture theaters, a column of stock quotations rubbed out and written in by a Western Union boy on a blackboard, a public library full of old newspapers and dogeared historybooks with protests scrawled on the margins in pencil” (vii). This collection of parts presented in each novel and bound together in a trilogy culminating in *The Big Money* can be interpreted as a giant machine, a Moloch that swallows its characters whole. However the cogs do not line up quite as neatly as the interchangeable parts required by Fordist logic because not all of Dos Passos’s characters are automatons on the path to inevitable destruction, nor are Rivera’s workers. In this chapter, an analysis of the nuanced depictions of childbirth, abortion, and parenthood in both *The Big Money* and *Detroit Industry* suggests that depictions of reproduction are relevant to interpretations of production. In Dos Passos, motherhood and childbirth are key motifs in narrative production, critical to recognizing the often unacknowledged possibility for Margo Dowling’s agency. In Rivera’s mural, the portrayal of an unborn child represents hope for the possibility of a harmonious, revolutionary future aided by technology and seated in capitalist Detroit.

Orphaning as American Identity

John Dos Passos’s epic *U.S.A.* comprises of three novels: *The 42nd Parallel*, published in 1930; *1919*, published in 1932; and *The Big Money*, in 1936. Re-released in 1938 as a unified collection with a new introduction titled “U.S.A.,” the work combines narra-

tives that follow the trajectory of several characters, focusing on a segment of one character's life in each chapter. The narrative chapters are each titled according to their central character—"Mac," "Charlie Anderson," or "Margo Dowling" for example—and might cover the events of the character's life over the span of a few moments or a decade, collapsing and expanding time only to pick up again later on the novel. This primary narrative is broken by inter-chapters written in experimental, modernist prose.⁸ These sections fall into one of three categories: "Newsreel," a juxtaposition of scrolling descriptions of news events, headlines, song verses, and historical actualities; "Camera Eye," somewhat surreal visual descriptions that position the reader as a dissociated voyeur peering in on a fragmented scene already underway; and biographies of inventors, industrialists, artists, politicians, and other iconic Americans that satirize the conventions of the traditional genre of biography through depicting lives in a way that frustrates a romanticized perception of the subject.

The character development in *U.S.A.*, sometimes spanning chapters of all three books for characters such as Charley Anderson and Eveline Hutchins, illustrates the changing relationships between the primary characters and their parents from childhood to adulthood. In doing so, the reader is given a view—sometimes more like a snapshot, sometimes more like a home movie—of the initial parent-child relationship and formative events between the character and the adults that form the basis of their family. Within the traditionally formatted narrative of *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos often uses the parent/child relationship to

⁸ In true modern form, *U.S.A.* thus complicates a straightforward comprehension of itself with regard to an original or authentic version of the text.

introduce conflict and address ideologies about ways to raise the next generation of Americans. Several protagonists are orphans, and many of the characters, such as Margo Dowling, construct their own families irrelevant of biology. When children remain in touch with their parents and grow up in the same household, as Mary French does, familial relationships are depicted as painful and troubled between the child and at least one parent.

Themes of troubled parent/child relationships frequently arise within the canon of modern literature, challenging notions of the nuclear family, perceptions of respect and authority, and interpreting ways in which identity is formed. Meg Gillette analyzes portrayals of impending parenthood in the Hemingway short story and Delmar's novel. Noting that "unfit parents abound in modern American fiction," she lists Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening*, Mrs. Compson of *The Sound and the Fury*, Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby*, Rabbi Smolinsky of *Bread Givers*, Anse Bundren of *As I Lay Dying*, Jeeter Lester of *Tobacco Road* and more as examples of both mothers and fathers who fail in different ways at parenting their children (50). *The Big Money* falls in line with this grouping; parents are flawed characters that have difficulty connecting emotionally with their children. When parental ties are broken, either physically or emotionally and psychologically, the character is then freed in some sense of the past. Diana Loercher Pazicky writes, "Orphanhood, the loss of parents who represent the moorings of a child's identity, is the ultimate metaphor for identity issues. If a child never knew his or her parents, the loss entails personal history as well" (XII), thus the trope of orphaning is well-suited to the modern exploration of issues of identity. Loercher Pazicky marks *Moby Dick* as a turning point towards modern literature and a break from the past in the development of the orphan trope,

suggesting that Ishmael's isolation from society and is a rejection of that society's xenophobic values. In Dos Passos's work, the possibility of identifying with a unified society is never really an option. Characters are constantly vacillating between feeling more and then less alienated in a culture whose capitalist, racist and xenophobic traits are emphasized wherever possible. Thus, it is fitting that practically every character struggles with the broken or severed ties to their parents as either literal or emotional orphans. Loercher Pazicky continues,

orphan imagery is inseparable from familial imagery, and that the metaphorical meaning of orphanhood depends on the larger symbolic context of the family, specifically the relationship between parents and children. In American history, the family is the paradigmatic institution that defines cultural values. Of course, the imposition of familial (particularly patriarchal) imagery... is a cross-cultural phenomenon, but the nature and sequence of events in American history reinforced this predisposition and placed a national inflection on the imagery. The family as an institution provides the stage on which the struggle for American identity is played out, and on that stage the orphan is a primary, though not the only, character. (XIII)

Thus, while tropes of orphaning are famously used in the literature of other cultures—Charles Dickens as an obvious example—widely varying concepts from the American Dream to the American slave narrative are particularly suited to using the orphan as a metaphor for characters searching for a new identity, severed or wishing to sever ties to the past, or struggling to find a place in the present. Individuality, not collectivity, is portrayed as the key to success. While the orphan trope was previously cast as a wandering waif in need of a family and a home, here, however, the orphan is a character unweighted by the psychological and economic demands made by family members, whose home can be relocated to increase geographic opportunities. Margo Dowling illustrates the advantages of

both, travelling across the United States and even venturing outside its boundaries and creating familial relationships that mimic business opportunities.

Although much of the scholarly work on Dos Passos's characters suggests they don't have emotional or psychological dimension, the sketches and vignettes presented in each chapter can be interpreted as the fictionalized longitudinal development of complex personalities who are informed by past experience and upbringing. We are able to see the development from childhood into adulthood for two such characters in *The Big Money*, women who function as polar opposites in the narrative and only briefly cross paths in their last chapter. Mary French is the social activist born into privilege, yet exposed to the less fortunate; she gives everything she has monetarily and emotionally to others. Margo Dowling, on the other hand, comes from humble beginnings. She does whatever it takes to succeed and makes the most of each situation she encounters to acquire wealth and become a rising film star. Despite their differences, both women have parents who abandon them physically and emotionally. Rather than perpetuate their line of dysfunctional relationships in the wake of their sometimes pleasurable but often traumatic childhood and adolescent experiences, Mary and Margo seek an end to their reproductive lineage in divergent ways that can be interpreted not only metaphorically but rhetorically. Through Mary's abortions and Margo's attempted abortion and the early death of her child, production and reproduction come to a halt in lines that end with these two very different women.

Mary and Margo Halt (Re)production: Rhetoric, Revolution and Desire

The denial of reproductive potential in Dos Passos appears first in the form of abortions, both attempted and realized, and, secondly, when characters have miscarriages or

their infants die prematurely. The former can be read as an intentional cessation of the genetic assembly line and the latter as the unintentional (but potentially profitable) production of a faulty “product.” Mary French and Margo Dowling both attempt abortions and suicide, but their characters’ paths take opposite turns within Dos Passos narrative machinery.

To begin, Mary French’s relationships parallel her political ideals. She commits herself to social and political causes throughout the narrative, collaborating with others to fight poverty and improve conditions for the working class. She likewise seeks love and acceptance from men whose lives center on a devotion to politics. The nature of her commitment to both, however, is unfruitful and frustrated. Mary conceives twice, resulting in two abortions that must be financed through the charitable contributions of other people. The first is the result of an affair with George Barrow. Although she was once infatuated with George, Mary can no longer bear the thought of marrying him or having his child at the time she discovers she is pregnant. Dos Passos writes, “Fear of having a baby began to obsess her. She didn’t want to tell George about it because she knew he’d insist on their getting married. She couldn’t wait. She didn’t know any doctor she could go to. Late one night she went into the kitchenette to stick her head in the oven and tried to turn on the gas, but it seemed so inconvenient somehow and her feet felt so cold on the linoleum that she went back to bed” (117). Mary then asks her friend Ada Cohn to pay for the abortion. Ada agrees, but in order to find a doctor who will perform it, Mary has to contact and ask George, who provides her with the information

Later in the narrative, Mary becomes pregnant again by Ben Compton. Unlike George, the wealthy, conservative politician, she can envision herself settling down and raising a family with Ben, who is an idealist communist. However once she becomes pregnant, Ben believes, “Now was the time to fight. Of course she could have the baby if she wanted to but it would spoil her usefulness in the struggle for several months and he didn’t think this was the time for it” (359). So Mary asks her mother for the money to pay for the abortion and puts political and social interests ahead of her own desire to marry and start a family. Mary needs to be productive for social causes, not reproductive and indulging in her own desires, so she ends the pregnancy.

Miscommunication, the inability to communicate, and the unwillingness to speak are critical in understanding the pregnancies of Mary French and Margo Dowling. When Mary is ultimately forced to contact George for a referral to a doctor, he acts “broken-hearted,” but he sends her the address and does not insist on getting married as Mary anticipated he would. Prior to her pregnancy, Mary considered settling down with George. They first met when she went to see him give a lecture on how the working class would keep the country out of war. She eventually takes the job he offers her as his secretary because she thinks they will be able to work on creating legislation that will benefit the interests of striking steelworkers.

However, Mary is disillusioned by George’s evolving politics; she discovers that he is involved in getting striking workers blacklisted from other job opportunities. When she questions him about it, he says, “it’s the fault of the leaders who picked the wrong minute for the strike and then let the bosses hang a lot of crazy revolutionary notions on

them. Organized labor gets stung every time it mixes in politics” (116). Mary naively believed that George was sympathetic to the same social causes when in reality he was manipulating her. The realization of her pregnancy and the wish to end it follow shortly after she realizes George is not committed to the same political goals she is, and Mary’s desire to end the pregnancy is a reaction to the awareness that her idealism has been dashed by George. However, the abortion could also be interpreted as an attempt to punish or deny *herself* an opportunity for which she, as well as George, has expressed desire. Confronted with the realization about steelworkers’ legislation, she continually implicates herself in his actions: “George, *we’re* as responsible as anybody for selling out the steelworkers” she says at one point, and “*We’re* just laborfakers” at another (116, my emphasis). Angry at George for deceiving her about something to which she is so committed and experiencing self-loathing due to her own involvement, Mary French makes the decision to disrupt her own reproductive line, as well as George’s, rather than to continue to raise another generation of frauds.

Mary French confuses idealism in politics with idealism in love and the desire to raise a family throughout her entire narrative. Ben Compton allowed Mary to believe that the two would be together for the foreseeable future, but once that reality is on the horizon he encourages her to terminate her pregnancy and devote her energy to advancing the political concerns of others. Rather than guiltily focus on her own needs and desires, Mary puts her social activism—and Ben’s wishes—first and gets the abortion. By equating self-sacrifice with political conviction, and assuming that Ben is also putting the needs of others ahead of his own, rather than selfishly remaining detached, Mary relinquishes the dream

she holds for domesticity. Furthermore, she rejects George because of his opposing political views and, therefore, also gives up a life with him. George is not committed *enough* to be with and Ben is *so* committed that a child would interfere; Mary, unable to learn from her experiences, understands these facts only after she becomes pregnant.

A quarrel over the validity of her research and Ben's failed strike ends the relationship shortly after Mary gets the required operation. Later in the narrative, Ben Compton eventually wants Mary French back after he gets kicked out of the Communist Party, and he alludes to the fact that he also wants her connections to those working for their common cause. Believing that she's going to settle down with Don Stevens, Mary refuses him only to, of course, eventually be jilted by Don. Don goes to Moscow for a month on party business and marries someone who may be closer to his equal, rather than his mother and caretaker: "She's an English comrade . . . she spoke at the big meeting at the Bronx Casino last night . . . she's got a great shock of red hair . . . stunning but some of the girls think it's dyed" (438, author's ellipses). Mary had been denying herself any physical comfort or indulgence in aesthetic that might make her sexuality obvious, but ultimately, Don leaves Mary for a woman that Mary would consider vain for dying her hair an attention-grabbing shade of red but powerful enough to command a public audience on her own—not a woman willing to work behind the scenes, unselfishly sacrificing all of her desires like Mary. Previously, Mary fixed up the apartment she kept with Don while he was in Moscow in order to comfort him when he returned. After Don dismisses her, she goes home and "when she opened the door the new turkeyred curtains were like a blow from the whip in the face" (437). The curtains, not really bought for Don but for herself, are Mary's bit of vanity, a

small show of pride in color and design. Although she tells herself they are to comfort a man, the curtains reveal her as more than just a woman who works herself to the bone to better the lives of people she's never met. She has emotions, she is in love, she can delight in beautiful things, but she allows herself these concessions too late. Mary's heart is broken, despite her impervious exterior; self-denial has not made her successful or happy. The impossibility of ever realizing her twin desires of sexual fulfillment and political reform as a means of establishing both domestic and ideological fulfillment is recognized through the enactment of Mary's dual abortions.

A comparison of Mary French and Margo Dowling illustrates both Margo's agency in avoiding the destructive path the rest of the characters follow and the ways in which reproduction and gender are tied to one definition of American success. Margo's mother died giving birth to her, and her father, Fred, married her mother's best friend, Agnes. Her father, an alcoholic like Mary's father, soon abandons both his child and his second wife. Struggling financially, Agnes then sends Margo to live at a convent until Agnes remarries a vaudeville actor named Frank Mandeville, who can support the pair. Margo likes Frank at first; he is the parental figure who introduces her to show business. Her feelings change when he comes home drunk one night in her adolescence and rapes her. To escape her troubled home life, sixteen-year-old Margo marries a young Cuban man named Tony and runs away.

Margo romanticizes an exotic Latin lifestyle in her mind, the way that Mary French has idealized life with Ben Compton. But when Margo runs away with Tony to Cuba, this fantasy lasts only the span of a few hours. Instantly, Margo is alienated and isolated in a

foreign land where she does not speak the language and cannot communicate with her new relatives. But for Margo, “the worst of it was when she found she was going to have a baby. Day after day she lay there all alone staring up at the cracked white plaster of the ceiling, listening to the shrill jabber of the women in the court and the vestibule and the parrot and the yapping of the little white dog that was named Kiki. Roaches ran up and down the wall and ate holes in any clothes that weren’t put away in chests” (194). Like Mary, Margo thinks of killing herself rather than having the baby, but she can’t follow through: “She stole a sharp-pointed knife from the kitchen and thought she’d kill herself with it, but she didn’t have the nerve to stick it in. She thought of hanging herself by the bedsheet, but she couldn’t seem to do that either” (195). Heavily supervised by the suspicious matriarchs of Tony’s family, Margo manages to escape to the drugstore and takes heavy doses of castor oil and quinine in an attempt to cause a miscarriage.

The fact that both Mary and Margo *contemplate* suicide but are unable to follow through with it supports a reading that the causes and beliefs that underpin both women’s grief are not more important than their self-preservation. A characterization of Margo as vain or self-interested comes as no surprise; Dos Passos frequently portrays her as such. But it is a more complicated indictment with Mary, who puts political idealism ahead of her own needs repeatedly throughout the narrative. When Dos Passos writes that for Mary suicide “seemed so inconvenient somehow and her feet felt so cold on the linoleum that she went back to bed” (117), it suggests an act of frivolity, that Mary is only playing with the idea of ending her life. By undermining Mary’s commitment to end her own life, her commitment to social concerns is also called into question.

Mary's half-hearted suicide attempt indicates she has more self-interest than her lack of personal investment and attention to the causes of others initially suggest. Her activism can also be read as a form of rebellion against her bourgeois upbringing and, ultimately, her mother. Like Margo, Mary French also has a complicated relationship with her parents. Mary's father was a doctor who took in less fortunate patients, including miners and their children. Despite the fact that he drinks excessively, Mary admires her father's desire to help those in need. During a trip home from college, Mary finds her motionless father and assumes he has passed out from excessive drinking; the narrative refers to him as "deaddrunk." Horrified to discover that her father is actually dead, Mary immediately wants to go back to college. Her mother balks at the idea of Mary missing the funeral but lets her go and gives her a hundred dollars on her way out. Mary and her mother are depicted as having a contentious relationship throughout the novel, both before and after her father's death. In championing those who are struggling against oppression, Mary makes a motion of solidarity with her father and against her mother, who represent wealth, upbringing, and capital. Mary's hypocrisy is evident, however, when she accepts her mother's money as a political donation after her father's death *and* accepts her mother's money to finance her second abortion. Moreover, Mary's unwillingness to bear a child is another rejection of her mother: a refusal to become like her by becoming a mother herself.

But unlike Mary, Margo's abortion attempt is unsuccessful and Margo carries her baby to term. When it is born, it is clear to Margo that the baby is sickly:

It looked dreadfully little. It was a little girl. Its poor little face looked wrinkled and old like a monkey's. There was something the matter with its eyes. She made them send for the old doctor...He kept calling her a poor little niña and finally made her

understand that the baby was blind and that her husband had a secret disease and that as soon as she was well enough she must go to a clinic for treatments. (196)

Margo contracted the unnamed sexually transmitted infection, the doctor implies, because Tony has sex with other men, passing the disease down to Margo and, eventually, the baby. The day after the sickly baby was christened, it died, making Tony's same-sex promiscuity responsible for the death, not Margo's home-abortion attempt. Having also contracted the disease herself, Margo eventually requires an operation, which makes her sterile. Learning she could no longer have children, "she didn't much care, but Agnes cried and cried" (203). Agnes's remorse can be traced to the fact that she could not have children herself, which is perhaps one of the reasons she continued to care for Margo as a child, although not biologically related to her, after Fred, a drunk like Mary's father, left them both. Dos Passos writes, "Agnes would ask Margie if she loved her as much as if she'd been her own mother and Margie would cry and say, 'Yes Agnes darling.' 'You must always love me,' Agnes would say, 'because God doesn't seem to want me to have any little babies of my own'" (131).

The death of Margo's baby in Cuba and Mary's abortions suggest stunted birth as a metaphor for unfulfilled revolution and thwarted desire. Like Mary, Margo's attempted abortion and the eventual death of her live born child are also due to a misunderstanding between partners. However, unlike Mary, Margo was overtly deceived by her husband, Tony. Before heading to Cuba, Tony claims, "And we shall rent a fine house in the Vedado, very exclusive section, and servants very cheap there, and you will be like a queen" (148). Instead, Margo is forcibly kept under lock and key in a house teeming with cockroaches. The greater deception, however, is that Tony fails to tell her about his love affairs with

men. No one attempts to negotiate with Margo in a language that she can understand and the rhetorical impasse is much greater. Her pregnancy and the death of the child occur entirely in Cuba. Upon her arrival, “all the old women crowded around kissing her and staring at her and making exclamations in Spanish about her hair and her eyes and she felt awful silly not understanding a word and kept asking Tony which his mother was, but Tony had forgotten his English” (193). Tony also refuses to translate for Margo in another scene: “The doorway was crowded with the neighbors staring at her with their monkeyeyes. ‘Say, Tony, you might at least tell me what she’s saying,’ Margo whined peevishly. ‘Mother says this is your house and you are welcome, things like that. Now you must say muchas gracias, mama.’ Margo couldn’t say anything. A lump rose in her throat and she burst out crying” (193). Margo reacts not only to the idea of living in Tony’s mother’s house, rather than in the luxurious home she was promised, but to the fact that she is so obviously an outsider.

Portrayed as the fair American in an exotic country, Margo, with her blond hair and blue eyes, becomes a spectacle. Tony’s family stares with “monkeyeyes” and her own dying child’s face appears small and wrinkled, like a monkey’s. In doing so, Dos Passos portrays the Cubans as primitive and creating a chasm of their cultural distance from Margo. But miscommunication has spiraled into a total breakdown of communication without the possibility of being bridged because Tony’s family speaks only Spanish and Margo only English. Only Tony can interpret for her and she is now aware of the fact that she can’t trust him to intercede on her behalf. Margo, in turn, “couldn’t say anything.” Margo’s dying child forces her to re-interpret Tony’s past behavior and recognize the truth about his same-sex desires. Previously, she had thought about one of Tony’s friends that: “there

was something funny about Senor Manfredo, but she was as nice to him as she could be. He paid no attention to her either. He never took his eyes off Tony's long black lashes" (195). Margo has been disillusioned, like Mary. But unlike Mary, Margo realizes there is gap between what is stated and what is enacted. She learns to interpret and anticipate this gap in signification, never becoming a victim of misinterpretation throughout the rest of the narrative.

In order to frame the rhetorical consequences of Margo marrying Tony, I'd like to turn to Eve Sedgwick's essay "Queer and Now." In her analysis here, Sedgwick talks about the pairings of signified and signifier and how she has always had the desire to realign the pairings throughout her life. Sedgwick writes, "I see it's been a ruling intuition for me that the most productive strategy... might be, whenever possible, to *disarticulate* them one from another, to disengage them" (6). For Sedgwick, a queer interpretation is resistant to categorization, it entails a realign the columns of words with their previously associated definitions. This realignment is an act that Dos Passos engages in with the trope of the orphan. Previously understood through a Dickensian framework, the American orphan of the twentieth century is freed from the social and economic burdens of the previous generation in U.S.A. More literally queer, however, Tony's interactions with Margo dislodge preconceived notions of identity from traditional expectations about sexuality. The couple's relationship demands a re-reading in order to arrive at an accurate interpretation. Margo learns that Tony can socially function as a heterosexual husband and experience same-sex desire at the same time. She then applies this lesson about the gap between image and reality to her acting career learning to market and publicize her own image advantageously.

Another queer character in *The Big Money*, Dick Savage, cannot make his desires, his actions, and the perception of him by others match up. Consistently portrayed as heterosexual throughout the novels, near the end of *The Big Money* Dick has an erotic experience with a black transvestite in Harlem named Gloria Swanson.⁹ Sedgwick writes, “That’s one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). For Sedgwick, “queer” is as if she wrote lists of words in two columns, one of signs and the other of what is signified by them. Then, she slips only one of the columns down a few notches, mismatching them. Dick Savage is a white thrill-seeker in black Harlem, drunk on the dance floor when he begins to express attraction to Gloria. He becomes aware of the disarticulation between the appearance of the female impersonator and her true intentions when he wakes up in a hotel room, having been hit over the head and mugged.

While Sedgwick writes of this misalignment of signification as a subversive act, for Margo Dowling the gap in signification between being sold a romantic fantasy with her heterosexual lover and the reality of being literally trapped in a foreign land with a husband who does not desire her or advocate for her is disorienting. The abortion attempt after an undesired pregnancy is Margo’s endeavor to realign what she believed with what is real, but she is unable to do so. The baby is born alive, yet later dies due to Tony’s deception,

⁹ George Chauncey notes the escapades of a famous, historical female impersonator addressed by the stage name Gloria Swanson in Harlem in the 1930s (251).

not Margo's abortion attempt. Regardless, from this point on in the novel Margo is never again deceived, unlike Mary French. Margo controls her own fate for the rest of the narrative, learning and absorbing the new meanings of her modern world and becoming a success because of her ability to adapt to the new meanings of these significations.

The Trouble with Margo: Assembling the Party as Machine

Mary and Margo are only in the same chapter once, at a party thrown by Eveline Hutchins. The paths of these two women's lives intertwine in a way that is characteristic of the narrative circuitry of *U.S.A.* Scenes such as Eveline's party, which occurs near the end of *The Big Money* and brings many of the characters together within a social milieu, provide the novel with a petri dish for examining the ways characters interact with each other. Similar scenes occur in other modernist novels—*Mrs. Dalloway* for example. In “A Berlin Chronicle,” Walter Benjamin describes drawing a map that resembled a family tree and connected all the memorable people he has met in his life. He discovered “on a small [scale] there are perhaps paths that lead us again and again to people who have one and the same function for us: passageways that always, in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, the master. This is what the sketch of my life revealed to me as it took shape before me on that Paris afternoon” (31). Thus, the framework of these novels can be described as a series of intersecting pathways that lead again and again to characters enacting the same archetypal roles. Morris Philipson describes this plot device of *Mrs. Dalloway* as an intricately woven arabesque rather than an intersecting map. Clarissa's party functions, like Eveline's, as a vehicle for weaving all the paths together. For Dos Passos, it may be more appropriate to describe the role that Eveline

Hutchins's party plays near the end of *The Big Money* as the final attempt to assemble the machine. In "All the Lost Generations," Alfred Kazin writes, "Dos Passos is at once the most precious of the lost-generation writers and the first of the American 'technological' novelists, the first to bring the novel squarely into the Machine Age and to use its rhythms, its stockpiles of tools and people in his books" (143). Kazin later continues his analysis of the trilogy: "With *The 42nd Parallel* we have entered into a machine world in which the rhythm of the machine has become the primal beat of all the people in it; and Dos Passos's hard, lean, mocking prose, forever sounding that beat, calling them to their deaths, has become the supreme expression of his conception of them" (152). Accordingly, the trilogy's narrative could begin to conclude in no better way. *The Big Money* is full of characters whose lives intersect in major or minor ways: as lovers, business partners, or as names on the gossiping lips of strangers in passing. The connections are furthered from book to book in the set of three. On the conveyor belt of their lives, the characters are routed through Eveline's salon and the American machine is made complete. Exhausted and bored, Eveline leaves her own party early, retiring to her room. Mary French learns the next day that Eveline overdosed on sleeping pills, called to her death by the beat that she in part helped to orchestrate but from which she could not escape.

There are a few ways, however, that this novel-machine resists a proper and straightforward assembly, or if we choose the arabesque model, places in which the tightly-woven threads fly loose. One of these ways lies in how the four separate components of the trilogy lock into place with each other. Kazin writes,

the success of Dos Passos's method does not rest primarily on his schematization of the novel into four panels, four levels of American experience—the narrative

proper, the 'Camera Eye,' the 'Biographies,' and the 'Newsreel.' That arrangement, while original enough, is the most obvious thing in the book and soon becomes the most mechanical. The book lives by its narrative style, the wonderfully concrete yet elliptical prose which bears along and winds around the life stories in the book like a conveyor belt carrying Americans through some vast Ford plant of the human spirit. (149-150)

These four components, however, are not as mechanically predictable as Kazin indicates. Near the end of this chapter I will address ways in which they overlap with each other, with *Manhattan Transfer*, and with Dos Passos's own experiences. But secondly, although Mary French is perhaps on the same path to disaster that Eveline followed, Margo is not. Margo Dowling refuses to be incorporated into the mechanism that lures Dos Passos's characters closer to its gaping maw.

At Eveline's party Margo Dowling floats in among the guests, ethereally coated with the gloss of her newfound fame as a burgeoning movie star. Just as swiftly, she fades back out and is the subject of party gossip as people regurgitate what they've heard about her. Their whispers contain elements of truth and parts of stories told by others or invented by Margo herself, and their comments can be both disparaging and complimentary. Whispers swirl around Margo and then she causes a hush to fall across the room as she passes in a haze of cigarette smoke. Mary arrives with her friend Ada Cohen. George Barrow also attends the party and tries to get back into Mary's life, but she's unable to connect with anyone, let alone him, and subdues her pain with an excessive amount of alcohol. The gauzy, translucent nature of Margo's appearance at the party is juxtaposed with the blurry vision of Mary's increasing intoxication: "Mary was seeing blurred faces getting big as they came towards her, changing shape as they went past, fading into the gloom like fish opening and closing their mouths in an aquarium" (443). With every sentence, we sense

Eveline's despair at her own party, her dissatisfaction with the emptiness of her life that has been only hinted at up until now. Mary agrees: "'You know it does seem too silly to spend your life filling up rooms with illassorted people who really hate eachother'" (444). After finding out that her fellow comrade Eddy has been murdered on a mission, Mary French's last actions in the book are to hear from Ada that Eveline must have killed herself the night of the party, as she was found dead the morning after they left. Mary dismisses Ada's news as once again frivolous, particularly in light of Eddy's death, and in doing so makes a value judgment on the cost of one life over the other. In *1919* a teenage Eveline declares her plan to kill herself once everything becomes "too grim," once life is no longer exciting and glamorous. Mary French believes Eveline's parties, and life, are inconsequential—and yet Eveline's ability to follow through on her intentions of suicide reveals her as having some conviction after all.

The narrative discloses Mary's thoughts as they occur in this chapter, and they support the depiction of her throughout the end of the novel as both judgmental and self-sacrificing, to her own detriment. She is unhappy and fills the void left by a lack of connections to other people first by throwing herself into work and then by drinking, much like her "deaddrunk" father. Divorcing herself completely from her mother, she instead blindly follows the path her father traveled, repeating his pattern of behavior. Like Eveline, Mary's "silly life" tells on her, too, through the turkeyred curtains she purchased for her apartment with Don Stevens. In *Mourning Modernity*, Seth Moglen analyzes Mary in Freudian terms: "Dos Passos emphasizes that Mary's attachment to Ben—and later to Don—expresses an erotic version of the masochistic impulse that is enacted in her politics. For Mary actively

chooses men characterized by a mode of political commitment that is both self-destructive and guaranteed to erase her needs” (214-215). This psychologically engrained behavior adheres to a repetitive pattern of cognitive organization: like a worker performing a single task, removed from the end product, Mary performs the same actions over and over. Unable to evolve and adapt, she remains stuck in a circuit that can only lead to her demise.

As previously mentioned, however, Margo Dowling does *not* repeat the same patterns of behavior in an endless naturalistic cycle. Once she realizes that her situation in Cuba is not what she anticipated, she attempts to change her circumstances. After Margo returns from her escape to the “American drugstore” where she “bought all the castor oil and quinine she had money for” in order to attempt an abortion, the old women she lives with frantically tell Tony. He “made a big scene and tried to beat her up, but she was stronger than he was and blacked his eye for him” (195). As a teenager Margo adored Agnes’s husband, Frank Mandeville, and looked up to him as a father figure. Yet, Frank abuses his authority in this role and rapes her one night. Once Margo is able to leave Cuba, she goes to Frank and Agnes, and Frank begins to enact the same pattern of abuse: “Little by little he sidled over to the arm of her chair, telling her how attractively looking she’d become. Then suddenly he made a grab for her. *She’d been expecting it* and gave him a ringing slap on the face as she got to her feet” (201, my emphasis). Having previously learned about the difference between appearance and intention, Margo anticipates Frank’s advances. She slaps him and threatens to tell Agnes, saying she caught a disease in Cuba and Frank had better leave her alone if he doesn’t want to catch it. In refusing to allow the men

in her life to put her in a position of subjectivity by controlling her reproduction and sexuality, Margo alters her pattern and changes her narrative path.

There is not much depth in the scholarly work dealing with Margo. Criticism published contemporaneously with *The Big Money* frequently depicts her as a gold digger or omits her from analysis completely. An essay by Benard De Voto published contemporarily in 1936 claims that in *The Big Money*, Margo Dowling conducts “the most extensive whoring anyone has yet done in this series” (130). Although most scholarship doesn’t treat her as frankly—or negatively—as De Voto, the majority of work on her character does depict Margo as someone who sleeps with the right people to get into Hollywood. However, characterizing Margo as a shameless gold digger not only completely ignores the psychological dimension that being raped as a child by her “stepfather” adds to the sexual motivations of her character, it is also an inaccurate assessment of her behavior.

Margo becomes a difficult character for scholars to deal with because the plot ends with her as a success. The rest of the characters succumb to tragic fates, physically and psychologically, and acknowledging Margo’s significance makes it difficult to categorize her in line with the rest of the characters. The mode of *U.S.A.* has likewise been difficult for some to categorize: the narrative is often depicted as adhering to a realist or naturalist aesthetic; the interchapters are typified as examples of modernism. *U.S.A.’s* characters are doomed to fail to a large extent, and it is their failures that point out the flaws of the systems—misogynist, capitalist—under which they struggle. Kazin writes, “The modern equation cancels out to zero, everything comes undone, the heroes are always broken, and

the last figure in *U.S.A.*, brooding like Dos Passos himself over that epic failure, is a starving and homeless boy walking alone up the American highway” (143). Well, everyone except Margo. She does not fit this pattern, much as she does not follow other societal patterns set out for her throughout the novel. This is another reason that she cannot follow through on her half-hearted plans for suicide: Margo won’t succumb to her naturalistic fate like Eveline Hutchins. Although his analysis of Mary French is often accurate, Moglen’s assessment that “characters are carried along by Dos Passos’s sentences, like un sentient commodities upon a conveyor belt, stamped by one event and then another” (189) cannot be applied to Margo. An argument can be made that she is a product of the capitalist system, that she is a materialistic New Woman, that her image represents the promise of sexuality if not the fact of it, but Margo adapts to her circumstances and is not carried along by anyone other than herself.

Furthermore, although Margo is quick to understand how to manipulate image and surface, she cannot be reduced to a two-dimensional caricature. She is strong, intelligent, resilient, and has agency. Born into unfavorable circumstances, she creates a family for herself and invents a new identity in every chapter. She’s brilliantly successful, tenacious and persistent, and for all of her relationships with influential men, was given nothing by them that significantly contributed to her success. In early adulthood, Margo solicits jobs in dress shops because she wants to learn more about clothes. Later, on the cusp of her movie career, she attends a Beverly Hills party with director Sam Margolies. Quickly scanning the high class, acidly critical women in attendance, “At once she knew that she ought to have an ermine wrap” (325). Despite acting like she doesn’t understand business when

it is convenient for her to portray herself as a silly blonde, “Every morning she studied the stock reports” (263). Throughout the novel, Margo and Agnes at times rely on each other and, at others, resist one another, like mothers and daughters do throughout the course of their lives. But by the last third of the plot, she and Agnes have developed a well-rehearsed act, and an unspoken understanding between them allows for improvisation when necessary. They are both hustlers—less mother and daughter, more partners. As a child, Margo performed with Frank on the vaudeville circuit, but in the age of the silver screen, she and Agnes are the pair who turns their routine into a career.

The orphan trope does facilitate Margo’s resistance to follow the pattern laid out before her. However, it is clear from the outset that she will not be like her biological mother. Ironically, Margo was given the same first name as her mother: Margery. Her “mother Margery died when she was born. ‘She gave her life for yours, never forget that’; it made Margie feel dreadful, like she wasn’t her own self, when Agnes said that” (131). And, so, refusing to live in her dead mother’s shadow, she changes names from Margery to Margie to Margo. When Margo’s own child dies shortly after birth and Margo herself survives to change her own circumstances, the reversal of the pattern becomes clear. Yet, Margo isn’t exactly like Agnes, either; instead, they complement one another. Because her mother died and her father abandoned her, Margo is able to rewrite her own personal history. Ultimately, this is a distinct advantage, both in terms of her desire to be an actress, assuming different roles, and in her ability to navigate the shifting American socialscape during the first half of the twentieth century.

The Fetus and Fertility in *Detroit Industry*

Diego Rivera's mural series, *Detroit Industry*, is painted on the four walls of Rivera Court in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Large panels of men working in an automotive plant occupy the North and South Walls. Above these are panels depicting large, mythical beings with different skin tones, overseeing the work below. Alongside these panels are smaller vignettes, such as the "Vaccination" panel, which visually references a nativity scene set in a modern medical laboratory, and the "Commercial Chemical Operations" panel on the South Wall, which demonstrates some cubist or futurist techniques. The largest panel on the West Wall is "Aviation," a depiction of both commercial planes and war planes. The East Wall, on which I will focus in this chapter, portrays a fetus buried in the earth, between two female symbols of fertility.

Initially, Dos Passos's trilogy of novels and Diego Rivera's mural in the Detroit Institute of Arts may seem an unlikely pairing. However, in his 1991 foreword to all three novels in *U.S.A.*, E.L. Doctorow writes, "the peripatetic Dos Passos landed one day in Mexico City and was much taken with the murals of Diego Rivera colorfully spreading, story after story, up the courtyard walls of the Secretariat of Education. In later years he indicated also his love of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century European tableaux—those with the saints painted big and the ordinary people painted small, filling up the background" (viii). Here, Doctorow's observations only begin to bring into focus the comparison between the expansive novel with its biographies of great men and the epic mural, with its four large, mythical figures at the top layer, representing the races in backgrounds evocative of surrealist imagery. In *Making the Modern*, Terry Smith writes about the physical

presence of the men painted in factory scenes that comprise the focal point of *Detroit Industry*. Images of people dominate the panels rather than the machinery, the actual size of which is scaled much larger than the human beings operating them. Smith contends, “This drive toward the priority of assembly over the production of parts absorbs the achievements of the production engineers...into a larger system, that of the plant as a whole: a machine using machines to produce machines” (33).

It is this concept of a machine using machines to produce machines that I’d like to examine through reproductive imagery. Concepts similar to the one Smith presents here have been applied to both the mural and *U.S.A.*, perhaps a bit too hastily in each case. Both Rivera and Dos Passos do provide artistic representations of models of working and living that are in line with Fordist assembly line production, but both of their texts also simultaneously undermine the concept of machines using machines to produce machines as best or only mode of production.

The obvious thematic reference to the patterns of factory life occurs in the large panels on the North and South walls of *Detroit Industry*. However, it is the East wall that I want to turn to here in arguing that Rivera’s work frustrates an interpretation of assembly line production as childbirth and reproduction in the panel referred to as “Infant in the Bulb of a Plant.” Symbols of fertility are easy to recognize in the juxtaposed images of rounded female figures holding ripe native fruits and grains in panels on the far left and far right. Beneath and between them is the child in utero, depicted underground in a seed-like womb. In *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, Linda Downs interprets this depiction of the fetus as rooted in the ground, from which all of the materials that comprise Ford cars

come from, and reminding man of his connection to the earth. In his analysis of this panel in *Making the Modern*, however, Smith introduces the possibility that the infant is actually depicted as stillborn because the time period in which Rivera painted the mural coincides with Frida Kahlo's traumatic and artistically influential miscarriage and her subsequent stay at Henry Ford hospital while the couple was in Detroit.

However, if read according to Smith, the symbolism behind a miscarried fetus would cut off any interpretation of a positive perspective on the union between man and technology. Smith is at times ambivalent about the possibilities of the mural. Sometimes positive, he writes, "My claim is that, within all the partial narratives—religious, historical, philosophic, technical, cross-cultural, racial, artistic—at work in this mural cycle, Rivera also sets in play an extraordinary reading of the current stage of industrialization, and the role of humanity (including womankind) within it, as creators, drones, and victims" (227). He goes on to say that Rivera "demands the spectator: to be the inseminator, the life giver; then, in turning to the other wall, the deliverer, the life maker of a new order of working, the basis of a perfectible social order" which Smith calls "breathtaking in its literalness—some might say crudity" (228). However, Smith believes that Rivera's work was perhaps too literal, too tied to lived experience. He writes, "Rivera's outlook was, in sum, essentially historical, that is, about human growth through work and struggle. It lacked the futuristic utopianism more typical of modernists, in both art and business" (227). Regarding the fetus depicted on the East Wall, Smith briefly writes, "Yet this child may be stillborn" and pursues the interpretation no further. As evidence, Smith cites in a footnote the fact

that Downs suggested to Laurence Hurlburt, author of *Mexican Muralists in the United States*, the possibility of an interpretation of the baby as stillborn.

A clear reading of the child in the bulb of a plant as alive and thriving lessens the dialectic pull of Smith's interpretation regarding Rivera's depictions of the future, as I hope to show. There is no real textual evidence for understanding the child as stillborn. The hue of the baby's skin is healthy in appearance, as opposed to the greenish pallor of the men working with chemicals on the northwestern side of the North Wall. The cells in the placenta-like encasing are regular, rather than malformed and abnormal. The "roots" of the seed are intact and reaching out. My correspondences with Downs indicate she has no memory of a conversation with Hurlburt suggesting an interpretation of the child as stillborn is plausible.¹⁰ Smith writes, "The final steps in the sequence occur on the West Wall. An allegory of choice is played out: workers and capitalists are the envisaged actors" (231). In wholeheartedly agreeing with this statement, I would, however, suggest that the choice begins earlier. Both Downs and Smith suggest that the mural cycle begins on the East Wall, with the infant. Spectators do enter facing this wall and this interpretation makes sense on both a practical and symbolic level. This is the point at which Smith plausibly suggests that the spectator is positioned as the inseminator. In presenting a child, this fetus, not aborted and not miscarried, Rivera raises the question that many other modernists grappled with—how will the future generations interpret the work of the modernists, both artistically and technologically? Here, however, the decision is not whether to have the child, but what future will it inherit, an interpretation that evidence from Smith's own argument actually

¹⁰ Downs, Linda. Email Correspondence. 16 Jan. 2012.

supposes when he interprets “the image of the child in the womb, simultaneously evoking a plant seed and a chemical combustion” with “two man-made metallic shapes—one a plough, the other armor plating—anticipating the peace-war duality of the West Wall” (211). The concept of machines producing machines is further frustrated by the presence of the plowshare in the panel with the infant. The implication is that technology has the dual potential to cultivate or threaten life (and what would there be to threaten if the child is not alive?).

While it would be difficult to enter the Rivera Court and not see the East Wall and the child first, the spectator, too, is given a choice that may not necessarily culminate in the way that Smith suggests or even Rivera desired. The literal space of the museum also lends itself to an interpretation of the mural that undermines an assembly line analysis. Before the mural was painted, there was a fountain surrounded by plants in the middle of the courtyard, which was removed. If it had been left there, observers would be forced into a pattern of motion, following a linear path around the space and, if one did start at the East Wall, forced to make a binary decision. Without it, spectators are free to choose whatever course they like or no course at all. I have observed museum patrons sitting on the floor in the middle and looking up, somewhat ironically, at the natural blue image of the sky seen through skylights above the mural as the paint colors on the walls fluctuate with the shade cast by passing clouds.

Next to the dual images of feminine fertility and above the “Infant in the Bulb of a Plant” are three sections in the architecture that remain as empty spaces. I don’t suggest that this was necessarily an artistic consideration—a whimsical analysis to ponder was

posed to me by Downs, who suggests that this area became a “‘viewing gallery’ during the painting of the murals,”” and that Rivera would have enjoyed spectators (the concept of these gaps as a performance space, or as Downs states, a kind of “opera box” is one for future exploration).¹¹ Instead, I want to offer a reading of the space from my own vantage point as a spectator at the DIA. The first noticeable aesthetic these holes provide is to emphasize the panels next to and below them. The North and South walls on either side are teeming with action. The composition is chaotic and complex with detail. In comparison, the East Wall has a simplicity and stillness that are made possible, in part, by the empty spaces. However, these absences also fragment the mural. They reveal depth through the empty space behind it, rather than allow *Detroit Industry* to be presented as a unified monolith. The holes express a lack by utilizing negative space. It is this lack of panels, not “Infant in the Bulb of the Plant,” that best express the trauma surrounding childbirth experienced by Kahlo.

A comparison between the depictions of unborn children in Rivera’s “Infant in the Bulb of a Plant” and Mary’s and Margo’s pregnancies is rife with implications for both works. If we accept the reading of abortion and early infant death as metaphors for thwarted desire, lack of commitment, miscommunication, and failed revolution for Mary and Margo, the interpretation of the symbolism behind the East wall becomes easier to read at its most optimistic as “the wall of the sunrise, hope for the future, new beginnings.”¹² At the least,

¹¹ Downs, Linda. Email Correspondence. 17 Jan. 2012.

¹² Downs, Linda. Email Correspondence. 16 Jan. 2012.

it can be interpreted as a choice for future generations to make between technology in relation to the earth and a positive future for humankind on the one hand or relative to war and destruction on the other.

While I wish to be careful to avoid layering the symbolism behind one critique of capitalism onto another in a one to one correlation—each work undertaken by artists with individual goals, styles, and mediums—the juxtaposition of the mural with *U.S.A.* does cast doubt on claims that Rivera lacked a utopian vision for the future or even that he compromised such a vision by accepting the financial backing of an auto magnate by allowing room for a reading inclusive of hope for the life of revolution powered by humanity. In turn, Dos Passos is clearly less optimistic about the possibilities of his doomed characters. The most revolutionary of them all, Mary French, is given no real glimmer of hope for the future of either her political or personal life, both symbolized by her abortions that were financed and facilitated by “outside interests.” Impending birth motivates both Mary and Margo to contemplate suicide, a choice which, unlike abortion, would put an end to their personal futures as well. Instead, however, Margo literally fights for the means to end her own pregnancy, one conceived in miscommunication and deception. From this point in the novel until the end, Margo makes no claims to either revolution *or* genuine love and desire. Having survived childbirth, unlike her mother, she evolves and moves forward.

Diego Rivera and John Dos Passos in Detroit

One final point of comparison between Rivera and Dos Passos is perhaps the most obvious: that of subject matter. The mural clearly deals with the auto industry and the impact that Ford’s business practices have on Detroit and the world at large. A managerial

overseer is painted in a panel, opposite a worker depicted with a communist aesthetic. Downs suggests that the depiction of machinery behind the manager, reminiscent of Henry Ford, deviates from the real machinery used at the Rouge Plant so that Rivera may create the image of an ear, referencing the omnipresent and paranoid surveillance techniques Ford used to supervise his workers.

Dos Passos also literally depicts Detroit and the auto industry. *The Big Money* follows the character Charley Anderson to Detroit. While Charley's story hints at some of the larger social issues at stake in Fordist Detroit, the inter-chapters provide more insight upon analysis. First, I'd like to examine a biographical section on Henry Ford. The "Biography," entitled "Tin Lizzie," begins with a well-worn storyline, a Horatio Alger tale that George Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post* would appreciate. Dos Passos initially depicts how a boy from a small town finds great success in the big city due to hard work and ingenuity. But by the end of the interchapter, Dos Passos's realism kicks in and shades the section with a sinister tone. He writes,

The American Plan; automotive prosperity seeping down from above; it turned out there were strings to it./But that five dollars a day/paid to good, clean, American workmen/who didn't drink or smoke cigarettes or read or think/and who didn't commit adultery/and whose wives didn't take in boarders,/made America once more the Yukon of the sweated workers of the world;/made all the tin lizzies and the automotive age, and incidentally, made Henry Ford the automobileer, the admirer of Edison, the birdlover,/ the great American of his time. (Dos Passos 41)

Here, Dos Passos alludes to the actions of the Ford Sociological Department, whose officers went into workers' homes to ensure that they were living the appropriate lifestyle deserving of five dollars a day. Dos Passos goes on to write,

He wanted people to know about his ideas, so he bought the *Dearborn Independent* and started a campaign against cigarette smoking. When war broke out in Europe,

he had ideas about that too. (Suspicion of armymen and soldiering were part of the Midwest farm tradition, like thrift, stickativeness, temperance and sharp practice in money matters.) Any intelligent American mechanic could see that if the Europeans hadn't been a lot of ignorant underpaid foreigners who drank, smoked, were loose about women and wasteful in their methods of production, the war could never have happened. (42)

Towards the end of "Tin Lizzy" Dos Passos depicts the Great Depression in Detroit. This is the period during which Rivera was painting *Detroit Industry*:

When the stockmarket bubble burst, Mr. Ford the crackerbarrel philosopher said jubilantly, 'I told you so, Serves you right for gambling and getting in debt. The country is sound.' But when the country on cracked shoes, in frayed trousers, belts tightened over hollow bellies, idle hands cracked and chapped with the cold of that coldest March day of 1932, started marching from Detroit to Dearborn, asking for work and the American Plan, all they could think of at Ford's was machineguns. The country was sound, but they mowed the marchers down. They shot four of them dead. (45)

This biography stands in stark contrast to the published biographies of Ford at the time, which Banta describes as heroic and overly sentimental in tone. It also brings into focus the anachronisms of Ford's own autobiography *My Life and Work*, which I've discussed in the previous chapter in conjunction with Sinclair Lewis. In comparison, the actual biographies and autobiography seem more fictionalized than what Dos Passos presents in "Tin Lizzy."

In contrast to the biography's linearity and ability to be easily comprehended are the "Newsreel" sections in *U.S.A.* The following example appears just before Charley Anderson arrives in Detroit, and its location here in combination with its thematic resonance insist on a connection between the narrative and the inter-chapters:

*I've a longing for my Omaha town
I long to go there and settle down*

DETROIT LEADS THE WORLD IN THE
MANUFACTURE OF AUTOMOBILES

I want to see my pa

I want to see my ma

I want to go to dear old Omaha

DETROIT IS FIRST

IN PHARMACEUTICALS

STOVES RANGES FURNACES

ADDING MACHINES

PAINTS AND VARNISHES

MARINE MOTORS

OVERALLS

SODA AND SALT PRODUCTS

SPORT SHOES

TWIST DRILLS

SHOWCASES

CORSETS

GASOLINE TORCHES

TRUCKS

Mr. Radio Man won't you do what you can do

'Cause I'm so lonely

Tell my Mammy to come back home

Mr. Radio Man

DETROIT THE DYNAMIC RANKS HIGH

IN FOUNDRY AND MACHINE SHOP PRODUCTS

IN BRASS AND BRASS PRODUCTS

IN TOBACCO AND CIGARS

IN ALUMINUM CASTINGS

IN IRON AND STEEL

IN LUBRICATOR TOOLS

MALLEABLE IRON

METAL BEDS

Back to the land that gave me birth

The grandest place on God's green earth

California! That's where I belong

“DETROIT THE CITY WHERE LIFE IS

WORTH LIVING”

In this newsreel section, Detroit is hailed as a manufacturing mecca in capital letters, while a longing for small town America, depicted as song lyrics, is set in italics. The montage also references an absent “ma,” “pa,” “mammy,” and “the land that gave me birth” in excerpts from the songs, which underscore the themes of searching for an American identity via the trope of the orphan. Lastly, the cascading capitalized lists of commodities and raw materials create a form that sets off the imperatives “DETROIT IS FIRST,” “DETROIT THE DYNAMIC RANKS HIGH,” and is punctuated finally with “DETROIT THE CITY WHERE LIFE IS WORTH LIVING.” The form rolls down the page, emphasizing that the production of these goods using the raw materials is what makes Detroit a site of significance in terms of American modernity and capitalism.

Earlier in my analyses of Mary and Margo, I asserted that the four “types” of literary components in *U.S.A.* are not as predictable as Alfred Kazin believes. The “Newsreels” sections are one way in which the experimental inter-chapters introduce new possibilities for interpretation. The montage of headlines and songs reference events in the narrative in unexpected ways. For example, the “Newsreel” that is positioned in the gap in Margo’s narrative between when she leaves for Cuba and when she arrives on the island thematically alludes to different kinds of travel by train and boat: “*Oh joy/Feel that boat arockin’/Oh boy/See those darkies flockin’/What’s that whistle sayin’/All aboard toot toot*” (188). Another song states, “*Down beside the summer sea/Along Miami Shore/Someone waits alone for me/Along Miami Shore.*” And earlier, just after Margo leaves a note for Agnes letting her know that she has left for Cuba with Tony, a biography titled “Adagio

Dancer” follows. It contains the life story of Rudolph Valentino, someone Tony aspires to be like later on in the novel. Just as Dos Passos undermines any romanticism in the biography genre with Ford, he describes in detail an operation that the ill Valentino underwent. He writes, “the abdominal cavity contained a large amount of fluid and food particles; the viscera were coated with a greenishgrey film; a round hole a centimeter in diameter was seen in the anterior wall of the stomach.” Then, as Valentino awakes from the operation, Dos Passos makes the connection between Tony and the film star even clearer: “the first thing he said was, ‘Well, did I behave like a pink powderpuff?’” (152). Once Margo returns to the United States, “Newsreel LVII” follows and the headlines are even more explicitly connected to the narrative. It includes the lyric “*Altho’ we both agreed to part/It left a sadness in my heart*” above the headline “UNHAPPY WIFE TRIES TO DIE.” Other clearly related snippets include: “Financing Only Problem,” which references Margo’s difficulty getting a ticket home, “*I thought that I’d get along/and now/I find that I was wrong/somehow*” and “ABANDONED APOLLO STILL HOPES FOR RETURN OF WEALTHY BRIDE” (202-203). Thus, the breakup of the marriage and Margo’s abandonment of Tony resonate in the “Newsreel.” Lastly, the word “queen” is mentioned four times and in the following narrative chapter, Margo meets a friend in the chorus line named Queenie. The relationship between the clippings in the “Newsreels,” the themes in the “Biographies” and the narrative demonstrates that the mode of the four components to the novel is not compartmentalized. Each segment does not function as its own discrete entity,

stamped into its patterned place. They are more complex than that, sometimes foreshadowing events, deepening interpretations, and underscoring themes in their avant-garde juxtaposition.

Moreover, the components become complicated due to the way that some scholars have interpreted portions of *U.S.A.* as semi-autobiographical. While relating an author's life to his work has become an unpopular position from which to critique over the last few decades, and I think for good reason, it nonetheless complicates any straightforward interpretation. Moglen's study of Dos Passos suggests that the author may have identified most strongly with Mary French and relates Dos Passos's life to events in hers. An essay titled "Autobiographical Elements in the Camera Eye" published in 1976 analyzes autobiographical possibilities in excessive detail. In it, James Westerhoven describes how the "Camera Eye" in all three of the books relates to the author's personal life, starting from the time when he was a young child of about five. It claims that the smallest detail is autobiographical, relating names and places to his parents, places he visited, and childhood experiences, and using postcards to support travel locations and his autobiography, *The Best Times*, to provide details. Westerhoven links a childhood fight not only to *The 42nd Parallel* but to *Manhattan Transfer* as well. Other scenarios in *U.S.A.* are compared to Dos Passos's other works such as *Chosen Country*, *Adventures of a Young Man*, and his short story, "July." Westerhoven suggests his own motivation in relating the work to the man is so that we come to a "more complete understanding of Dos Passos as a person" and therefore that his essay is more a supplement to Dos Passos's autobiographical work than a critique of the fiction. In short, Westerhoven presents *U.S.A.* as an index to Dos Passos's life. However,

Westerhoven's secondary objective is his hope that "with the help of this guide, readers of *U.S.A.* will no longer be distracted by references to persons or places unfamiliar to them, so that they can concentrate more fully on the complicated work of art that the trilogy is" (341). This statement assumes that a dissociative effect is undesired and that the "Camera Eye" may serve as an unnecessary distraction to the reader, neither of which should be assumed to be the case. Lastly, he states, "As a rule, I have refrained from commenting on the relationship between individual Camera Eye sections and the text surrounding them, except in cases where the author's use of flashbacks or apparently out-of-place events seem to require it" (341).

Not many of Westerhoven's goals, including this last one, coincide with mine—regardless, I believe these observations are useful for reasons I will address momentarily. However, I would argue that there are other areas of overlap between *U.S.A.* and *Manhattan Transfer* that step away from this sometimes problematic autobiographical perspective to complicate the desire to separate *U.S.A.* into distinct sections. There are obvious stylistic similarities between the two works, but there is at least one aspect of *narrative* overlap. In *1919*, the middle novel of *U.S.A.*, "Camera Eye (31)" contains a brief scene narrated by an unnamed male speaker at a party. Here a "ladyphotographer in breastplates and silk bloomers dances the Song of Songs in rhythms" (126). The party is raided by detectives, who are eventually called off when the "hennahaired" photographer calls the district attorney to have them removed. In *Manhattan Transfer*, the character Ellen attends a party thrown by Hester Voorhees who had "hennaed hair" and wore "silk bloomers and a clinking metal girdle and brassieres" (290). Here Ellen (who has also been described previously as having

henna hair) calls the district attorney, her old acquaintance George Baldwin, to explain that there is a dance recital going on, and the detectives apologize and leave. There are minor differences between the “Camera Eye” section and the chapter in *1919*, but many more specific congruencies. So how can we relate the two obviously connected scenes to one another? There are a number of explanations, starting with the possibility that, if we believe Westerhoven, this may have been a personal experience for Dos Passos that informed some of his work. Or some of the work in *Manhattan Transfer* could have been used a draft or precursor for material in *U.S.A.* There are character similarities that might support this: George Baldwin in *Manhattan Transfer*/George Barrow in *U.S.A.*, Anna Cohen in *Manhattan Transfer*/Ada Cohn in *U.S.A.* But there is also the possibility that this “Camera Eye” in *1919* is somehow informed by the narrative in *Manhattan Transfer*, the way that the newsreels and biographies of *U.S.A.* inform and are informed by its own narrative. Minor discrepancies between the two works could be due, perhaps, to the difference in narrative perspective: an unnamed man in *U.S.A.* and the third person (arguably) subjective from Ellen’s standpoint. Narrative instability is a recurrent theme in Dos Passos in many regards.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the four types of chapters in *U.S.A.* are far from automatic and predictable. Rather than being habitually stamped into place, they reference and anticipate the narrative in a mutual relationship. They are both fictionalized and historic; locked into a specific time period yet belonging to no time at all. I propose the possibility that the perspective in the “Camera Eye” may even extend to a fictional narrative *outside U.S.A.* or the historical events of Dos Passos’s own life. However, unlike Westerhoven, I don’t believe the purpose of studying these elements is to eliminate distractions

from the narrative. Instead, they complicate the narrative, reveal nuance in Dos Passos's writing and open up possibilities for countless interpretations and new meaning rather than closing them off. If Dos Passos uses portions of his own autobiography in his writing, it only serves to underscore the ironies inherent in the genre of autobiography—or in the genre of fiction. Dos Passos is, after all, keenly aware of the hazy differences between the construction of a story of someone's life and the actuality of the life lived. He demonstrates this in each "Biography" section in *U.S.A.* Furthermore, this overlap between author and character shares attributes, not only with those I've outlined previously in chapter one with Sinclair Lewis and Henry Ford, but with Diego Rivera.

Rivera complicates interpretations of his mural when he paints himself, almost caricature-like in a bowler hat, as a spectator in the Rouge factory on northwest end of the North Wall. Many readings of this are possible, beginning with one that suggests that Rivera, positioning himself as a tourist, acknowledges his outsider status in Detroit, not only as a Mexican in this American city—the reversal of Margo Dowling in Cuba—but as an artist in this capital of industry. Maybe there is an acknowledgment here that the men who work in factories have a politics that Rivera may only observe, comment on, or advocate for, rather than one in which he can completely participate. The history of Rivera's political involvement with the Mexican immigrant community in Detroit would support such a reading. In *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* Zaragosa Vargas writes, "Rivera assisted Detroit Mexicans in establishing La Sociedad Cultural (The Cultural Society) and in reorganizing the community newspaper *La Prensa Libre*. The editorials in *La Prensa Libre* became more politically

strident than they had been and served as a vehicle for the progressive ideas of Ford auto-worker Luis Gasca and other writers tutored by Rivera. Despite its mission of political indoctrination through culture, during the early depression years La Sociedad Cultural provided a social outlet for Detroit's colony" (179). On the one hand, Rivera worked to organize and establish a foothold for the voice of Mexican autoworkers. On the other, it was obvious to the people of Detroit that he wasn't exactly like them either: "Two former autoworkers recalled the cool reception to Rivera's leftist ideas; the audience remained silent as he lectured, awed by the tall, heavy-set artist with the frog-like eyes. None of the factory workers openly expressed their thoughts about what Rivera said but clearly understood his message" (179). Rivera's idealist hopes for the community eventually did fall short with a repatriation effort that failed miserably for Detroit agricultural workers sent back to Mexico (Vargas 185). Thus, while Rivera can be an organizer and a communicator, he is not himself repatriated in a dark train without adequate heat or food into a situation vastly different from the one the Mexican government assured was waiting.

Yet there is at least one other possible interpretation of the artist painting himself into *Detroit Industry*. It illustrates the complicated nature of the *factory/spectator* relationship, too. The Ford Rouge Factory plant, the primary model for Rivera's auto scenes, was considered not just an industrial achievement but an architectural innovation. The clean lines of its smokestacks were captured by modern photographer Charles Scheeler. Tours of the Rouge began in 1924 and are still regularly conducted today, where the factory stands as part museum, part advertising propaganda for Ford, and part, well, factory. The concept of spectators watching workers work as a tourist attraction is something like Detroit's very

location-specific take on Disney's Epcot Center. The irony of this kind of spectatorship, the leisure of watching work for entertainment, would not likely have escaped Rivera in the early 1930s.¹³

What is Left?: Birth and Survival Through Image and Word

Max Kozloff suggests that Rivera's mural was a "tissue of compromise" (Smith 205). Terry Smith suggests that the mural is a negotiation, but that we are "obliged, in this case, to surrender the simple concept of the individual creator seeking to realize in an unmediated way his unitary intention" (205). But neither of these positions attributes to Rivera the proper agency. Rather, *Detroit Industry* is instead a story of birth and survival. Unlike Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural, sometimes hailed as the more mature work, *Detroit Industry* was not eventually whitewashed due to overt controversy. Therefore, it remains to be interpreted and re-interpreted today, in a city that still very much needs the possibilities of reinterpretation. The difference in Rivera's approach to these two murals lies somewhere in their locations: Detroit as a primary site of manufacture and New York—*Rockefeller Center* no less—as one of capital. Research indicates, also, that the Ford publicity machine may have had a hand in averting controversy away from the outrage about Rivera's ties to Communism and towards something easier to swallow in Detroit—Rivera, the heretic—by directing attention toward religious themes in the mural, and thus, perhaps preserving it intact. Smith writes, "There is no doubt that Rivera's time in Detroit, April

¹³ In a final layer of complexity, it may be worthwhile to note that Vargas indicates that Frida's father, "the photographer Guillermo Kahlo, helped design the Ford branch plant in Mexico City" (Vargas 178).

1932 to March 1933, coincided with the greatest impact of the Depression: massive unemployment, financial chaos, political struggle, violent class warfare in the streets and factories” (208). It would have been impossible for a Detroiter to walk into the space of the mural and remain disconnected with these facts of reality, just as, I would think, it is impossible not to be reminded today of the crises that the auto industry—and the entire city by way of its industry—is currently in. Looking back from the current Detroit perspective, the hope and promise of modernity has seemingly failed the city in a drastic and visible way. However, as evidenced in both Dos Passos and Rivera, it is not the assembling, but the dismantling and reassembling, that create new meaning and fresh possibility. Modernism is so often characterized by loss, but it seems forgotten that anxieties about modernity were not the only emotions prevalent at the time. Most artists and authors must have, at one point, also recognized the potential for positive change brought about by impending modernity, and even hoped and longed for it. Even the members of the Lost Generation who critiqued parenthood had children: “Despite the sexual freedom and intrigue that characterized the jazz age, the fêted ‘lost generation’ was also a generation of young parents. Hemingway wasn't called ‘Papa’ for nothing, and icons of the jazz age like the Fitzgeralds and the Murphys all had young children in tow” (Gillette 64–65).

Rather than end my examination in this chapter with “Vag,” the final chapter of *U.S.A.* that depicts the “starving and homeless boy walking alone up the American highway” (Kazin 143), I’d like to return to the beginning, Dos Passos’s 1938 introductory chapter “U.S.A.” He writes,

The young man walks by himself, fast but not fast enough, far but not far enough (faces slide out of sight, talk trails into tattered scraps, footsteps tap fainter in alleys); he must catch the last subway, the streetcar, the bus, run up the gangplanks of all the steamboats, register at all the hotels, work in the cities, answer the wintads, learn the trades, take up the jobs, live in all the boardinghouses, sleep in all the beds. One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough. At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone.
No job, no woman, no house, no city. (v-vi)

What a complicated thing. One man becomes a whole city of men, then back to one desolate, singular man. This passage underscores the framework of “bookending” the novel with this nameless man and the one in “Vag”: one to many to one, like a camera zooming in and then tracking back out. But then Dos Passos goes on to write,

Only the ears busy to catch the speech are not alone; the ears are caught tight, linked tight by the tendrils of phrased words, the turn of a joke, the sing-song fade of a story, the gruff fall of a sentence; linking tendrils of speech twine through the city blocks, spread over pavements, grow out along broad parked avenues, speed with the trucks leaving on their long night runs over roaring highways, whisper down sandy byroads past wornout farms, joining up cities and fillingstations, roundhouses, steamboats, planes groping along airways; words call out on mountain pastures, drift slow down rivers widening to the sea and the hushed beaches. (vi)

So the land becomes populated with sound and speech, the man becomes “only the ears” so he is no longer alone. But it is not in any of these particular *places* that he becomes less lonely. It is in “his mother’s words telling about longago, in his father’s telling about when I was a boy, in the kidding stories of uncles, in the lies the kids told at school, the hired man’s yarns, the tall tales the doughboys told after taps; it was the speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood; U.S.A.” (vi). Dos Passos gives rhetoric, narrative, experience and storytelling the power to unify and transform, which is the success, too, the legacy, that Rivera has in his unwhitewashed mural. Histories and pasts connect us to others, “But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people” (vii).

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK AND WHITE: DISPLACEMENT AND RACE IN THE RURAL SOUTH AND URBAN NORTH THROUGH PRINT AND PHOTOGRAPHY

“‘Country’ and ‘city’ are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities” (Williams 1). Raymond Williams opens his examination of our tendency to dichotomize the urban and the rural with this observation, and I have chosen it to begin this chapter, which represents a thematic departure of focus from the more easily observable mechanization and commodification present in the bustling life lived in the city to the organization of work in the rural South. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also breaks with the previous texts examined in the first two chapters in that James Agee’s prose and Walker Evans’s black and white photographs are works of nonfiction, portraying the lives of three tenant farmers and their families in the rural South in the late 1930s. Yet this chapter continues to bring into focus the themes that underpin my previous analyses through a comparison of the rural, white Southerners with the African-American inhabitants of the Sojourner Truth housing project in Detroit as depicted in Arthur Siegel’s photographs for *LIFE* magazine and the Office of War Information. Patterns of work align domestic organization and family structure in the agricultural South in ways that are similar to the industrial North. On the other hand, the white farmers have a different relationship to migration than the African-American Northerners in that the tenant farmers are anchored to the land that simultaneously generates their income and keeps them locked in a cycle of poverty. African-Americans migrated to Detroit in waves, however, due to the economic opportunities afforded

by factory jobs with companies like Ford Motor Company. And yet when these new Detroit residents faced protests against the government housing development intended to home them, it becomes clear that whether forced to relocate or unable to stay, mobility is a privilege of class. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, intended for publication in *Fortune* magazine, and Siegel's photographs, published in *LIFE*, illustrate opposite publication goals in terms of narrative construction. *LIFE* created a simplified narrative by minimizing relevant information in order to target the passive readership of a popular magazine. Agee, however, openly frustrates a passive audience through his dense prose and lengthy lists of farmers' items, a writing style he often alternates with philosophical narrative lapses. A comparison of the stories told about rural white farmers and African-American factory workers suggests that when the narrative is constructed by the upper class and conflicts between African Americans and white Americans are pared down to illustrate racial tensions for the sake of narrative impact, the important role that class difference plays in such conflicts can be elided.

My analysis of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also suggests that Agee's prose frustrates a dichotomized and chronological reading of traditional culture—which comes first, and then gives way to modernity—by illustrating the similarities between agricultural work and factory labor. Here, representations of reproduction as production reveal similarities in the ways that Dos Passos and Agee depict gender, despite the otherwise obvious differences between Margo Dowling and the Gudger women. Fiction and documentary become increasingly indistinguishable in these works; Agee uses experimental prose, trying to reach an ever-elusive, subjective truth, while both Evans and Arthur Siegel submit

pictures from the same series of photographs to a work of high modernism, glossy magazines, and government archives. I hope to show that Evans and Agee, like Rivera—as shown in the previous chapter—combine modes of representation, rather than strive towards a singular, purist technique in order to arrive at a historic, although inherently subjective, truth. Ultimately the battle over housing caused by the migration of African Americans to Detroit for employment opportunities in factories, and the stationary status of the tenant farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* illustrates that the binary of North and South breaks down upon examination, at least in terms of social and economic mobility. The two groups of people featured in the comparison between these texts—one Southern and white, the other Northern and black—had many differences between them and yet neither were able to attain the means by which they could choose their own living situations or make choices that would allow them to escape limitations dictated by their class. These works all share commonalities of form and aesthetic as they obfuscate the distinctions between author, subject, and audience. Moreover, they all frustrate the divide between high and mass culture and the distinction between fiction and documentary becomes difficult to discern.

Competing Interests

The prose and photographs collected in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were originally intended to be published as an essay in *Fortune* magazine in 1936 as a documentation of cotton sharecroppers' lives, part of a series called "Life and Circumstance." However, it is difficult to imagine any revision of the resulting dense and complex work of photography, nonfiction, and poetic prose appearing in the mainstream press. James Agee's ideal

version of the book would make it particularly unpublishable. He writes, "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, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game" (10). This section of text introduces two of the primary concerns that Agee takes on in his study of the Gugder, Ricketts, and Woods families: how he can best convey the facts surrounding the lives of those struggling to survive in the South and how those lives, through his work, will be interpreted by others.¹⁴

Agee's densely written, philosophical prose requires the audience to labor to read the work, which is antagonistic to mass media's need to accrue and sustain a large and arguably passive readership. Evans has suggested that Agee never really wanted their work to appear in a popular magazine in the first place. "Half unconsciously, and half consciously, Agee saw to it that it would not get into *Fortune*," Evans said (Rathbone, Whitford). Walker Evans photographs the faces that belong to the names in the text, as well as the buildings they inhabit and frequent, but the images work as a separate text, not as an illustrative example of Agee's words. His composition creates a distance between the lens and the subject, capturing just the stares of people who contain unknown desires beneath the depths of their gazes. By photographing buildings and signs devoid of human subjects,

¹⁴ The names used in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are pseudonyms. Because the text is the primary source of my analysis and to avoid confusion, I'll use the pseudonyms rather than the actual names throughout my interpretation.

“Evans affirmed his attraction to anonymous art and laid the foundations for a consideration of the symbols of mass marketing” (Mora and Brannan 69). But at other times, an intimacy with his subjects is achieved through symbols of mass marketing, as in a photo of a montage of magazine clippings, advertisements, and graphic calendar covers that grace the walls of a home as art, the uniquely and personally arranged desires of the subject.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men represents a collision of the aesthetics typical of what we might call realism and modernism. On the one hand, Agee and Evans were supposed to document. Agee writes, “It was our business to prepare, for a New York magazine,* an article on cotton tenantry in the United States, in the form of a photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers” (ivx, Agee’s asterisk). The footnote to this sentence reads, “Evans was on loan from the Federal Government,” where he was taking photographs for the Farm Security Administration. Yet, despite both *Fortune*’s and the government’s assignments to observe and report, throughout the work Agee consistently acknowledges a biting skepticism about the possibilities of crafting a straightforward representation of the people he was reporting on and the conditions of their lives so that they could be understood, felt, known by his reader. Agee expresses these doubts often and at length, particularly in the first few sections of the work. He writes,

In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact. As for me, I can tell you of him only what I saw, only so accurately as in my terms I know how: and this in turn has its chief stature not in any ability of mine but in the fact that I too exist, not as a work of fiction, but as a human being. (9)

Agee compels the reader to accept his position that the people he meets and lives with are not the subjects of a sociological experiment, poked and prodded as spectacles or characters of a novel; therefore, as Agee writes, “If complications arise, that is because they [the authors] are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously” (xi). Discarding these lenses of observation, Agee rejects a predictable “angle” to his “story,” even though setting aside all preconceived notions is impossible. Because pure documentation is impossible, realism is likewise sometimes set aside for abstraction.

Agee navigates this gap between attempting to represent the real and never being able to fully reach the truth, in part, by altering the modes used to convey meaning. By picking up one mode, method, or style and then setting it down in favor of another, Agee forces the reader to constantly shift perspective, rendering him or her unable to settle into a comfortable conception of the subject and historical condition implicated in his description. Much in the way Dos Passos assembles his chapters of nonfiction, experiment, and narrative, but with less distinct separation, Agee alters his approach at will, though the core of his prose is founded upon historically situated subjects rather than invented fictional characters.

The majority of the passages are candid and poetic; both he and Evans appear in the narrative alongside the people he meets. At other times, however, Agee records every minute detail of houses, furniture, and objects in blunt, objective, list-like terms.¹⁵ Then

¹⁵ T.V. Reed, on this level of descriptive detail: “This is empiricism with a vengeance, and it reveals how selective and laden with preconceived meanings most documentary description is. As detail is heaped

without a break, he slips into experimental writing, creating a pastiche of poems, songs, and literary allusions. Intermingled with these are abstract passages that theorize the relationships between humankind and nature. His descriptions can be both theoretical and purely aesthetic; one section spans several pages and describes the way that day breaks across the continent, bringing to life a network of roosters which are juxtaposed with the tenant farmers beginning their morning. Another is the depiction of the self as a bubble carried along a stream full of other bubbles, whose protective encasing must eventually be pierced by the conditions of life, depending in some part on the strength of each individual sphere. In this selection, Agee weaves into the text an important literary allusion: “Now everyone needs food, clothing, and shelter. The lives of most men on the earth are spent in getting these things. In our travels we shall wish to learn what our world brothers and sisters eat, and where their food comes from. We shall wish to see the houses they dwell in and how they are built. We shall wish also to know what clothing they use to protect themselves from the heat and the cold.*” The footnote indicated by the asterisk remands to the following: “*These are the opening sentences of *Around the World With the Children*, by F.B. Carpenter (published by The American Book Company), a third-grade geography textbook belonging to Louise Gudger, aged ten, daughter of a cotton tenant” (XIV). This passage at once highlights the nature of Evans’s and Agee’s exploration into the lives of the subjects of their own book and underscores the irony of Louise’s education about the exotic global

upon detail the effect is to move past the ‘you are there’ realism of most documentary to a point of subtle disorientation. The reluctance of minutely described objects to offer up unambiguous signification infuses them with a sense of untranslatable symbolism” (162-163).

Other when knowledge about her own existence in these terms is so desperately inaccessible.

Geography. Class.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is, among many other things, a study in class and work. The types of labor that people perform are determined by and then reinforce their class position. Agee and Evans were commissioned by “such a bastion of high capitalism as *Fortune*” (Agnew and Smith 199), but the published version of the text includes a page entirely blank except for the passage, “Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win*” (xii). And yet, despite these words from the *Communist Manifesto*, or, rather, because of them, the text is very self-conscious about the class difference between the author and photographer and their subjects. In much the same way that class created a noticeable dissonance between the erudite and well-traveled Diego Rivera and the Mexican agricultural workers in Detroit (Vargas 179), Agee and Evans also had a class background that presents an unbridgeable distance between themselves and their subjects. Agee, whose childhood was spent in Tennessee, went to Philip Exeter secondary school in New Hampshire, later graduating from Harvard. Evans was born in St. Louis but moved across the country before going to boarding school and college for a year in Massachusetts. Both men had a comparatively privileged upbringing, spent much of their lives in the northern United States, traveled to Europe and had access to excellent education. Yet both men had Southern ancestry—Agee’s family was from Tennessee and Evans’s from Kentucky and Virginia (Rathbone 93, 95).

Their initial encounters with the white farmers of the rural Deep South, however, are depicted as full of confusion and misunderstanding. Upon their arrival, Agee stops to ask directions, and writes of the encounter thusly, “There were three on the porch, watching me, and they must not have spoken twice in an hour while they watched beyond the rarely traveled road the changes of daylight along the recessions of the woods, and while, in the short field that sank behind their house, their two crops died silently in the sun” (30). As the awkward encounter continues, Agee writes, “There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimately a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves, and toward the damages they sustained, as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude; nor did this at any time modify itself” (30). The author’s difference from the farmers is immediately understood and despised as a recognition of something symbolic of the system that inflicts damage upon them. In her analysis of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Paula Rabinowitz notes that the work does objectify its subjects in a way that Agee acknowledges is impossible to escape. And yet, “it also indicates the moments of resistance when their objects defy them, challenge them and reverse the gaze to produce another form of consciousness” (Rabinowitz 145). Evans’s photographs reinforce Rabinowitz’s interpretation of Agee’s text here. Many of his subjects face forward, aware they are being photographed. Unlike the troubled, sideways glance of Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” Louise Gudger’s searing eyes confront the lens, challenging the viewer.

Agee continues to narrate this mistrustful interaction, writing, “None of them relieved me for an instant of their eyes; at the intersection of those three tons of force I was transfixed as between spearheads as I talked” (31). He explains that the people on the porch

were “clients of Rehabilitation” and had been given a sick steer, seed, and fertilizer too late in the season and now were in debt to the government for this “favor.” In portraying himself as “transfixed between spearheads,” Agee exoticizes them, members of his own race, and highlights his own intrusion into a culture to which he doesn’t belong. In doing so he self-consciously adheres to the model presented by Louise Gudger’s geography textbook, highlighting the class differences between subject and author: born into two very different worlds, one group given many opportunities and the other given so few. Agee is never relieved of their gaze as the spectator becomes spectacle, but he also describes their eyes as spearheads, creating dangerous objects out of the farmers and depicting them as natives defending their territory from an intruder. Later, Agee understands that Emma, in particular, sees him and Evans as exotic outsiders (54), demonstrating—despite and because of this class difference—that the power to romanticize outsider status is not a unilateral privilege.

“Negro and of No Use”

Although class difference becomes a central way to see the conflicts between documenter and subject throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, racial difference in the American South in the 1930s also frustrates what would otherwise be basic, brief human interactions. As Agee and Evans make their way to the tenants’ homes, Agee writes, “The man I drove with made steady conversation...I was glad enough of it; nearly all his tenants were negroes and no use to me, and I needed a rest from asking questions” (23–24). The assignment is to capture the plight of white farmers who, despite their hardships, possess at least the privilege of skin color. In this passage, it becomes clear that Agee’s subjects

are part of his work. Thus, African-American farmers do not interest him because they cannot help Agee to complete the task of documentation.

Despite the “uselessness” of their encounters, the author and photographer do have a few interactions with a number of African Americans while in Alabama. Agee’s narrative of the pair’s first encounters with African Americans goes beyond the awkwardness of those with other white people, and the danger to Agee implied by the spearheads is reversed onto the African Americans. In one such instance, Evans seeks access to a small country church so that he may photograph it. Agee sees an African-American couple walking past him and chases them down the road to ask if they might know how the pair can get into the church. But “before I had gone ten steps they turned their heads (toward each other) and looked at me briefly and impersonally, like horses in a field, and faced front again; and this, I am almost certain, not through having heard sound of me, but through a subtler sense” (37, his parentheses). Agee “breaks into a trot” and “at the sound of the twist of my shoe in the gravel, the young woman’s whole body was jerked down tight as a fist into a crouch from which immediately, the rear foot skidding in the loose stone so that she nearly fell, like a kicked cow scrambling out of a creek, eyes crazy, chin stretched tight, she sprang forward into the first motions of a running not human but that of a suddenly terrified wild animal” (37–38). The husband and wife have no frame of reference for a white man chasing them down that would result in a positive resolution. The fistlike position the woman instinctively takes—was “jerked down into” as if by external force—is one that anticipates and braces against violence. Agee’s prose naturalizes the couple, compares them to animals startled by encroaching danger. But he also “trots,” like the horses he compares the couple

to and later on in the narrative refers to both himself and Evans in animalistic terms. The temptation Agee entertains is to relate the plight of the couple to one experienced by all humanity, a common theme throughout the text. This is the same temptation faced when realizing that, just as he exoticized the people on the porch, Emma positions him as Other. Through the descriptions in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, however, privilege exists in the author's favor in both, indeed in almost all, of these scenarios.

After the woman folds into a position of defense, the author catches up to the couple and Agee recounts:

I could not bear that they should receive from me any added reflection of the shattering of their grace and dignity, and of the nakedness and depth and meaning of their fear, and of my horror and pity and self-hatred; and so, smiling and so distressed that I wanted only that they should be restored, and should know I was their friend, and that I might melt from existence: I'm *very sorry!* I'm *very sorry* if I scared you! I didn't mean to scare you at all. I wouldn't have done any such thing for anything..." The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace and kiss their feet... Their faces were secret, soft, utterly without trust of me, and utterly without understanding... they said the thing it is usually safest for negroes to say, that they did not know. (38–39)

They must say they don't know. James Agee and the unnamed couple cannot communicate, cannot meet in the middle because of the culture of the American South—the experience is endlessly, eternally painful, awkward, self-conscious, and traumatic—which is simultaneously the culture and history of the United States. It also presents the clash of modernity and a culture still very much rooted in pre-twentieth century tradition: blacks working at the same occupation as whites are still treated as drastically lower in class than their white counterparts and remnants of the traditions of slavery are often tangible. Most people throughout this text live an agrarian way of life, a struggling and hardscrabble one, despite the technological advancement accessible in more prosperous and industrialized areas of

the country. In the chapter two, I've analyzed a similar inability to communicate due to cultural conflict and misunderstanding when Tony introduces Margo to his Cuban family in *The Big Money*. The difference here is that Agee and the couple share the English language, yet the gap in communication seems even wider. Tony translated poorly for Margo, but Agee has no one at all to intercede on his behalf to the young black couple. Violence is the only expected result of contact between black and white in Hale County.

Reversal of Fortune: From Depression to War and South to North

By the time *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published in 1941, the nation's attention had turned from the plight of the poor to the United States' involvement in World War II. I'd like to turn to another set of racialized subjects and intruding documenters who enter into history because of the same wartime priorities that formed the background of Agee and Evans's text. In order to escape conditions like the ones depicted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the rural South, many African Americans left and traveled to the industrial north with expectations of economic opportunity and greater racial equality. The onset of World War II and the conversion of auto factories into plants for wartime production led to a job boom in Detroit, Michigan, and many African Americans traveled to America's "Arsenal of Democracy" in a second Great Migration. In *Michigan Remembered: Photographs from the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information, 1936-1943*, Constance Schulz argues that "The auto companies played a central and highly visible role in Michigan's transformation into an arsenal, not only because of their size but also because of the flexibility their strong machine tool base gave them" (31). The interpretation Schulz then follows this observation with suggests the wartime prosperity that

brought the nation out of the Depression and was facilitated by Detroit's ability to make the commodities needed to fight the war had more to do with the skilled machine workers already trained and residing in Detroit and the elasticity of the auto companies rather than the anticipated Fordist rigidity and inability to adapt to the spontaneous. But somewhat more predictably, the large influx of newcomers taking these jobs clashed with the existing white population of Detroit, many of them barely a generation removed from the European ancestors who brought them to the city for the same reasons.

Under Roy Stryker's leadership, the Resettlement Act had morphed into the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which then became the Office of War Information (OWI). At the FSA, Stryker's Historical Division collected photographs that were meant to document the lives of Americans, providing support for many New Deal policies. The FSA's transformation into the OWI was due in some part to Stryker's realization of this turn in national attention to World War II (Schulz). The images captured by OWI photographers thus soon came to document the war effort, and the transition from the rural to the industrial brings my analysis to Detroit also. Instead of presenting photos of destitute farmers in order to persuade the public of the necessity of the New Deal, the OWI presented images of efficient abundance in order to bolster enthusiasm for the war. The composition of Detroit OWI photos from 1941 and 1942 frequently highlights its highly organized production and a seemingly infinite amount of wartime products. Symmetrical rows of Jeeps appear lined up like soldiers in a lot; the photo is cropped before the rows end, drawing out the clean, repetitive lines of the vehicles (fig. 1). Likewise, another photograph of an assembly-line conveyor belt features streamlined rails angled to an indiscernible vanishing point (fig. 2).

Photos of stack upon stack of sorted tires attended to by an alert worker (fig. 3) are much more common than the photograph of a man past the prime of youth framed within an almost hyperbolically huge gear of a press, a large chain slung across the bottom of frame and clasped to the press in the foreground, symbolically tying him to his station (fig. 4).¹⁶

The subjects of the Detroit OWI photograph collection are more racially diverse than those in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, even if the scenes portrayed in them are not. Southern blacks migrated northward alongside Southern whites, both looking for economic opportunity, and the vast collection is a little less fragmented in terms of race. But with this influx of workers, Detroit quickly faced a number of structural and social growing pains, including a housing shortage. In an attempt to relieve the pressure on housing and mediate racial tension at the same time, the federal government helped to establish the 200-unit Sojourner Truth housing project in 1941 in order to home some of the new African-American Detroiters. Government officials believed the project would pose less of a problem to current residents because it was slated to be built next to a black neighborhood instead of a white one. The assumption was that expanding an already black area would meet with less resistance from the surrounding neighbors and white city residents (Sugrue). That did not end up being the case, however, and a clash over property, race—and class—erupted. *LIFE* magazine covered the ensuing riots over the housing projects, which it called “an authentic race riot” in its March 16, 1942 issue. The compelling photographs portray white protestors and black supporters following the new black residents into Sojourner

¹⁶ Of the Detroit OWI photographs, the ones taken by Alfred T. Palmer arguably demonstrate the most cohesive and self-aware aesthetic for the reasons I list in this paragraph.

Truth and their subsequent collisions with police. These images were taken by photographer Arthur Siegel.

Like Walker Evans, Siegel took photographs for both a mainstream popular magazine and the United States government. A local Detroit photographer and teacher on assignment for *LIFE*, Siegel contributed a number of unpublished photographs from this assignment, along with many others, to the Office of War Information (Natanson 65). Siegel's subjects, however, are not the white farmers of the South, but African Americans who migrated to the industrial North with hopes of escaping institutionalized racism. Headed to Detroit for the promise of greater freedom and economic opportunity, these migrants were soon faced with many of the same struggles they thought they had left behind. What I hope to illustrate about this culture collision, however, is that while the tension between black and white is the most obvious and frequently reiterated, it is the tension between classes that burns beneath this conflict. Class difference becomes almost as much of a barrier to communication, even, and perhaps especially, within groups of the same race. The oversimplification of the black versus white dichotomy, one duplicated in the mainstream press, helped to establish a narrative pattern that would be followed in the future, repeating and reinforcing this perception of a stark binary.

Siegel's photographs of the Sojourner Truth housing project and the protests surrounding it comprise a partial, though compelling, record of an important incident in the development of race relations and policies, both in Detroit and the U.S. at large. There are two collections of photographs I will discuss here: the photos Siegel took for *LIFE* under assignment and included in the article "Detroit Has a Race Riot as Whites Bar Negroes

from New Homes in U.S. Housing Unit,” and the ones Siegel contributed to the Office of War Information, which are now found in the Library of Congress archive.

The article in *LIFE* spans two pages and photos dominate the comparatively small block of text. The first photo shows a police officer on horseback bearing down on the crowd of African Americans (fig. 5). The officer faces the camera as at least four other officers charge from the opposite side, backs to the lens. One black man is off-balance in the scuffle and looks like he is about to fall down in front of the horse as a baton swings his way. Behind the crowd, a black man climbs a telephone pole—for escape or a better view. The caption reads, “Cops charge down on Negro sympathizers of excluded tenants. Police devoted most attention to Negroes, made no effort to open picket line for vans. Said one inspector: ‘It would be suicide if we used our sticks on any of them [the whites].’” While it isn’t possible to discern the race of every participant of the riot in the photos, the clear depiction is of a dominantly white police force battling a clear majority of African Americans, as the caption indicates. The caption’s implication, however, is that attempting to corral whites while blacks were present would have caused the white crowd to erupt further and beyond control. Indeed, the vast majority of those both injured and arrested would be black. Below this first photograph is one in which a black man stands in the middle of a cloud of smoke, hands in pockets, as others stand on porches in the background (fig. 6). The caption reads, “Tear-gas bombs hurled by police explode on rioters. Said one young Negro bitterly: ‘The Army is about to take me to fight for democracy, but I would as leave fight for democracy right here. Here we are fighting for our own selves.’” History would repeat itself a generation later on a greater scale: these would be the same sentiments

echoed by many during the catastrophic and widespread 1967 Detroit riot between white police officers and a black populace, a riot that blazed until it was settled by the National Guard, called to Detroit in the midst of the Vietnam War.¹⁷ The most blatant photograph is of a stark white sign against a dark nighttime background, two American flags protruding from the top (fig. 7). It reads simply: “WE WANT WHITE TENANTS IN OUR WHITE COMMUNITY.” The caption to this photo states, “Ill will, engendered by signs like this, smoldered for weeks before opening of 200 Government-built brick-and-clapboard homes.”¹⁸

The largest and last photograph in the collection is perhaps the most compelling (fig. 8). Below it a caption reads, “Three Detroit cops subdue negro rioter” and the image is of police officers descended from horseback, one holding the arms of an African-American man whose brow is furrowed and whose mouth is open in a yell, while another police officer punches him in the stomach. These two officers have light-colored gloves on but the officer engaged in the punch has a padded, leather mitten on his striking hand. Two of the officers have batons. The back leg of the black man is in between those of the officer holding him and he is off-balance and at a disadvantage. The spur of the punching man’s boot is in the foreground. In the background is a line of African-American women and men

¹⁷ John Hersey pieces together one particular sequence of events that occurred during the Detroit riot in *The Algiers Motel Incident*. Four young men were killed as police and state troopers stormed the motel to investigate reports of a sniper’s gun being fired. The gun was likely only a starter pistol. The book is rife with comparisons between Vietnam and the battle raging in the streets of the city, and Cheney Pollard, the brother of the slain Aubrey Pollard, suggests that Aubrey’s treatment here is much worse.

¹⁸ Beneath this photo are two others on the page, comprising an only partially fragmented “chase scene”: two police officers with a baton chase a man with a bat in the first, and a man with a bat runs across the frame in the second, as one man runs directly toward the camera and another, with his back to the photographer, runs away.

with newsboy caps or wide-brimmed hats. The crowd wears blank faces, their mouths slightly open.

This photographic essay vividly depicts a traumatic and real racial clash, and the tension between black and white Detroiters would not be ameliorated in the coming decades. The line is clearly drawn and the sides are chosen in these images. And, in fact, Detroit continues to be a violent and segregated city. However the narrative visual record presented here precludes the recognition of some historical realities, ones that complicate the black-versus-white storyline but helped to create a narrative pattern for the future, one in which this binary would be repeated.

What neither the words of *LIFE* nor Siegel's photographs allude to is that, as Thomas Sugrue tells us, "between June 1941 and February 1942, white residents in the area formed the Seven Mile-Fenelon Improvement Association to coordinate opposition to the project; they were joined in a brief alliance by middle-class black residents in nearby Conant Gardens" (73). The adjacent neighborhood of African Americans had moved to this tree-lined suburban-esque community in order to escape city life; these residents were upset that the new project was built so close to their urban refuge. And both blacks and whites were aggravated because the federal government had wavered regarding its intentions. The government changed its conception of which race would occupy the housing project at least three times, depending on whether blacks or whites rallied the loudest in protest. Sugrue continues, "Even more galling to white area residents was the FHA's 'refusal to insure any more mortgage loans' in the Seven Mile-Fenelon area in the aftermath

of the decision to build public housing for them. Public housing for blacks, residents believed (with some justification) jeopardized their ability to improve their homes and finance new construction on the many vacant lots in the area” (73). The comparatively wealthy middle-class black citizens of Conant Gardens actually briefly joined with their white counterparts in objecting to the housing project, as blacks participated in the newly formed Seven Mile-Fenelon Improvement Association to coordinate opposition to Sojourner Truth plans (41). Furthermore, “civil rights groups, left-leaning unionists, and pro-public housing groups pressured the federal government to maintain its commitment to house blacks at Sojourner Truth. In 1941, only one other project in the city housed blacks, despite the growing inner-city housing shortage” (Sugrue 73). Thus, the distinction between black and white is not as clearly oppositional as it was, and often still is, depicted. Class, leisure, property, and wealth play integral roles in the opposition to the Sojourner Truth housing projects, as does a frustration with the government that all groups share. White agitation was fueled by the outside interests of the KKK, who are briefly mentioned in *LIFE*, and had their own obvious agenda. The photograph of the sign reading “WE WANT WHITE TENANTS IN OUR WHITE COMMUNITY” completely elides these complexities because “our white community” was in reality *their* already black-but-classed community.

Typical Photographers

The image of this sign is the only duplicate between Arthur Siegel’s *LIFE* photographs and the Office of War Information photographs. The OWI photos could be categorized as *before*, *during*, and *after* the protests over the new inhabitants. All of those in

LIFE were taken *during* the height of the scuffle, and the OWI collection seems comprised of the leftovers, photos edited out of the mainstream press's narrative because they've captured a significant amount of milling about and less action. It is the before and after that interest me here because of the complexities they present upon interpretation which, to a lesser extent, are akin to those in Agee and Evans's work. For example, Siegel's photo captioned "back view of a typical newspaper photographer," portrays a photographer, squatting inactively curbside, half-turned to the man next to him, perhaps in conversation, who is partially cropped out of the frame (fig. 9).¹⁹ This photo turns the gaze of the camera onto the photographer without his knowledge, revealing him to be sitting on the sidelines, safely out of the fray. Observing from the outside, rather than participating on the inside: this is the "typical" newspaper photographer. This photo shares an aesthetic self-awareness with one particular photograph in Evans's collection: a photograph of two photographs nailed to a board. One is of an old woman, standing on a sidewalk in front of a field, hands to her side, plainly facing the camera. The other shows a grouping of four children, posed sitting on the ground, also facing the camera. The inclusion of this frame causes the viewer to consider the difference, if any, between these photos and the others Evans has taken and, like Siegel's, to acknowledge the dual acts of documenting and looking, insisting on the photograph as construct rather than concealing its presence.

In addition to capturing the height of the clash over the Sojourner Truth housing project, Siegel also documents the neighborhoods that the future occupants lived in prior

¹⁹ However, it is important to note that, while still a "spy and a disembodied eye," Siegel is less of an outsider than Agee and Evans. Detroit is just as much his city as it is of any of the conflicting parties in this scenario.

to relocation. Like Evans, several of Siegel's OWI photos depict the façades of neglected buildings (fig. 10). But unlike the captions included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Siegel writes captions that are directive. They clearly create the anticipation of a "before and after" with the repetition of phrases like, "These were the conditions before the Sojourner Truth Housing Project." They lead the viewer to expect the portrayal of new and improved housing options for blacks in the photographs to come, photographs which are subsequently supplied. However, an equal number of the photographs are taken inside the homes of the African Americans whose existence these photos attempt to document. In contrast to the outside photos and despite some of the captions, these show black Detroiters in a way that I could also describe as...typical, a word frequently employed throughout the captions. The residents don't appear destitute or entrenched in poverty; the homes appear well-cared for and the American ideal of the nuclear family is intact. The photos feel posed and borrow from the family photo album genre of photography, an aesthetic I'll address through T.V. Reed's observation of Evans's photos momentarily. For example, one photograph is captioned, "Detroit, Michigan. A typical Negro worker's family. These are conditions under which families originally lived before moving to the Sojourner Truth housing project" (fig. 11). This photo positions the parents and small children on the family's couch with the older children standing behind it. Everyone faces the camera and smiles, except the matriarch, who wears a stern expression.

These interior photos suggest a level of intimacy with its inhabitants. This is particularly true in scenes set in the bathroom and bedroom, the most private sanctums of the home, areas that most white viewers would be especially unlikely to have accessed. One

photo is captioned, “Detroit, Michigan. Interior of a bathroom, with a Negro boy washing his hands. These are conditions under which families originally lived before moving to the Sojourner Truth housing project” (fig. 12). It shows the same unsmiling woman who was seated on the couch in the previous photo now standing at the door to the bathroom, watching the boy wash his hands. Of the several pictures taken in the more intimate rooms of the home, this one particularly illustrates the photographer’s, and therefore the viewers’, access. The image is taken from the inside of the bathroom, rather than from a position that indicates the photographer was standing in the doorway. Siegel is thus positioned deeper in the room than the boy and the woman, standing alongside the bathtub, the lens angled down the length of the room, revealing the extent of his embeddedness in this invasion, as Agee might view it.

Another similarity between Siegel’s and Evans’s composition is the depiction of subjects whose gaze confronts the lens (fig. 13), as in one image of the adult man in the family facing the camera with his back to the window, framed by an intricately patterned curtain. The man, wearing a three-piece suit, stares plainly into the camera and the viewer must acknowledge this confrontation. Yet this is another example of Siegel’s directive captioning: “Detroit, Michigan. This man worked at a Ford factory but was unable to live in a decent place until Sojourner Truth homes were open for occupancy.” There are several arguments implied in this caption. One is that, although this man makes a living wage working for Ford, he does not have access to housing options, given the crowded conditions and, perhaps, his skin color. The other is that the homes we are seeing are not “decent,”

despite their relatively well-maintained interiors. One reading of the inside/outside dichotomy for Siegel could be that the jarring effect of the decrepit appearance of the neighborhoods belies an as yet unknowable similarity on the inside. Another reading suggests that the false intimacy created by the photos on the inside lulls the reader into endowing the black family with a “sameness” to white culture, which the photos of the outside constantly resist in the dissonance created between the conditions of the homes and the awareness of the housing crisis and riot to follow, an awareness repeated by Siegel’s captioning.

The violent protests over the Sojourner Truth housing project shaped the future of housing legislation in Detroit, while the narrative simplification of black versus white, one that ignored class difference, initiated a pattern that was then historically reinforced. On February 28, 1942, the new tenants of the housing projects began to move into their new homes, despite the opposition. The growing crowd soon broke into fighting, and by the time police restored order at least 40 people were injured, 220 were arrested, and 109 were held for trial. Of these numbers, three were white (Sugrue 74). After this incident, it was decided that no new public housing in the city would disrupt the racial makeup of a pre-existing neighborhood, thus institutionalizing housing segregation policies that would affect the city for decades and seriously impede racial integration. “The result of wartime housing battles in Sojourner Truth, Dearborn, and Oakwood was that whites began to view public housing as ‘Negro housing,’ and grew increasingly skeptical of the federal agenda that called for the housing of America’s poor” (Sugrue 81). After this uprising and Detroit’s 1943 race riot, “white community groups learned to use the threat of imminent violence as a political tool to gain leverage in housing debates. City officials, desperately hoping to

avoid racial bloodshed, had no choice but to take seriously the specter of civil disorder” (Sugrue 75). Thus when the public and the government embraced the streamlined narrative of black versus white represented in the press, that binary became reinforced through housing policies that would systemically reenact that oversimplification, helping to create a more distinct and violent binary over the coming decades.

***LIFE's* Fordist Narrative**

LIFE and *Fortune* magazines would eventually be subsumed together into the media conglomerate formed under the Time-Warner umbrella, and Walker Evans would spend two decades working in various capacities for *Fortune*. The format of *LIFE* magazine, privileging glossy photographs over text, served to help elide the nuances of racial and class tension over housing. As I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, the format of *Fortune* was never conducive to addressing the complexities of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, particularly as Agee envisioned it. However, in a compelling analysis, Jeff Allred suggests *LIFE* is “a publication whose limited intellectual range makes *Fortune* look like *Partisan Review* by comparison” (48). Both of these publications were products of Time, Inc., and Allred analyzes the interplay between Agee and Evans and the Time corporation, arguing that “both saw Time Inc., at least potentially, as a ‘gadget’ that they might use to communicate with a mass audience in a fresh and experimental idiom” (43). Sifting through Agee and Evans’s letters and scrapbooks, according to Allred, reveals their desire to access the large audience these magazines were beginning to access. More importantly, the evidence indicates that they may have been hopeful about the possibility of pushing the aesthetics of Time, Inc. in a more avant-garde direction from the inside.

However, the success of any attempts to influence mass media was difficult to assess, in part due to Time cofounder Henry Luce's intent to have his publications provide the type of public narrative that would foster a passive audience by eliminating any incongruences, or even potential audience anxieties, from a story line. Allred asserts that from 1922 onward, Time, Inc.'s "relentless Fordization of the writing process" (45) was evidenced not only in the seamless finished product, but in its production. He describes *Fortune* as a massive machine where writers and researchers provide the raw data to be chewed and strained by the editors, who relieved it of political bias. There was also an inherent tension between predominantly liberal writers and largely conservative editors. According to Allred, "Luce argued that advertisers and journalists had to band together to channel the desires of an unruly public made up of 'not merely Hitler's crowds, or Mussolini's, or Stalin's...but the crowds on American beaches, the crowds in the movies.' Luce went on to claim that, unless they were domesticated by the 'purely informative function of journalism,' these crowds would 'destroy civilization'" (47). How, then, can depictions of strikes and crowds be used to "dissipate or contain any mass unrest" (46) when that is exactly what they depict? Allred leaves some of the interpretation of Luce's words up to his readers, but this stripped-down narrative seems due to the removal of potentially troubling context. The desires of the audience are also certainly redirected to the advertisements in *LIFE*, images that play alongside the photographs of the story so smoothly that the commodities and the "purely informative function of journalism" are nearly indistinguishable. For example, in the issue covering the Sojourner Truth riot, an article about how chimpan-

zees just love to get their photo taken runs alongside an advertisement for Cashmere Bouquet soap (fig. 13). The soap ad utilizes comic strip blocking style, contains more dialogue, more description, and occupies more space on the page than the photographs of the chimps juxtaposed alongside it. Given the subject matter of each, it is nearly impossible to discern which is “journalism” at a glance.

Allred provides Luce’s perspective on political and economic tensions. He writes, “Ruminating on the recent wave of ‘sit-down strikes’ that swept the United States in 1937, Luce is pleased to report that *LIFE*’s pages release the readers from any ‘burden of responsibility’ and suggest even the most tumultuous events with an air of relaxation: ‘To *LIFE*, the sit-down strike is not Labor Problems of Big Words between a dozen men you really don’t give a damn about. In *LIFE*, the hot news of the sit-down strike is that the people sit down! Or don’t. So simple. So unlike the *NEW YORK TIMES*. So relaxing. And yet so true” (47). Siegel’s photos are less composed, less reassuring than the ones that Allred selects to illustrate this relaxing editorial style, placid immigrants in handcuffs safely secured by officers, all parties motionlessly facing the camera. And yet, ultimately, Siegel’s images tell a story, one of an “authentic race riot” in which the people simply rioted. That is all. By leaving the story largely unhistoricized except for the oversimplified conflict of race, the publication format is consistent with a readership that is not compelled to act in the way that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* demands of its audience.

One observation in the *LIFE* article featuring Siegel’s photos does serve to highlight the relationship between the Detroit housing conflict and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. A caption reads: “Three Detroit cops successfully subdue Negro rioter. Disappointed

tenants of Sojourner Truth Homes, all of whom had paid rents in advance, gloomily returned to their squalid former dwellings. Seven families found them already occupied by new tenants, went home homeless while moving companies charged them \$5 an hour. Detroit Housing Commission finally found them lodging” (41). The would-be tenants of the housing project, many of whom have moved from the South to Detroit, are thus dislocated once more, searching for a permanent resting place and social acceptance. Similarly, Reed writes of the interaction between author and photographer on one side and the white tenant farmers on the other: “But the unavoidable, fundamental political fact that Agee and Evans confront in their attempt to establish a relationship with Gudger is their privilege, one conveyed by class and its accoutrements of education, leisure, mobility, and so on, and inscribed in the text as the further privilege of authorship” (171). Despite the illusion of sameness indicated by the interior of black homes prior to resettlement in the housing projects, the photographs and texts of Siegel, Agee, and Evans illustrate the disparity between both sets of tenants and those documenters and observers of privilege, class, education—and especially mobility. These works collapse some notions of race and representation, while upholding others, to illustrate that the white cotton farmers of the South and the black auto workers of the North who attempted to escape that Southern culture, each unable to move yet always moving on, have more in common than either could speak, know or represent.

Fathers and Mothers: The Production of Reproduction

Evans’s and Siegel’s juxtaposed bodies of photographs detailing fragmented narratives of historically situated and classed black and white strife for both the government and

mass media—each institution propagandists in their own right—are not the only element keeping *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in line with the rest of this collection of fiction, otherwise set in Northern offices, factories, and tenements. The connections are many, some of which have hopefully been extrapolated already in this chapter—those of form and aesthetic, the obscuring of boundaries between author, subject, and audience, the breakdown of a division between high and mass culture, fiction, and documentary. The repetitive and cyclical nature of work appears in rural agricultural labor, just as it does in urban white-collar office work and blue-collar factory work.

A theme shared by both Agee and Dos Passos is the depiction of sexual reproduction as tied too labor. For Agee, maternity and class are inextricably linked. Mothers cannot keep from having children and children suck the life out of their mothers—an act that is reciprocated by the taloned vampirism of mothers clinging to their children until, ultimately, the children are drawn away from the family in order to start a family of their own, perpetuating the cycle. For Agee, the act of reproduction further anchors tenants to a doomed and inescapable pattern: dependence on the unpredictable land and a circuit of working to pay off debt, which only incurs further debt. This bears a symbolic, thematic relationship with Palmer's OWI photo introduced earlier, in which the emphatically large machine press wheel and the attached chain and clasp evoke an interpretation that is one half Sisyphus and one half Chaplin's *Modern Times* (fig. 4). Agee writes, "These fields are workrooms, or fragrant but mainly sterile work-floors without walls and with a roof of uncontrollable chance, fear, rumination, and propitiative prayer, and are as the spread and

broken petals of a flower whose bisexual center is the house” (112). The labor of the Southern tenants is compared to that of Northern factory workers, the imperfect center of which includes the labor of both sexes. Thus, “women’s work,” bearing children, cooking and cleaning, is included in this cycle alongside men’s and the home is foregrounded as central, as opposed to the fields. Agee introduces a reading of reproduction as an assemblage through these agricultural workers: “A man and a woman are drawn together upon a bed and there is a child and there are children: / First they are mouths, then they become auxiliary instruments of labor: later they are drawn away, and become the fathers and mothers of children, who shall become the fathers and mothers of children” (49). The production involved in reproduction is highlighted first; men and women are “drawn together” as if by some unseen force beyond their control. The development and stages of humanity are then broken down into their discrete and most basic elements: mouths that need to be fed, then tools—the ultimate “purpose” of having children, then these are drawn away by the unseeable hand themselves to become producers. And again, Palmer’s other photographs—of an assembly line with an indiscernible vanishing point, of row upon row of wartime goods—help to illustrate the comparison of seemingly infinite production in both North and South. Raymond Williams writes, “The division and opposition of city and country, industry and agriculture, in their modern forms, are the critical culmination of the division and specialization of labour which, although it did not begin with capitalism, was developed under it to an extraordinary and transforming degree” (304). Thus, for Williams the binary opposition between city and country comes to a crescendo under capitalism due to the heightened

use of these discrete components. Agee, however, depicts a collapse of the urban/rural binary through, not just agriculture, but sexual reproduction and the nuclear family as assembled and compartmentalized. Furthermore, Agee suggests that the families' ties to a traditional, agrarian way of life are responsible for this process, and for its replication, just as Williams holds a modernizing and industrializing capitalism accountable for the culmination of the dichotomy between country and city.

Although Agee often diminishes the agency and capabilities of the tenants, pitying them, calling them simple or helpless, he is quick to amend his judgment on most accounts by reminding the reader that we are all helpless. We always have been, and likely always will be to a greater or lesser extent. Of the pairing off and reproduction he writes,

Moreover, these flexions are taking place everywhere, like a simultaneous motion of all the waves of the water of the world: and these are the classic patterns, and this is the weaving, of human living: of whose fabric each individual is a part: and of all parts of this fabric let this be borne in mind: Each is intimately connected with the bottom and the extremest reach of time: / Each is composed of substances identical with the substance of all that surrounds him, both the common objects of his disregard, and the hot center of stars...identical [yet never] quite to be duplicated. (51)

There is a constant push and pull of the identical and the unique, the universal and the particular, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. We are all similar and yet none of us are alike. The horror of realizing that we are implicated in an unbreakable cycle of birthing gaping mouths that will turn into mechanized laborers is softened and aestheticized through its re-envisioning as waves, likened to some natural phenomenon—not fully conscious—akin to the migration of birds. Yet the inescapable pattern he presents continues to frighten nonetheless.

While this depiction of the family—an anchor to perpetual labor, echoing Huxley-esque detached descriptions of assembly-line reproduction—is clear, Agee simultaneously praises the handmade nature and simplicity of the tenants’ goods, items that are the antithesis of the mass produced and factory made. The structure of a house, for example: “Each texture in the wood, like those of bone, is distinct: each seam and split; and each slight warping; each random knot and knothole: and in each board, as lovely a music as contour map and unique as a thumbprint, its grain, which was its living strength” (125). Agee occasionally acknowledges the backbreaking labor that must have gone into creating each unique item. This utilitarian aesthetic beauty that he and Evans have the luxury of observing is “made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time, and is inextricable among these, and as impossible without them as a saint born in paradise” (117). Thus, perhaps like all art, even this functional beauty is born out of pain and necessity.

Agee’s observations reconfigure the relationship between the object and the subject in a complicated way. In a seemingly pre-modern world affected perhaps only peripherally by the culture industry analyzed by Adorno and Horkheimer, the individually produced commodities are valued for their unique beauty by this outsider but made and used out of necessity by the tenants.²⁰ Thus the distinction between function and art is still somewhat leveled, although the difference may depend on the interpreter (and his class position).

²⁰ Of course, this world is not totally unaffected by the culture industry. Evans photographs rampant Coca Cola signs in town, some items are described as store-bought, and the plate containing a collage of calendars, advertisements, and post cards above the mantle indicate an interest in and desire for commodities and what they symbolize, as well as access to mass communication.

What remains, however, is the observation that the *people* are caught in the cycle of sameness regardless of the commodities, as opposed to culture infecting the commodities and the classification of behaviors stemming from that standardization. The illusion of difference provided by weather patterns and seasons belies the reality that prior to the insertion of a standardized work environment, these laborers were at least as likely to be patterned and organized into a life they are unlikely to alter. When Horkheimer and Adorno write, “Even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production” (98) they assume that the mechanization of production has at least afforded the possibility of leisure time in the first place.

This depiction of people as reproducing machines echoes similar implications in Dos Passos, except—somewhat oddly—there are no literal machines or assembly lines in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee’s interpretation of human behavior is that it is robotic, independent of their interactions with machinery; people self-classified into groups or are drawn there by circumstances they do not understand. Agee’s portrayal of motherhood and childbirth correlate, inversely, to those in Dos Passos. In each, child bearing—or a lack of it—is intrinsic to the likelihood of success in capitalist terms. Thus, Annie Mae Gudger, her sister Emma, and daughter Louise cannot succeed because their conditions and their class dictate they will follow the pattern set out before them. The spark that both Agee and Evans observe emanating from Emma and Louise will likely be stamped out as they become more and more like Annie Mae through a course they are powerless to alter. Likewise, Ivy is considered by most to be a “whore” like her mother before her. The subjects’ fates are at least as predetermined in this documentary as they are in Dos Passos’s

work of fiction. As I've illustrated in chapter two, Margo is able to succeed in *The Big Money* because she does not have children, and maybe more advantageous still, does not have a mother.

In both Dos Passos and Agee, motherhood represents a connection to a collective experience. And for both authors, this connection is a disadvantage. Only the modern trope of the individual, paramount in American culture, has a chance in these narrative worlds, unweighted by the burden of who and what comes before or after them. Rabinowitz writes of maternity as history in her analysis of *The Girl* by Meridel LeSueur. For LeSueuer, she states a woman's "entry into history is achieved through maternity, the seemingly natural source of women's subjectivity and political strength" (Labor 119). Rabinowitz suggests that although LeSeuer romanticizes the role of motherhood, she "nevertheless reminds us that women's labor brings children into the world, producing value and history just like men's" (120). Maternity is a connection to a collective history in both Dos Passos and Agee, however this relationship to the historical is totally undesirable. Motherhood, instead, has the ability to erase individual subjectivity and the labor of producing children only serves to perpetuate further labor. For Dos Passos, Margo Dowling needs to be able to change her history and rewrite her own narrative in order to succeed, and a connection to a collective womanhood never serves her very well. The tenant women, on the other hand, can't escape their histories and likewise their conditions. Through Annie Mae, Emma and Louise, Agee writes about this collective history lived through the bodies of women:

The mother, whose body already at twenty-seven is so wrung and drained and old, a scrawny, infinitely tired, delicate animal, the poor emblems of delight no longer practicable to any but most weary and grunting use: her big young sister, childless

still, and dim, soft as a bloomed moon, and still in health, who emanates some disordering or witless violation: and the still inviolate, lyric body of a child, very much of the earth, yet drawn into that short and seraphic phase of what seems unearthliness which it will so soon lose: each aware of herself and of the others, and each hiding what shames or grieves her: and the two elder talking (and the child, the photographic plate, receiving: These are women, I am a woman, I am not a child any more, I am undressing with women, and this is how women are, and how they talk). (64)

The stages of the production of womanhood are laid out in these three phases of inevitable female development: Annie Mae as mother, already almost indistinguishable from grandmother, and like Lewis's office executive Mrs. Arroford, Annie Mae's work—in the form of bearing children—has rendered her sexless and exhausted; Emma as the young woman still with the blush of youth, about to be drawn away from her family, her own impending motherhood necessarily on the horizon; and Louise, about to become a woman and absorbing all the secret knowledge of every woman who has come before her. The metaphoric assembly line is replaced by the camera, each copy increasingly removed from the original work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, an age that has reached these women figuratively before it will be reached literally, and Louise copies what she sees and inevitably will pass down to her children.

In *The Big Money*, Mary French willfully abandons any connection she might have with a feminine collective. She shuns Ada and her own mother, and she declines maternity when she has two abortions. However, Mary trades this participation in communal womanhood for the role of mothering the men in her life. The men accept her in this role, which is counterproductive to her desires for heterosexual coupling, and, like the parent/child relationships in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Mary is drained dry by male demands upon her. Margo, on the other hand, selects her own family: Tony, her queer ex-husband

who is incapable of reproducing with her, and her “adoptive” mother Agnes, also unable to have children. Together, they help facilitate Margo’s navigation through the male-dominated Hollywood system.

In *Labor and Desire*, Rabinowitz applies Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s argument in *Writing Beyond the Ending* to suggest the obfuscation of a difference between dual narratives of gender and class in female-authored proletarian novels of the 1930s. As Rabinowitz interprets the premise, “Twentieth century women’s narratives often subvert the distinction between the two [gender and class] by joining these incompatible and gender-marked plots, resulting in novels that are misread because they break generic and (and gender) conventions” (11). Although *The Big Money* is neither authored by a woman nor a proletarian novel in the conventional sense, this argument nonetheless becomes practical when paired with the earlier criticism of Margo Dowling’s character, and may also be indicative of the *lack* of criticism about her in more recent scholarship. Critics cannot make sense of the inextricable narratives of her gender and class. To be successful and sexual is to be an opportunistic whore, according to earlier scholarship (De Voto 1936). Knowing this is not the best interpretation but unwilling or unable to separate the gendered narrative from a classed one, later critics have either minimized or ignored her role completely. The inability to extract race from class is also at work for *LIFE*’s presentation of Siegel’s photographs. While the racial tension clearly present at the time is literally captured in black and white, the complexities inherent in the gray area of class are obscured in favor of a linear narrative more easily encapsulated in two pages for a mainstream readership.

The irony that lies in the comparison of Agee's prose and Evans's photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Siegel's photos for *LIFE*, and his archived Office of War Information images is that the government's documentation narrative became increasingly linear, more storyboarded and less inclusive than Siegel's commercial work and less investigative than Agee and Evans's artistic exploration in human realities. Roy Stryker's "shooting scripts" to photographers "increasingly focused on celebration of 'the American habit' of hard work, cheerfulness, and dependability and on 'affirming photographs': rich rolling fields of ripening grain as opposed to the stark, raw soil of eroded cotton fields; hardworking, well-dressed war workers and their families as opposed to the destitute, sometimes pathetic, but of often plucky and proud 'poorest third of a nation'" (Schulz 46). Thus, the direction of the Office of War Information's aesthetic objective turned away from seeking out classed and racialized tensions and toward a glossier positivity that encouraged simplified narratives. The use of an overt aesthetic that prioritizes narrative over the inclusion of facts dispels theories of rigid categorization and encourages the "refusal of the fact/fiction dichotomy" (Reed 162), illustrating ways in which documentary and realist aesthetic in the form of the government-commissioned photos, pop culture as depicted in *LIFE* magazine and the modern, experimental prose and images of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* trade, share, and borrow objectives and narrative structures.

Walker Evans includes one photograph of black men sitting in front of a barber shop as a white man, starting at the right side of the frame, drives past in a car. The graceful, collared shirts, hats, and suits of the black men stand in contrast to the tattered storefront adjacent to the barbershop. Makeshift curtains made of torn fabric hang in the windows

and an advertisement for Camel cigarettes reads that the woman featured would walk a mile for a Camel. A second photograph depicts a group of men standing underneath a large Coca Cola sign posted on the front of the post office in Stott, Alabama. Some men in this photo are black and others are white; most wear overalls and tool belts but a few wear suit pants and white, buttoned shirts. Terry Smith writes that “what excites [Roy Stryker’s directive captions] as texts is precisely the double movement between the unquestioned imperialism of the totalizing external gaze and the absolute reverence for autonomous truth of the local, the particular” (312). Smith’s description of Stryker’s direction has a note of truth in these photos and recalls back to Agee’s initial account of meeting rural Southerners, transfixed between the spearheads of their eyes. Evans’s photograph in front of the post office evokes an image similar to the imposing gaze from the porch Agee describes; however, there are more complicated dynamics on this porch in underneath the expansive Coca-Cola ad. Black men intermingle with white men and signifiers of their class and occupation may be read in their dress and posture. Some are customers and some are likely gas station attendants. A few white men wear work clothes like the black men and are positioned deeper in the building, compositionally grouping them with those of their class. Other white men stand at the edge of the frame in clean shirts and wide-brimmed hats, positioned as outsiders and patrons. Almost all, however, face the camera, unified in their confrontation of the lens.

The Inappropriate Alarm Clock

Much like my analysis Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry*, my examination of Agee acknowledges a complication between the traditional boundaries of subject, author and

audience through his form. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* does not allow the readers to continue to assume they are the passive observers of an exotic, entertaining anthropological investigation. Agee writes, “This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell” (xi). He makes the reader complicit in the work and in the modes of capitalism that operate on the subjects of the book. Walker and Agee, the three tenant cotton farmer families—the Gudgers, Ricketts, and Woods—as well as the black sharecroppers on the periphery of the narrative, are all historically situated human subjects, as is the reader herself, who becomes involved in the story—a reality that is at times a privilege and at others a burden. The text itself addresses and confronts the reader: “the question, Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it” (7). The key to seeing the similarities between *Detroit Industry* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* lies in this observation from T.V. Reed:

Agee and Evans insist that to remain faithful to even the relative truth of the real one needs access to a whole range of styles and modes, including both a range of discourses that cross disciplinary boundaries—the text is at turns sociological, poetic, pedagogical, ethnographic, autobiographical, novelistic, even theological—and a range of aesthetic styles. They offer richly textured crazy quilts of and allusions to a vast array of aesthetic styles—impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, imagism, naturalism, and others—but these styles never become purely autonomous or self-referential; the claim is always that these representational styles are necessary to the empirical task to trying to disclose their subject matter. (161)

In the previous chapter, Dos Passos and Rivera alternate between what might be called modernist, realist, and sometimes naturalist aesthetics. Sections of their work are, in some

places, experimental and abstract, and in others more clear representations of lived experience. *U.S.A.*'s dominant mode is fictive, but historical events and figures are situated throughout the text. Agee's subject matter, on the other hand, is strictly nonfiction; he meets, interacts with, and writes about people and their real, lived conditions. And yet, he frequently uses a highly aesthetic, often lyric, prose in his descriptions, rather than maintain an adherence to a stripped-down, objectively factual journalistic style frequently used in documentary. For Agee, the reality of the human condition is rhythmic and poetic.

The tension between realist, nonfiction representation, and a more subjective, fictionalized, creative expression is foregrounded in the photos under discussion in this chapter. For example, images from the same collection taken by Siegel appear in both glossy magazines as examples of journalistic reportage and in government archives used to mold national public opinion; both Stryker and *LIFE* had a purpose, audience, and editorial aesthetic in mind that were sometimes at odds with the notion that objective fact-reporting was an easily achieved goal.

A somewhat recent attempt to grapple with the complexities of documentary in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is undertaken in a seven-part online series that appeared in the "Opinion Pages" of *The New York Times* online in 2009. Published by writer and filmmaker Errol Morris, the piece is entitled "The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock" and begins by discussing Arthur Rothstein's controversial Dust Bowl photos of a cow skull. Evidence suggesting the skull was moved to various locations had previously called into question the realist documentary record Rothstein was purported to be making. Morris

starts his dissection of Evans's photography in the third part of the series, "Gudger's Mantel," where the alarm clock of the title comes into play, and conducts much of his examination through an interview with James Curtis. Curtis, professor emeritus at the University of Delaware, reexamines F.S.A. photography in his 1991 work *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: F.S.A. Photography Reconsidered*. According to Morris, "Curtis's thesis was simple. 'The bitter reality' of the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.) photographs was not the result of clinical, photographic field work: 'The realism was deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized.' According to Curtis, many of the most famous of the F.S.A. photographs [Evans, Rothstein, Lange] were all arranged, staged and manipulated. The purity of the F.S.A. style had to be called into question and reexamined." I would argue, as have others, that Stryker's directive captioning also indicates the calculated, stylized intentions of the photography in the F.S.A. collection.

Morris continues in "Gudger's Mantel" to discuss how Curtis began to notice elements in Evans's photos that seemed out of place: a rocking chair may be positioned too close to the staircase to be practicably rocked in, a kitchen table that would have been moved in order to place the tripod, and the alarm clock on the mantel that seemed out of place. Curtis notes that the alarm clock is not mentioned in Agee's prose and this causes him to examine the "authenticity" of it—an action that one of the commenters on Morris's piece suggests indicates that Curtis privileges the record of the author over the photographer.²¹ Ultimately, Curtis believes Evans may have placed the clock on the mantel. Morris

²¹ According to a comment on the website, "It's interesting, isn't it, that we trust the written description more than the photograph. We would never imagine that Agee would just skip over a prominent object like the clock, or insert something that wasn't there, like the comb. Imagine that he just made up the

wonders why the Gudgers would need an alarm clock if they got up at sunrise and worked until sunset? Why would it be set at 8 a.m.? And why would it be worn around the edges? Morris provides some plausible reasons for these questions and misses others. Yet ultimately Morris writes,

Try as I might, I have been unable to answer the question of whether the Westclox Fortune No. 10 was owned by Walker Evans or by George Gudger. Our lives are partially defined by ephemera — address books, bus tickets, campaign buttons. A trail of detritus. But do we have the *right* bits and pieces of detritus — the *right* evidence — to answer the question: did Evans put it there? A sales receipt with the name of the buyer? A card accompanying a gift? (Perhaps a snapshot of Walker Evans opening a handsomely wrapped present on a snowy Christmas morning, 1934. Guess what it is?) Where does it end? Isn't there always the possibility that something unexpected and definitive could show up? Perhaps.

The inherent trap in this mode of analysis becomes clear: the process involves a continual line of questioning that becomes increasingly detail obsessive, all observation points toward an unending trail of clues, while the bigger “picture”—one that depicts a human reality beyond the hollow fact of an alarm clock—is overlooked. What happens if instead of what Morris suggests, the photograph that turns up is one of George Gudger holding his new alarm clock on Christmas morning? Then the argument made by the strand of evidential pearls is easily snapped. Like Kazin's interpretation of Dos Passos, most of the components in the narrative of the alarm clock line up, but some facts refuse to be assembled

comb, which doesn't appear in the photograph. He invented it, with its missing teeth, for poignancy. What a lie! But the addition of the clock to the photograph doesn't have the same force. The clock was really there; we can see it. It may have been added by the photographer, or by the owner of the cabin; we don't know. But it was really there. So it was a part of the room at the point in time when the photograph was taken. The photograph illustrates an objective reality which existed. The written account, maybe not. But when we compare the two accounts, we give the written version greater weight, because we can imagine reasons the photographer would have added an object, but not the writer. The photographer wanted to dress up the photograph, perhaps, and the only way to do that was to add objects. But the writer didn't have to do that, because he could dress up the writing by choosing the right words, as Agee obviously did” Signed Jon Webb, comment 38. 21 Oct. 2009, 10:06 a.m.

under a clean, organizational logic. As the series continues, Morris increasingly acknowledges some of the complexities in arguing that purist documentary ideals should override all other goals and presents a great number of unanswerable questions.

Morris's article is published online in *The New York Times*, and the transfer in medium from print publication to web changes the dynamic between the Morris's analysis and the audience of his article. The audience becomes actively engaged in Morris's argument—and invested in the evaluation of Evans's photography. The comment section is elaborate, and many astute and analytical readers are willing to participate in what then becomes an evolving dialogue regarding the interpretation of documentary photography and its purposes. A number of commenters follow each part in Morris's serial publication; they trail through the discussion, meticulously looking for clues in the images and engaging in the historical detective work presented by Curtis and Morris. There are also many readers who present insightful and critically evaluative counterarguments to the competing perspectives that Morris details. Reading Morris's article, they are actively thinking through the discourse of documentary, questioning what they believe about the nature of factual representation. One reader asks, "Does the fact that Matthew Brady moved bodies on Civil War battlefields to stage his photographs of death make the horror any less real?"²² Another writes,

What's the point of this?
 Making a kind of clever idea art out of long established works
 by deconstructing and thereby dismissing?
 But really it seems more like an act of appropriation,
 a far more pernicious crime than moving a rocking chair
 into the hallway to catch the light.

²² Signed by David Waddington, comment 14. 20 Oct. 2009m 8:33 a.m.

Is that the point?
 to understand that artists
 always fudge and borrow and shift perspective
 for desired effects?
 Isn't that a given?

This collaboration between an Am. writer and photographer stands as one of the great mysteries in American art. There are a hundred different ways to read/see it. Keep your grubby digital hands off!²³

It is interesting here that this commenter equates Curtis's revisionism with the digital because the format of the conversation is only possible due to the advent of the Internet. The suggestion seems to be that the detective work is tampering with the intent of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, rather than that Evans was tampering with the documentary record. A continuation of this line of thinking may claim that art is a reality, a truth, and the assumption that truth is anything other than subjective is false to begin with.

To arrive at an intermediary reading of documentary ideals, Morris positions William Stott, author of *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1986), against Curtis. Stott believes the problem with Curtis's argument is that he doesn't state how Evans's images would be any better aesthetically for having moved the objects and that he lacks a plausible reason for Evans's motivation to do so. Stott's issue with Curtis is not, however, that inconsistencies reveal the subjective nature of documentary to begin with. Stott believes that Rothstein made mistakes in his cow skull photographs, not that moving the skull was unimportant: "When the cow skull incident happened, Rothstein was 21 or 22. He was very young. And he was not trained as a photographer and wasn't trained as a journalist... He didn't know what the strictures were about documenting reality." Stott argues that if

²³ Signed by B. Forrester, comment 36. 21 Oct. 2009 9:58 a.m. "Am." is taken to mean American.

Rothstein had been more experienced, he would have burned the negatives of other photos that served as evidence proving he moved the cow skull from place to place. What this suggests is that Stott believes Rothstein's juvenile error was actually failing to deceive more cleverly, rather than suggesting there was no inherent deception at all, as I would argue. Morris brings up a number of points in Rothstein's favor, such as the chosen lens for the image would have a greater ability to manipulate than the movement of the skull, and the two fall into a debate about whether Rothstein or Evans intended to deceive the audience: the implication of the debate is that perhaps Rothstein did and perhaps Evans did not. Morris reintroduces the convincing counterargument that cropping or otherwise editing a photo selection is also manipulation. But Stott will not concede and insists on drawing a distinction between these techniques and moving an object. At the end of Stott's interview, Stott and Curtis are essentially arguing the same perspective with minor differences in nuance.

As his interviews progress, Morris increasingly acknowledges how blurry the dichotomy between fictive art and documentary as fact becomes, distancing his perspective from Stott's and Curtis's insistence on keeping the binaries separate. Where I disagree with Morris, however, is in his belief that an ultimate, singular "objective truth" can be uncovered by sleuthing through the inventory of the photographs. There are, instead, a number of subjective truths to be reached. Curtis states, "What is so clear and simple in Evans's photographs is his whole style. Some objects are removed and other objects are rearranged in order to make the scene appear more simple [sic]. And, therefore, in his view more *honest*." Evans's truth, then, differs from the one that Curtis seeks.

The question the article leads the reader to ask—successfully, if we read the readers’ comments—is whether eventual proof of the artificial inclusion of the alarm clock would have any bearing on either an understanding of the lives of the Gudgers or the aesthetic integrity of the photograph. Examining the ways in which aesthetic and lived experience merge in representation is, perhaps, one of the primary concerns of this dissertation. The last sentiment of Morris’s part one, “Skullduggery,” is this: “Claims of posing, false captioning, and faking regularly appear in much the same way as they appeared in the 1930s. Clearly, Photoshop is not the *cause* of these controversies. They predate Photoshop and other modern means of altering photographs by more than a half century. But they allow us to ask an important question. What can we of the Great Recession learn from the photographs of the Great Depression?” Just as the tenant farmers’ behavior and work form cyclical patterns reminiscent of mechanization in the absence of industrialization, debates over photographic authenticity precede the invention of the current technology that makes altered images so prevalent today. Human biology, behavior, and thought instigated these patterns; the systems and technology invented by humans insisted upon their large-scale distribution and reinforcement.

Thus, whether or not the alarm clock in a photograph was moved will not help to answer questions about lived experience in the way that an examination of race, poverty, and class will. Curtis believes that photographs are evidence. Morris states, “Everything in a photograph is possible evidence. It depends on the questions we are asking and trying to answer.” But evidence of what? Morris returns to question whether it is right to venerate Evans and discredit Rothstein, recalling a footnote in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

“The footnote announces: ‘invention here. I did not make inventory; there was more than I could remember. I remember for certain only the sorghum cans...’ Agee is constantly wrestling with memory and with a dark sense of intrusion. Why should we worry about a damn alarm clock when it is Agee and Evans who are the true interlopers?” My interpretation of Agee’s representation of subjective truth in this footnote is that while a traditional documentarian might make an effort toward the erasure of himself or herself from the work, Agee writes of his and Evans’s interruption in their subjects’ lives. In doing so, he actually creates a more complete historical record.

The arguments that Curtis and Stott bring to Morris’s article are likely important ones to make in a context that undertakes the definitions of practices and ethics in the field of documentary photography. However, to apply this debate to the rest of the works undertaken in my dissertation, it is critical to acknowledge the multiplicity of perspectives, intentions, and motivations that combine to create these works. The individual photographers, Stryker, *Fortune*, *LIFE*, the Roosevelt administration—they all brought their own goals, motives, methods of persuasion and aesthetic ideals to the table. Within one photographer, even, many competing desires are at work. Of course, scholars, too, have different objectives in analyzing these photos. Morris states in a parenthetical aside: “Had I forgotten that there was something more to these photographs than the endless and hopeless investigations into the intentions of the photographers, the issues of posing, and false captioning? That these were photographs of *people* caught in a moment of time?”

Bill Ganzel, author of *Dust Bowl Descent*, a photographic comparison of FSA photo scenes in the 1930s and their evolution to the 1970s, brings a third perspective to Morris’s

essay. For Ganzel, it does not matter if the dustiness of the Dust Bowl is enhanced in some way as long as it accurately “portrays a larger reality”; i.e., the actual Dust Bowl was at least as dusty as images show, regardless of any photographic manipulation. Or as one observer succinctly noted in the comments beneath part two of the seven: “I suppose what is most important in the Curtis interview is not whether the contents of a photograph had been staged or not; but rather, how human perception of reality—be it emotively, objectively or esthetically—largely determines how photographs are taken and interpreted. — *Kwame Okoampa-Ahoofe*. ”²⁴ Thus, the reiteration of the necessity for the rigidity of these boundaries can be productive in that it allows us to eventually affirm that they are not quite so rigid after all. Agee’s endless lists of objects in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* may be read to satirize the practice that Curtis engages in: the belief that the recording of objects, commodities, is somehow capable of providing insight into the weight of the life of a man. In fact, lives *are* defined by more than ephemera, a trail of detritus.

The ways in which Walker Evans composed the people and objects in his photographs in order to create a visual argument or achieve a greater aesthetic serve to underscore the ways in which history and fiction are not entirely separable. As Rita Felski suggests, the ways in which we understand the past are “inevitably shaped by the explanatory logic of narrative” (1). But the composition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also frustrates attempts to anticipate an expected conventional narrative. Evans’s photographs precede Agee’s texts; we begin by looking at faces we don’t know, and, according to Agee, can’t ever really know. Seeing the people and places within the text before we even know

²⁴ Comment 108. 24 Oct. 2009, 9:19 a.m.

their names frustrates the nature of the photographic medium facilitates a perceived intimacy with the subject. Rabinowitz writes, “Looking at photographs is both a transgressive and a comfortable act—difference is domesticated, brought home for inspection, open to critique, but the everyday is also glaringly made strange remarking on one’s own position even as another’s life is revealed” (144). T.V. Reed suggests that Evans appropriates the concept of a family photo album to these ends, drawing the viewer in as a member of the family, creating an intimacy that Agee constantly dashes, thus making the reader ashamed of assuming such intimacy with his prose to follow. Reed writes,

Like Agee, Evans maintains a scrupulous commitment to the lived context while subtly employing and weaving in allusions to a variety of artists and aesthetic styles. There is, for example, a clear allusion to van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes *Les Souliers*. . . . The indexical nature of the photograph—its undeniable relation to the actual, the existent, when joined to an allusion to an aesthetic constrict, van Gogh’s painting—destabilizes both art and documentary. The universalizing of art is driven back to the very particular body of George Gudger, whose specific human weight can be felt in those shoes, while at the same time we are made aware that our vision is being aesthetically directed by Evans. . . . Agee and Evans recognize that their apprehension of beauty in the tenants’ world is largely a class privilege, a luxury the tenants themselves can seldom afford. Thus they seek to turn even the beauty that is in the tenants’ world against the abomination of tenantry and against the sins of the overprivileged by letting that beauty become further testimony to the injustice of the tenant system itself, making it a palpable promise denied. (165, 168)

Agee underscores Van Gogh’s influence on Evans throughout the text when he references art in the everyday objects in the tenants’ lives, comparing a house to Doric architecture, the color of blue in a pair of overalls to shades used by Cezanne (125, 236). While there is clear truth in Reed’s assessment of the work, I’m at once skeptical of the possibilities of capturing the beauty in the oppression of workers and using it for them on their behalf. Perhaps rightly so, as Reed later suggest, “But the unavoidable, fundamental political fact

that Agee and Evans confront in their attempt to establish a relationship with Gudger is their privilege, one conveyed by class and its accoutrements of education, leisure, mobility, and so on, and inscribed in the text as the further privilege of authorship” (171).

For both Agee and Diego Rivera, to get closest to the real is to be able to pick up and discard modes of representation as the need arises. Rivera writes of mixing styles and modes in order to achieve a new modern aesthetic. Addressing the Russian public’s unenthusiastic response to visiting modernist artists Rivera writes in *The Modern Quarterly*:

Unfortunately, those that won the applause of the public were not the new painters and the new European schools but the old and bad academic painters...it was not the modernistic painters but the masses of the Russian people who were correct in the controversy. Their vote showed not that they considered the academic painters as the painters of the proletariat, but that the art of the proletariat must not be a hermetic art, an art inaccessible except to those who have developed and undergone an elaborate esthetic preparation. The art of the proletariat has to be an art that is warm and clear and strong. It was not that the proletariat of Russia was telling these artists: ‘You are too modern for us.’ What it said was: ‘You are not modern enough to be artists of the proletarian revolution. (Shapiro 59)

The crucial difference between the author and the artist, however, is that Rivera’s goal may be interpreted as attempt to *access* the masses by mediating the abstract with realist and traditional, ancestral modes. Agee, however, *complicates* the representation of the real for the masses by adding abstraction to documentary in order to avoid the passive readership that mass communication invites, making the reader earn the privilege of an intrusive, intimate knowledge of the Gudgers, Woods, and Ricketts through thoughtful comprehension rather than a supply a neatly packaged, predictably patterned narrative.

Class and economy are essential to understanding the migratory patterns between urban industrial centers and rural towns, locations frequently positioned as opposites but inherently connected. Raymond Williams writes, “Beginning as centres of colonial trade

and administration, these cities have drawn in, as our own history, the surplus people and the uprooted labourers of the rural areas...A displaced and former rural population is moving and drifting towards the centres of a money economy which directed by interests very far from their own” (287). The juxtaposition of Siegel’s historically situated bodies with those portrayed by Agee and Evans reveals that in spite of and because of racial difference, the constantly displaced African Americans in the industrial North and the white Southerners seemingly chained for eternity to the land are positioned on the margin because of class structure. The social and economic immobility faced by African Americans is perpetuated by systemic and institutionalized racism that is antagonistic to greater job and housing opportunities. Almost seventy years after Evans and Agee first began their investigation, *Fortune* published a brief retrospective analysis of the pair’s venture. In it, author David Whitford notes, “The FORTUNE editors who sent Agee and Evans south wanted them to write about poor whites. That they found their subjects in Hale County was more than a little perverse. Most of the county’s people, and an even higher percentage of the poor people, were and are African American.” The demographic there has not changed as much as we might have thought over time: mobility is a privilege. The current demographic of Detroit also reveals this inherent privilege, a city which has become increasingly poorer and blacker after World War II and, especially after the 1967 riot. Those who were able to leave have left.²⁵ Williams continues, “We can overcome division only by refusing to be

²⁵ In writing this phrase, I’m reminded of the photographs of classed and racialized faces unable to leave the South when Hurricane Katrina hit, literally stranded by their immobility. It is also important to note here that in the last few years, Detroit has seen a slow but building influx of new, young, and white residents who choose to live within the city limits.

divided” (306). Although he refers to the binary between England’s country and city, surely Williams words ring true for Detroit, then and now. The implication for scholars is more complex. While we must be able to disentangle narratives of class, gender, and race so as not to obfuscate the nuanced, subjective experience, we need to also do the complicated work of acknowledging that an insistence upon an adherence to the hard lines of classification, while important in certain contexts, has the ability to muddy both aesthetic and representational nuance as well.



Figure 4: Photograph by Alfred Palmer

“Army truck manufacture (Dodge). Line-up of U.S. Army trucks at the Dodge Lynch Road plant in Detroit, ready for shipment to Army posts throughout the country.”

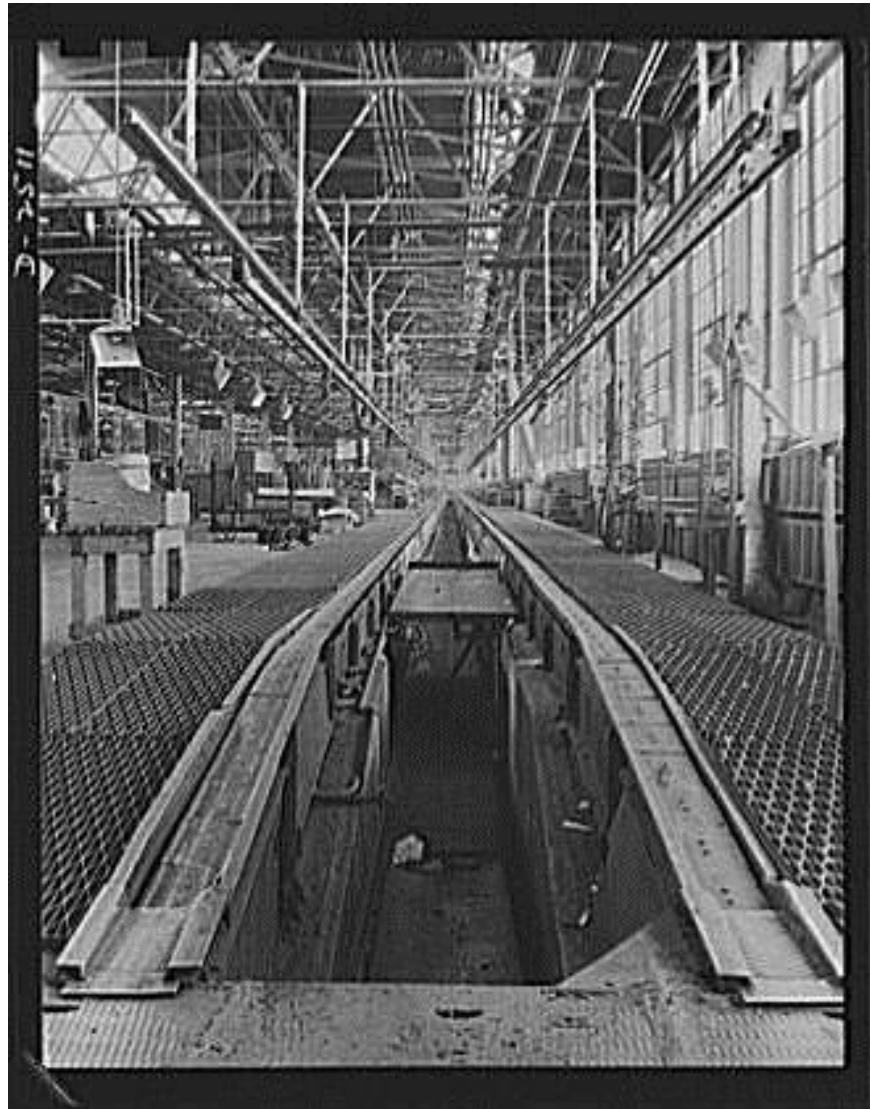


Figure 5: Photograph by Alfred Palmer

“Conversion. Automobile industry. Only a short time ago ninety cars per hour were made on this assembly line. From the pit shown above, final inspection and installation of small parts on the bottom of the car were made. To prepare this plant for war production, the pit will have to be filled in. The Plymouth Company, Chrysler Corporation, Detroit, Michigan.”



Figure 6: Photograph by Alfred Palmer

“Army truck manufacture (Dodge). A bank of wheels and tires for Dodge Army trucks piled up as they arrive at the plant before the assembling process starts.”



Figure 7: Photograph by Alfred Palmer

“New Alemite fitting is added to a toggle arm bearing of a big 90T96 Cleveland press before the machine is reassembled in another building of an important automobile factory. The building that formerly housed the press is entirely is entirely cleared for the manufacture of an entirely different war product. Chevrolet Motors, Detroit, Michigan.”



Figure 8: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

LIFE magazine, March 16, 1942.



Figure 9: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

LIFE magazine, March 16, 1942.



Figure 10: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

LIFE magazine, March 16, 1942.



Three Detroit cops successfully subdue Negro rioter. Disappointed tenants of the former Frank House, all of whom had paid rent in advance, gathered in their special former street. Signs, which had been found them already arranged by new tenants, were knocked over while moving companies shipped them off on buses. Detroit Housing Commission Daily found them helping

Figure 11: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

LIFE magazine, March 16, 1942.



Figure 12: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

“Detroit, Michigan. Riot at the Sojourner Truth homes, a new U.S. federal housing project, caused by white neighbors' attempt to prevent Negro tenants from moving in. Back view of typical newspaper photographer.”



Figure 13: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

“Detroit, Michigan. Typical Negro residence. These are conditions under which families originally lived before moving to the Sojourner Truth housing project.” (Note the ubiquitous Coca-Cola logo, also present in Evans’s work.)



Figure 14: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

“Detroit, Michigan. A typical Negro worker's family. These are conditions under which families originally lived before moving to the Sojourner Truth housing project.”

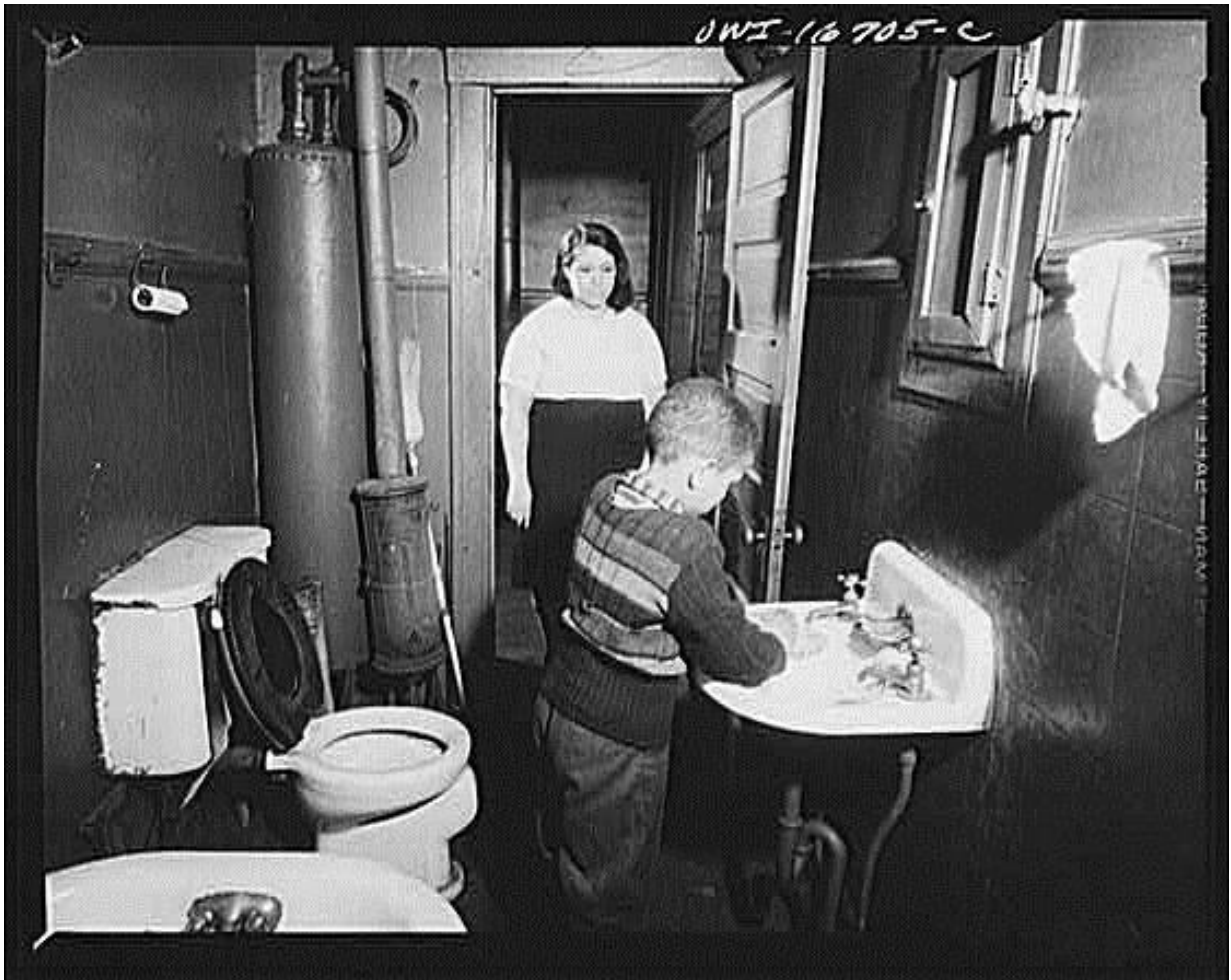


Figure 15: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

“Detroit, Michigan. Interior of a bathroom, with a Negro boy washing his hands. These are conditions under which families originally lived before moving to the Sojourner Truth housing project.”

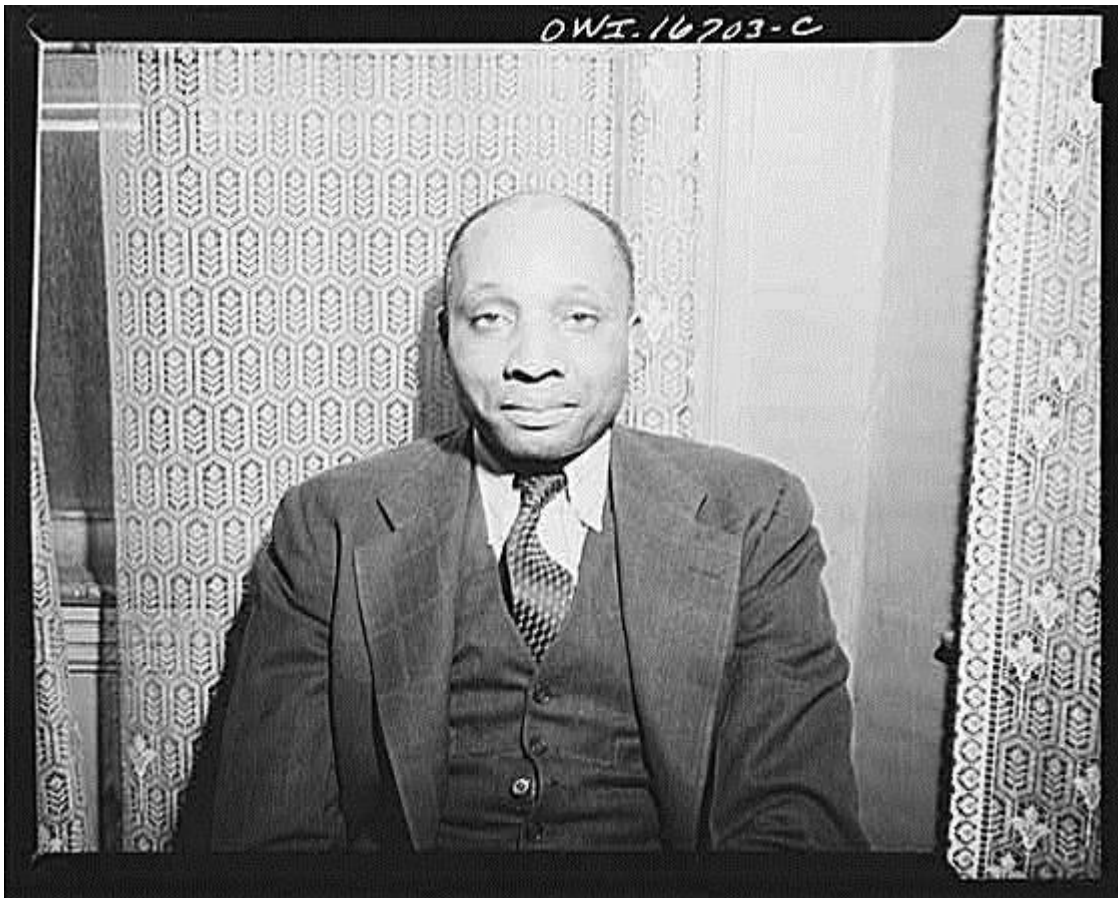


Figure 16: Photograph by Arthur Siegel

“Detroit, Michigan. This man worked at Ford factory but was unable to live in a decent place until Sojourner Truth homes were open for occupancy.”

CHAPTER FOUR**PICKET LINES AND PICKET FENCES: WORK AND DESIRE IN *LAST EXIT******TO BROOKLYN AND THE DONNA REED SHOW***

Understandably, World War II often marks a literary and cultural periodic break. Large-scale upheaval catalyzes shifting perspectives; reflection over traumatic experience and exposure to other cultures, ideas, and ways of being in the world crystallizes them. In the United States specifically, World War II possessed the transformative ability of literally switching the national gears in a new direction: toward production. Chapter 3 followed the previous incarnations of the Office of War Information and highlighted the “arsenal of democracy” as the national gaze turned to Detroit, providing potent examples of the formal, social, and technological sea change World War II made possible. Yet cultural undercurrents coursed beneath the visible shift. While the United States reveled in abundance, it was also a nation desperate for unification in the aftermath of a war that left a trail of shattered lives in its wake. Postwar popular culture often subverted and marginalized fragmented identities and nonnormative casualties pushed aside in favor of a unified front. One specific mode of living dominated the media in particular: the white, middle-class, nuclear family housed in a single suburban home, a representation of the Fordist social ideal. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, TV programs like *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966) dominated television sets across America, sponsored by companies that became more and more seamlessly incorporated into the show’s diegesis, inscribing the acquisition of commodities as an essential component to the American dream. This chapter pairs the wholesomeness of *The Donna Reed Show* with the depravity

of Hubert Selby, Jr.'s characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* as postwar representations of home and work. The juxtaposition of two texts that at first seem like photonegatives, and in many ways are, actually elucidates a nuanced but often shared historical and cultural reality through their depiction of gender, sexuality, and labor. World War II marks a break from previous economic organization and patterns of domesticity, while earlier trends in defining gay culture and feminist ideals were perpetuated even as they continued to evolve. The figures of Donna Stone and Harry Black illustrate how conceptions of collective American feminine and masculine identity took shape after World War II and prior to the civil rights movement in relation to a national shift from production to consumption.

Television programming was particularly conservative compared to film, music, and literature, in part because of its relationship to advertising and corporate sponsorship, and in part because of its relationship to domesticity. When televisions were a symbol of middle-class achievement and there was only one in every home, the whole family scheduled their evenings around watching it together. Programming had to be suitable for the youngest child and the oldest adult simultaneously. In an era when filmic representations like *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle*, and *Splendor in the Grass* delved into more controversial territory, television often avoided representing the troubled and rebellious teen (Morreale 98). Morreale writes that “both Mary and Jeff were examples of how well-socialized children learned to become just like their parents....As teens increasingly mobilized and rebelled against their parents in culture and in cinematic representations of youths, Mary and Jeff Stone remained well disciplined and *under control*” (98, my emphasis). Thus, *The Donna Reed Show* provides a template, enabling parents to understand how

to reproduce duplicate versions of themselves. Morreale argues that sitcom television of the 1950s and 1960s allowed American society to curb “potentially dangerous social forces” suggesting that domestically, “containment was manifest through conformity” (11). Hubert Selby, Jr. portrays a world in which not everyone is able or willing to exercise this kind of containment; and *Last Exit* clearly, if hyperbolically, maps out the societal consequences of an inability to contain one’s desires. The lesson learned through Donna Stone is we should either correct ourselves and realize that our true nature is docile and pleasant, or remap our desires onto commercial goods, which are accessible, safe, and likely to increase production. However, Harry is unable to conform to expectations in both the workplace and the bedroom; in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, women are regularly beaten into submission when their autonomy becomes problematic, and the middle-class ideal is unattainable. *The Donna Reed Show* and the cultural promises it offers subsist entirely upon the premise of a middle-class, nuclear family headed by caring, educated parents effective enough to resolve every problem their child ever has. The narrative relies on two things: consumption and control. Yet Harry’s consumption is curbed by his factory job and he is unable to control his life or his desire. Only when he goes on strike is he able to both purchase goods and services and explore his sexuality.

The Ideal Wife as the Perfect Worker

My analysis of *The Donna Reed Show* focuses on two aspects of the character Reed plays, Donna Stone. First, I examine her role as worker or laborer: she performs both manual and psychological tasks within each episode, primarily for her husband and children, but she also does all of the work required to resolve the central conflict within the plot of

each episode. Secondly, her relationship to the products within the show—household appliances, groceries, the typical consumable goods a housewife might purchase and use within the home—is examined. The ways in which Donna Stone labors and consumes also ultimately indicate how representations of femininity on screen in the late 1950s and 1960s have a cultural underpinning tied to the portrayal of masculinity that I will discuss later in conjunction to *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

The typical episode of the *Donna Reed Show* introduces a social problem in the first segment after the introductory credits. The dilemma of the day becomes Donna's issue to solve, even if the initial predicament happened to or was caused by her children, Jeff and Mary, or her husband, Alex. The issue that requires resolution often takes one of two forms—or some combination of both: 1) there is a dispute based on a power difference within the home that needs to be settled. Jeff and Mary might argue over competing interests and a compromise must be negotiated; for example, Alex, a doctor, frequently dedicates too much time to his patients and the rest of the family feels neglected. Or 2) there is a problem with one of the Stone family's acquaintances that negatively impacts a member of the household, and Donna is compelled to get involved and resolve it. Of course, Donna always finds a solution by the program's end. Occasionally a third type of problem is introduced, one in which Donna has to resolve a conflict having to do with the way she is viewed by others—or, more likely, the way she views herself.

For example, in the 1959 episode "The Ideal Wife," Donna's inherently sweet disposition becomes the central conflict. In the first half of the episode, the Stones' friends comment on how angelic Donna is with her family compared to how they are with their

own children. Jeff and Mary support this assertion when, independently, they marvel at how much more patient and kind Donna is than their friends' mothers. Donna rebels against this perception when she realizes that people take advantage of her because of how forgiving and gentle she is. For a moment, she demands what she wants from her children, her husband, and even the man who delivers her dry cleaning. Her family and the dry-cleaning employee are all resentful of this change in attitude, but they guiltily do what she asks.

As is the case in each episode, Donna is ultimately responsible for resolving the dilemma. But the central conflict here is depicted as tension between Donna and her family because she has asked for what she needs and expects those demands will be met—not that everyone Donna knows takes advantage of her and she needs that to stop. Thus, Donna finds a resolution to this problem when she realizes that the perception of her as “sweet” is accurate. She cannot help but be sweet, and she shouldn't try to be anything other than what she is, even if it means she will be inconvenienced by those who would capitalize on her sunny disposition. Donna's temporary fit of individuality served to accomplish the literal tasks of the episode but failed to perform the emotional work necessary to keep the domestic machine running long term. Thus, as the perfect worker, Donna resolves the conflict through self-correction, sacrificing her personal needs and picking up the slack on the housework for the rest of the family in order to preserve the harmony and functionality of the larger system. Therefore, “The Ideal Wife” of the episode title is the one who relents in the end and realizes her true nature is docile, self-sacrificing, and tireless in her endeavors. Although the central conflict appeared to be the fact that Donna was being taken advantage of because she was too kind, the conflict was actually an internal one, resolved

only when Donna learns to accept that she is sweet, and while she may be taken advantage of, she wouldn't have it any other way.

In 1960, two years into *The Donna Reed Show*'s eight-year run, *Good Housekeeping* published an article by Betty Friedan that attempted to contextualize women's roles in the household as a wife and mother. The title of the article—"Women Are People, Too!"—could easily substitute for the title of an episode of *The Donna Reed Show*; and Friedan, who became famous for *The Feminine Mystique* three years later, was attempting to solve a dilemma, too. For Friedan, "This feeling or problem is a strange stirring, a dissatisfied groping, a yearning, a search that is going on in the minds of women...afraid to admit to themselves the silent question 'Is this all?' as they make the beds, shop for groceries and new curtains, eat peanut butter sandwiches with the children, chauffeur Cub Scouts and Brownies to and from meetings, or lie beside their husbands at night." Friedan points out that therapists, experts, and the media "tell us how to catch a man and keep him; how to breast-feed children and handle toilet training, sibling rivalry, adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, cook Grandmother's bread and gourmet snails, build a swimming pool with our own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine, and make marriage more exciting; how to keep our husbands from dying young and our sons from growing into delinquents." Donna Stone provided a model for being a mother and wife that relied primarily on flawless and self-sacrificing conflict resolution.

I do want to note, however, that Donna Reed's comedic timing put a wrinkle in the sweetness that all insist is seamlessly apparent in Donna Stone. When first confronted in the beginning of the episode with this label she so badly wants to shed, Donna explains her

parenting skills with a delicious bite: “Well, I don’t believe in screaming. A rubber hose is just as effective and doesn’t leave any marks.” Although in my estimation the show would be far more entertaining with more of these moments, they affirm Heller’s position that Reed’s act “seems to border on a kind of camp performance—a self-consciously stylized surrender to the social script, a script held in quotation marks by Donna’s very insistence on acting it out with a kind of excessive sincerity that never precludes ironic undercuts or wry quips, often at the expense of her character” (47). Joanne Morreale reads Donna Stone’s sweetness as Donna Reed’s performance of the feminine masquerade: she is “excessively displaying the signs of contented domesticity; and in so doing, she avoids being recognized as a powerful female who is challenging the social codes of the 1950s” (77–78). In fact, Donna Reed did challenge a number of the strictures placed upon her in a male-dominated workplace. Morreale argues that “Donna Reed was more complicated than her syrupy image implied. She also posed topless for a glamour magazine early in her career, aborted an inconvenient pregnancy when married to Bill Tuttle, and tried to break free of the limited roles that typecast her” (25). Donna Stone also occasionally challenged her role as a housewife within the show, but the fictional Donna was always corralled by the end of each episode.

Watching *The Donna Reed Show*, one thing is immediately apparent about the aptly named sitcom: Donna is the central, most important component of each episode. Without her character, the plot could not unfold and the primary dilemma could not be resolved. Without Donna, the show would not work. In addition to the indispensable psychological and emotional work Donna conducts for her family and for the sake of the plot resolution,

Dana Alice Heller notes the physical tasks she performs: making dinners, arranging clothing, and taking phone calls. Heller writes, “She is a worker, in a sense employed by them all. In short, Donna Reed’s fantasy mother is a unit of indispensable labor power, as much a packaged commodity as the consumer goods sold during commercial ‘interruptions’” (Heller 48). In the figure of Donna Stone, the laborer also becomes the product and the platform by which other products are sold.

Like Sinclair Lewis’s Mrs. Arroford—discussed in my first chapter, Donna Stone works tirelessly, but there are critical differences between implications of their labor: as Arroford works, she exchanges her femininity for power that is construed as masculine. Donna Reed, however, is indefatigable. Every new episode presents her anew, fresh, and ready to take on the formulaic crisis of the day. Her pristine, excessive femininity actually fuels and enables her work. Heller goes on to note that “although it is reasonable to surmise, after watching enough episodes of *The Donna Reed Show*, that the images produced by the program reify the private sphere as the sphere of feminine feeling, virtue, and nurturance, my sense is that such readings are misreadings. Donna’s devotion to family is, first and foremost, her devotion to work. Her commitment to her husband and family is her commitment, above all, to an employer” (48). While there is some juxtaposition of the domestic feminine sphere and the masculine world outside, there are, in fact, plenty of ways in which this is untrue. Alex is a doctor, but he works inside of their home. Donna is frequently positioned as a social, and, occasionally, political, force in the outside community. But if we engage in Heller’s argument about Donna Stone as worker, then we must also

acknowledge that she represents the perfect worker (49). Donna is almost always enthusiastic; she rarely complains. Her family, friends, and casual acquaintances frequently remark on her sweet disposition and good nature.

Thus, by remaining entirely cheerful in the face of other mothers' faults, the central character in *The Donna Reed Show* reinforces the idea that contentment would be achievable if only a woman could change herself. This lends support to the ideas that Friedan asserted in her *Good Housekeeping* article, arguments that would form the foundation for *The Feminine Mystique*. As Coontz puts it, Friedan showed women that "America's psychiatrists, sociologists, women's magazines, and television shows had portrayed the post-war housewife as the happiest person on the planet. To the extent that women believed this to accurately describe 'everyone else,' they felt alone and inadequate. So when a housewife failed to attain the blissful contentment that all her counterparts supposedly enjoyed, Friedan said, she blamed herself—or perhaps her husband" (22). In her examination, Coontz notes that she finds a number of flaws with both Friedan's perspective and research in *The Feminine Mystique*; she carefully indicates this when it is pertinent. Daniel Horowitz echoes this opinion: "*The Feminine Mystique* nonetheless defined the perspective of a generation of white, middle-class women with its argument that what trapped them was sexual passivity, limited career ambitions, and identity crises" (Horowitz 4).²⁶ However, Coontz finds the response to Friedan's work to be extremely important in understanding women's

²⁶ For example, both Coontz and Horowitz suggest Friedan ignored the role feminism played in previous generations. In fact, the goal of Horowitz's project was to illustrate Friedan's involvement with feminism and labor politics during her college years, exploring how that involvement contributed to the belief system she outlines in *The Feminine Mystique*.

perspectives about the way they functioned socially, and her primary goal is to examine the reception to Friedan to understand the chord that she struck with American women.

Just a Housewife

During World War II, over 2.5 million women entered the workforce, many as unskilled or semi-skilled factory laborers (L.T. Frank 483). As women returned to the domestic sphere, sometimes by choice and sometimes because their positions were given to men, women increasingly assumed roles in making decisions regarding household consumption. By the 1950s, this role was recognized and exploited commercially. In her analysis of the reception of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Stephanie Coontz writes, "Business interests enthusiastically promoted this retreat into personal life because they saw in it a tremendous opportunity to expand the consumer goods sector of the postwar boom economy" (37). Women did the grocery shopping for the family and, therefore, often made choices about what to buy. At the same time, home appliance manufacturers were utilizing advances in technology and marketing them to women who oversaw the cooking and cleaning inside the home. Coontz writes, "In an exhaustive review of 1950s advertising manuals and surveys, including studies provided by Ernest Dichter, the decade's leading advertising guru, Friedan showed that manufacturers explicitly defined the ideal consumer as a homemaker who could be convinced to see housework as a way of expressing her individual creativity and affirming her femininity" (37–38).

One of the ways in which corporations advertised their products was through sponsoring television shows; the actors performed the dual job of acting and selling. Paul Petersen, who played Jeff on *The Donna Reed Show*, suggests that "in our day, corporations

owned the time and we worked at the end of the day for [them]....Our job was to deliver the audience who would go to the supermarket and buy Campbell's Soup" (Morreale 13). Advertisers recognized that the decisions about which soup to buy were often in the hands of the housewife. Furthermore, Donna Stone, loosely distinguishable from Donna Reed, also often appeared in print advertisements and commercials that ran before and during the program. Singer was a frequent sponsor and Donna was often seen vacuuming or sewing on the show (Morreale 13). Product placement has become such a common advertising technique that this hardly seems like an intrusion today. Postwar, however, the sale of the lifestyle becomes virtually inseparable from the sale of consumer goods. Heller writes,

Television, on one hand, offers us a comforting illusion of privacy and autonomy. We seem to be making choices—what to watch, what sponsors to patronize, whether to watch or patronize at all—yet it's so easy to overlook the fact that *we* are what's being sold, our dreams, our fantasies, our fears, our deepest disappointments. On the other hand, when viewed in a historical context, television instills in us more profoundly than any other discursive form a sense that the binary ideology of separate spheres has vanished and the marketplace has shattered into a multiplicity of spheres—or channels—any one combination of them capable of penetrating into our living rooms, seeping into the most private recesses of American domestic life. (42–43)

Donna's version of the housewife promised a number of cultural possibilities. The increase in production created by the United States' entry into World War II resulted in excessive capital. If women vacated their jobs to run their homes, returning men would have more opportunities for employment. And the housewife had explicit duties she was to perform as domestic engineer. One of these was to do the shopping for the household, returning that excess capital back into the economic system as the decision-making body for the consumers in her home, supporting the preservation of the nuclear family, and performing self-

effacing work without the need to be credited and compensated. The format of the television sitcom is particularly suited to reinforcing the importance of the nuclear family's stability. As Andrea Press notes, "These humorous and seemingly transparent domestic comedies owe their popularity to an implicit contract they form with viewers. This contract promises to maintain 'our belief in the indestructability and perpetuity of the family, which must stay together if we are to view it week after week'" (Heller 43).

In the episode "Just a Housewife" (1960), the role and the buying power of the "housewife" comes under scrutiny. Throughout the episode, Donna bristles at the term and attempts to define and expand the definition against the conception of the word that husbands and children are portrayed to have. Radio host Jerry Parker interviews women inside a grocery store for his program *The Housewives' Corner*. Parker gets comedic relief from mocking the women he interviews and making their lives seem simple. He puts a microphone in the face of unsuspecting shoppers, quipping, "We realize that housewives mold public opinion and are instrumental in shaping our national policies. I have a question to ask you, but it is very important; and before you answer, I want you to think about it very carefully. While baking an upside down cake, do you recommend standing on your head?" Donna takes issue with Parker's treatment of the housewives on air and takes a stand against him, explaining that housewives actually perform a number of jobs, including the duties of a nurse, psychologist, diplomat, and philosopher. Her vocal resistance sends shockwaves through the women in the neighborhood and Donna becomes a momentary celebrity, much to the chagrin of Alex and the other women's husbands.

The episode is uncharacteristically fraught with tension and resentment between the sexes. Donna often maintains her aforementioned sweetness, even while Alex undermines her independence at every turn, giving her sarcastic titles like “Maharani of the Mop” and “Princess of the Pantry” whenever she mentions she does not like being referred to as *just* a housewife. However, Donna and Mary team up to represent the woman’s perspective on the matter, and Jeff and Alex take the position representative of the “typical man.” Mary declares that the modern woman will no longer be chained to the stove and she believes within a decade there will be a female president. Donna responds, “Well, about time, isn’t it? And as soon as we get into office, the first thing we’ll do is take the vote away from the men.” The teams are clearly divided and the perspectives are supposed to be representative and unanimous within each gender. As Morreale notes, these teams are made more pronounced by alternating two-shots of mother and daughter with oppositional two-shots of father and son as the conversation takes place (82–83). Coontz suggests that a dominant cultural fear leading up to the women’s movement of the 1960s was that a “battle of the sexes” within the home and marriage would occur if women were seen as equal with men (xxiii), which might account for the uniquely antagonistic role portrayals in this episode. Morreale arrives at a Freudian reading of “Just a Housewife” to suggest that Donna’s humor expresses repressed frustration “at the fact that she is basically a worker in the home, economically dependent on Alex and tied to the social mores that render her subservient to him” (83). However, she does not note that Alex takes many more cheap shots at Donna under the guise of humor, which if we apply the same theory using Morreale’s interpretation of Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960), would suggest that

Alex is even more resentful of Donna's rebellion and burns with a not-so-thinly-veiled desire to repress it, mocking her at every turn.

One of the most surreal scenes in the series occurs in this episode and combines the portrayal of the role of the housewife with the tools she uses to perform her job. Donna is vacuuming. Alex walks in and asks Donna to get him a cup of coffee. She pauses in her task in order to fulfill his request; and as she does, Alex complains to Donna about the mother of a patient who didn't have time to bring her child in for a doctor appointment. He asks, "How busy could she be? She is only a housewife." Donna gets upset and when he thanks her for the coffee, she says, "Don't mention it, Master." She resumes vacuuming; but once Alex leaves, we witness an unusual break in style: the vacuum cleaner murmurs to her with robotic distortion, "Housewife, housewife." Thus, the appliance itself serves as an extension of Alex, taunting Donna about the work she performs and the role she plays within the home, and although she complains, Donna performs the tasks anyway. Friedan poses the question, "How can a woman shut her ears to all the voices of the experts and listen instead to the voice inside herself that tells her something else?" In this episode, the vacuum itself becomes one voice in the chorus.

In another pertinent scene, Alex questions Donna's opposition to the term, suggesting its benign connotation. To prove his point that *housewife* is just a word, he compares it to words for other objects around the room indicating, "Book. Pencil. Chair. Housewife." He then picks up the stethoscope and for a brief moment, I anticipated Alex would say "doctor," but instead he says "stethoscope." Here, Alex aligns "housewife" with the signifiers for other *things*, not people. Had Alex picked up the stethoscope and said "doctor,"

he may have suggested that “housewife” is an occupation that has value alongside those in male-dominated fields requiring an education. A stethoscope, however, is a tool that a doctor uses to complete his job. Thus, “housewife” is on par with “vacuum,” not “doctor.” “Just a Housewife” begins to address the unnamed yearning that Friedan described in her *Good Housekeeping* article published about eight months after this episode aired. This scene acknowledges the double bind of the housewife in relation to her home appliances. Coontz notes that arguments existed on both ends of the spectrum: “Some commentators noted that modern appliances were not yet efficient enough to compensate for the decline of household help since World War II, so young mothers were overwhelmed with work. Others expressed the opposite view, that mass production had taken over so many of women’s more challenging household tasks, so that wives needed to try harder to find creativity and novelty in their work as homemakers” (23). Friedan suggested that women assumed the guilt of both perspectives and this contributed to their dissatisfaction.

By the end of the episode, Donna rallies enough support through feminine commercial buying power to initiate a name change for Jerry Parker’s show: *The Housewives’ Corner* becomes the gender-neutral *The Shoppers’ Hour*. However, Alex tells Donna that “nothing has changed, you haven’t really accomplished a thing” by taking a stand against the term *housewife*. The first woman Parker speaks with on air undermines her own role and states that she is “just a housewife,” which bothers Donna. A mop salesman returns to the house at the close of the episode. Earlier, Donna had slammed the door on him for calling her a housewife, but he returns and states his company wants to know what to call housewives now. He explains that “some screwy dame” who spoke on the radio—meaning

Donna herself—has everyone all worked up. The episode concludes as everyone laughs at Donna being called a screwy dame.

“The Ideal Wife” is similar to “Just a Housewife” in that Donna resents how she is perceived; in the former episode it is her sweetness, in the latter it is the recognition of the diminished respect for her role within her family. In both, she resists the depiction, but ultimately her resistance leads to more conflicts for her to solve. Thus, the easiest way for Donna to perform the labor of providing the plot resolution is to fix herself, a task that repeatedly proves simpler than fixing everyone else. In “The Ideal Wife,” Alex states he is glad “the revolution” is over. He uses the same term in “Just a Housewife,” stating that he was on her side through two “regimes.” Therefore, the narratives of both episodes play with the idea of revolt inherent in Donna’s backlash against women’s roles, using terms of war to illustrate a feminine uprising. However, *The Donna Reed Show* ultimately presents a narrative of containment as the rebel faction is brought back into the fold by the episode’s end.

Harry Black: Terrible Husband, Terrible Worker

While mainstream popular culture in the postwar Eisenhower era presented a unified and untroubled front to the American public, Hubert Selby, Jr. was crafting a narrative that would present a photonegative of this idyllic and uncomplicated family behind the white picket fence. Selby’s brutal realism revealed the side of America that corporate television would never show. In 1950, he met and began working with several writers, including some who had attended Black Mountain College, including LeRoi Jones, Robert Creeley, and especially Gilbert Sorrentino (Giles 8). Chronically ill and diagnosed with

tuberculosis, Selby spent much of his free time walking the streets of Brooklyn “in search of sympathy and drugs” and wrote short stories about what he observed that would later comprise segments of his 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Applegate 347). Like Sinclair Lewis, Selby’s work was published in various magazines prior to being united in a collection. “The Queen is Dead” was published in the *Black Mountain Review* in 1956, and other versions of short stories subsequently appeared after that in publications such as *New Directions* and the commercial men’s magazine *Swank* (Giles 9). “Tralala” appeared in the *Provincetown Review* and drew notable controversy and criticism, but also caught the attention of Barney Rosset at Grove Press, the publishing company that would later publish *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. In *Understanding Hubert Selby, Jr.*, James R. Giles states, “Since [*Last Exit*] was deliberately written to challenge and provoke middle-class, traditional readers by violating a kind of historical, if unwritten consensus concerning acceptable taste in fiction, it was hardly surprising that Selby’s first novel was greeted in 1964 with considerable controversy” (3). In some ways, *The Donna Reed Show* may be considered a hyperbolic representation of conservative, middle-class values in the 1950s and 1960s—a television show that highlighted the ways in which masculine and feminine should ideally be construed within the nuclear family as they relate to power dynamics and consumption, roles enacted in part by postwar production and economic prosperity. On the other hand, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* takes up all of the societal components that mainstream television and corporate sponsors actively avoided—sex, violence, working-class tension, homosexuality—and instead, takes part in an avant-garde, countercultural movement intentionally

opposed to such conservative, middle-class values. The juxtaposition of the two works illustrates that they are each shaped by, and reflective of, similar veins in American culture pertaining to gender roles after World War II but prior to the gay liberation and feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

With *Last Exit*, Selby worked to dispel the concept of American identity that relied upon content housewives, industrious husbands, occasionally mischievous but always well-meaning children, and an attainable middle-class home in the suburbs, stocked with Singer sewing machines and Campbell's soup. Television portrayed a new variation on the same narrative introduced, plotted, and happily resolved in a half hour, but Selby's loosely strung together series of narratives made clear that there would be no happy ending. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* portrays the search for human connection as impossibly difficult and fraught with physical and sexual violence. In *Taylored Lives*, Martha Banta references Antonio Gramsci, writing, "The human passage through history, marked by the patterns of Taylorism and Fordism, is an 'uninterrupted, often painful and bloody process of subjugating natural (i.e., animal and primitive) instincts to new, more complex and rigid norms and habits of order, exactitude and precision which can make possible the increasingly complex forms of collective life'" (99). Selby's characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are constantly negotiating with this kind of subjugation, and they rarely triumph over it. For Selby, sex and the body are commodities that can be traded or stolen; individual desire is never realized without deadly consequence. The singular vision of the all-American family, aligned with heterosexuality and responsible parenthood, is portrayed as a falsehood through the revelation of diverse sexualities. These desires, the existence of which is denied by mass

culture, are expressed and then repressed again through extreme violence throughout *Last Exit*.

The chapter "Strike" demonstrates the relationship between factory labor based on Fordist principles, domesticity, and a cultural expectation for men to shape their living conditions to accord with the ideal of a masculine, heterosexual head of household. It opens with the main character, Harry Black, thinking about his infant son's penis. As his wife, Mary, enters the room he conjures up the mental image of Mary placing the baby's penis in her mouth, and he is filled with revulsion. And so in the chapter's first few sentences, the reader is relieved of any possible misconception that Harry and Mary might have a home life even remotely resembling that of Donna and Alex. Harry's revulsion, however, eventually proves to be at least as rooted in a visceral reaction to male/female sexual pairing and a compulsion to misalign the expected relationships of the nuclear family as it is rooted in the taboos of incest or pedophilia. For Harry, emotional and physical intimacy in a heterosexually oriented family unit is a painful, sickening perversion; gentleness is always replaced with violence and anger. Throughout this chapter, Harry grapples with the confines of a socially enforced heteronormative home life that Selby configures as a loss of control. Harry struggles to suppress his closeted queer desires, and his inability to have a successful marriage is mirrored by his failure to fall into a productive role at his factory job. Once the workers of Harry's factory go on strike; however, he is able to deviate from rigorously enforced social expectation and follow through on his latent attraction to other men. Eventually, Harry's fantasy life comes to an abrupt and tragic end once the strike is

resolved and he is faced with a mandate to return to regimented societal demands. Throughout *Last Exit*, Selby uses the concept of sexual inversion as a narrative trope. Harry's position within the inverted world of the strike, where he can express aspects of his identity not tolerated by his factory work environment, actually illustrates a more complex queer identity than the turn-of-the-century concept of inversion, one that was evolving in a post-war but pre-Stonewall period.

Keeping the Boa Constrictor at Bay

After a long day on the clock, Harry comes home to his wife and child. Mary rubs Harry's back. But rather than asking her to fetch him a cocktail, the newspaper and a pair of slippers, Harry furiously hopes that his wife will go away, that he'll fall asleep before he has to have sex with her. In stream-of-consciousness style, Harry imagines hitting Mary. He thinks,

krist, how many times had he thought of smashing her head. He tried thinking of something so he could ignore her and what she was doing and what was happening. He tried to concentrate on the fight he saw on tv last Friday where Pete Laughlin beat the shit out of some fuckin nigga and had him bleeding all over the face and the ref finally stopped the fight in the 6th and Harry was madashell that he stopped it...but still he was conscious of her hand on his thigh. (Selby 119)

Harry shrugs off Mary's advances and distracts himself with violent thoughts, but he can't escape Mary's sexuality and desire for him when he periodically becomes aware of the physical sensation of her touch. Images of men pummeling each other in a boxing match quickly revert to an internal monologue about his job and resentment toward his boss: "He knows he cant fuck with me. Id have the whole plant shut down in 5 minutes—the caressing hand still there. *He could control nothing*. The fucking bitch. Why can't she just leave me alone" (119, my emphasis). Selby recreates this pattern whenever Harry is confronted with

Mary's female sexuality. Harry resents his wife and wants to hurt her, and then he redirects his violent intentions to his bosses at work. He recognizes this as a loss of control of both spheres of his life and furiously wants to retaliate.

Unable to block out her roving hands, Harry ultimately has forceful, violent sex with Mary, which she interprets as desire and thoroughly enjoys, as murderous thoughts about her run through Harry's mind. Afterward, he's disgusted with himself; nauseous, sickened, and near tears, Harry clutches the pillow to his face, his dread enveloping him like the grip of a boa constrictor:

He could do nothing but endure the nausea and slimy disgust...his eyes tightly squeezed shut; concentrating on his stomach, trying to think the pressure and foul taste away, if not, at least control it. He knew, after years of fighting it, losing each time and ending up hanging over a bowl or sink if he was lucky enough to make it there, that this was all he could do. Nothing else would help. Except crying. And he was no longer able to cry. (121)

Portrayed as a violent brute through much of the narrative, this passage depicts Harry as a victim of trauma. If Harry cannot avoid sex with Mary and cannot avoid the impending revulsion that manifests itself in bodily symptoms, he would at the very least like to control it. But he knows that he can't. He will end up purging his physical disgust for sex with women, his body literally rejecting the act. As Harry tries to fall asleep, "He just lay there...if only something would happen. He clutched harder at the pillow; clenched his jaw tighter until a piercing pain in his ear and a spasm in his neck muscles forced him to relax. His body jerked slightly, involuntarily" (122). Unable to direct his own destiny, he struggles to even control his own body, tightening his muscles to the point of pain and, in doing so, rerouting the violence from Mary or his boss inward and onto himself. Selby writes, "still he didn't relax his muscles until the pain became unbearable and he wanted to scream;

and only then he relaxed, but the muscles remained tightened and he had to direct all his energy to the relaxing of the muscles before the pain killed him” (122).

Harry lies in bed, wrestling his own impulses, despising the acts his body has committed and trying to reconcile the sex he just had with Mary to himself. Spatially orienting himself with familiar objects in the room is a way for him to maintain control over himself and his environment:

His eyes focused on the bureau: there were two large knobs, a smaller one above, another large one to the side; a wall. His eyes started to smart from sweat. He wiped his face against the pillow. He turned his head slightly until he could see the ceiling. Now his vision reached to an end. The ceiling was there. The walls were there. No mysteries. Nothing hidden. There was something to be seen. It had an order. His eyes felt better. No longer felt pinched. No longer afraid to look. (123)

Thus, Harry affirms to himself what he knows to exist as a way of suppressing less-knowable emotions.

Masculinity theories provide a lens through which we can view Selby’s depiction of Harry as symptomatic of values that shape the identity of American men. R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities* explores the historical contexts of gender through a variety of academic disciplines, including psychoanalysis, anthropology, and sociology. Connell describes Victory Seidler’s work in this area as emphasizing “the control of emotions and the denial of sexuality in the construction of masculinity, and connects this to the exaltation of abstract reason in Western intellectual traditions” (Connell 38).²⁷ The sexual desire Harry is trying to curb is his attraction to men; moreover, he is trying to hide his feelings of revulsion for his wife, which are a symbol not only of weakness but of not being able to take part in the

²⁷ I briefly use Seidler’s text *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory* to discuss the rationalization of work as it relates to Sinclair Lewis in chapter 1.

ideal of the nuclear family. But Harry cannot do either. Connell also cites Nancy Chodorow's work with Freudian psychoanalysis as critical to understanding theories of masculinity. Chodorow "proposed that boys are pushed to disrupt their primary identification with the mother....This results in character structures that emphasize boundaries between people and lack the need for relationship that is characteristic of women" (Connell 20).²⁸ When Harry is thinking about his child's penis, he is considering one of the key signifiers of masculinity. He creates a boundary between himself and his wife and child by imagining an Oedipal sexual relationship between Mary and his son that is by definition reliant upon disrupting the boy's identification with the mother and eliminating the father from the picture.

Sedgwick's reading of Henry James's life through the works of J.M. Barrie in *Epistemology of the Closet* provides yet another way to interpret Harry's relationship with Mary.²⁹ Sedgwick's analysis layers Barrie's *Tommy and Grizel* onto James' relationship

²⁸ Chodorow's essay "The Enemy Outside: Thoughts on the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity" provides further ways we can theorize cultural violence as part of the American, masculine identity formation in the way of post-World War II victory beyond the scope of this dissertation: "reconsideration of [Freud's] *Civilization and Its Discontents*, must concern itself not only with 'ordinary,' normative, collective violence and aggression, but also with the extremes of widespread vicious violence, often tied in some way to nationalism and its (tribal, ethnic, racial) equivalents that we witness today and witnessed throughout the twentieth century" (236).

²⁹ In *Between Men* and *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the concept of homosexual panic in readings of literary texts. She writes, "Judicially, a 'homosexual panic' defense for a person (typically a man) accused of antigay violence implies that his responsibility for the crime was diminished by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked" (*Epistemology* 19). She describes homosexual panic as "only one path of control, complementary to public sanctions through the institutions described by Foucault and others as defining and regulating the amorphous territory of 'the sexual'" (*Between Men* 89). Queer and in the closet, what Harry goes through in this passage is not homosexual panic in precisely the way that Sedgwick or the judicial system have used the term. Rather than committing socially sanctioned violence against a homosexual man in order to control, Harry visualizes violence against his wife and causes himself pain in an effort to control his own body.

with Constance Fenimore Woolson. Sedgwick describes reading Leon Edel's account of James and "coming to a grinding sense that James felt he had with her above all, something sexually to prove" and Woolson may have suffered at the expense of James's "sudden 'generous,' 'yielding' impulses in him and equally sudden revulsions" (196). Rather than use the work to interpret James's desires, it may be useful to map the concept onto another fictional character, Harry, in order to elucidate an interpretation. Throughout "Strike," Harry boasts to other men about his (hetero)sexual proclivities and his actions mirror James's reported yielding impulses and sudden revulsion, if they were less than "generous." Sedgwick goes on to write that this interaction is "resolutely reproduced by virtually all the critical discussion of James's writing by the 'automatic imposition of *heterosexual compulsion*'" (*Epistemology* 196, author's emphasis).

Selby obviously does not labor under the same compulsion to write heterosexual narratives in the way that Sedgwick suggests may have been true of James. However, Harry has a compulsion to act heterosexually despite his body's desire to act otherwise. As Sedgwick writes, "The worst violence of heterosexuality comes with the male compulsion to desire women and its attendant deceptions of self and other" (*Epistemology* 198). By choosing to focus on the spatial orientation of his bedroom rather than the cause of his revulsion by bragging to his friends about the women he's slept with and by consciously and unconsciously circumventing his desires by dwelling on violence, Harry embodies Sedgwick's concept of self-ignorance. In her analysis of James's "The Beast in the Jungle," she writes that the character May Bartram sees John Marcher's ability to be with a woman, sexually or otherwise, depends on diffusing his "fascination with and terror of homosexual

possibility. It is only through his coming out of the closet—whether as a homosexual man or as a man with a less-exclusively defined sexuality that nevertheless admits the possibility of desires for other men—that Marcher could even begin to perceive the attention of a woman as anything other than a terrifying demand or a devaluing complicity” (206–207). Like Marcher, while Harry is unable to come to terms with a sexuality that is inclusive of same-sex attraction, he is unable to have a peaceable relationship with Mary. His wife becomes representative of a life he does not want and a control over his own sexuality that he does not possess.

Anti-Work

There is an interconnection between labor, sexuality, and violence throughout *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Harry’s thoughts circuit through a pattern: from sex to hitting his wife to violent encounters with his boss. Harry’s negative working relationships become more transparent the next morning. Harry works at a factory for an unnamed Corporation where he is “the worst lathe operator of the more than 1,000 men in the factory” (Selby 126). Harry does as little actual work as possible at his job and uses his right as a union member as an excuse to avoid labor. Moreover, his commitment to anti-work goes beyond personal interest. For instance, he insists that the company cannot allow a man who is uncertified according to union regulations to cut stainless steel, even though that means work will go unfinished for the day. The argument about cutting steel is carried out between Harry, Mike the foreman, and Wilson the production manager. As the men debate, the lines of dialogue run together and Selby does not use quotation marks to separate them: “The man at this machine aint cutting no stainless. I tried to tell him Mr. Wilson that the job had to be done—

thats OK, Mike, patting his shoulder and smiling even broader at both of them, Im sure we can straighten this thing out. Harrys a reasonable man. Nothin ta straighten out. He aint cutting stainless” (130). In doing so, Selby makes the oppositional binary pairs of worker/boss and company/union indistinguishable. Selby uses similar techniques to Lewis, but to a different effect. The dialogue in Lewis’s “Honestly—If Possible” creates a quick, unified, efficient chorus of words in chapter 1 to emphasize the workplace agreement on advertising dishonesty, but here the production of conversation—mimicking the production in the narrative—breaks down. The difference lies in Selby’s presentation of perspectives that are supposed to contrast, those of union members and those heading the Corporation, but the distinction becomes unclear and the division of labor is rendered inefficient. The overt narrative regarding the sexual relationships in *Last Exit* parallels the working relationships; binary pairings like husband/wife and worker/overseer are increasingly complicated and Selby’s language choices facilitate the breakdown. The division between heterosexual/homosexual blurs shortly after for Harry.

Harry ultimately wins his battle with the foreman and production manager and goes home to sleep soundlessly and dreamlessly—an unusual occurrence, “but before sleeping he would lie on his side and let the various images of empty shops, crumbling buildings, and splattering bodies drift through his mind, more real, more vivid, the features and images more sharply defined” (137). Acts of violence toward the Corporation are antiproduction, anticapitalist, postindustrial visions. Like his marriage, Harry wants to destroy what he’s being forced to participate in, what he can’t successfully enjoy like other men, and

thereby allow himself to remain in ignorance about his own motives rather than confront them.

As the chapter's title suggests, Harry's union soon goes on strike, and this marks a slow but clear turning point for Harry as his identity as a heterosexual laborer begins to fade. Increasingly, he is unable to orient himself—like a man fumbling for familiar objects in a dark room—and traditional habits, definitions, and identities start to lose their meaning. As Harry navigates the new terms for a modern identity, one that is not dependent on the image of the laborer as heterosexual family man, Selby creates a world of inversions. Harry's commitment to non-work earns him a position in the union office, and this anti-job becomes a previously unknown source of power, one he enjoys more and is better at than the job of lathe operator. Simultaneously, he begins to discover an awakening desire for men, especially “fairies,” and has longings and happiness he never experienced with Mary before. Selby's depiction of these fairies as sexual inverts, a medicalized psychological term used at the beginning of the twentieth century to diagnose homosexuality, facilitates Selby's trope of inversion throughout the novel, which is demonstrated not only in the reversal of the workday through the strike and the reversal of homosexual/heterosexual binary, but through an inversion of language as well.

So Many Men

Harry is eager to begin his first day manning the strike headquarters, however, “In a few hours Harry started to panic with so many men around” (145). He feels a familiar sense of anxiety and lack of control that eventually subsides as he begins to enjoy his

“work” for the union, the camaraderie of his fellow workers, and a sense of (self-)importance and value that he makes clear to anyone who will listen through the duration of the chapter. At the end of the first day of the strike, Harry goes to the bar to celebrate with coworkers and he notices a group of men, “Actually what attracted him to them was a high-pitched feminine voice” (148). The voice belonged to Ginger—an effeminate gay man or “fairy.” Ginger was friends with Sal, Vinnie, and the other guys who frequented “the Greeks, a beatup all night diner near the Brooklyn Army base” (11), a restaurant that provides the shifting center for the loosely connected narratives in *Last Exit*. Unable to take his eyes off Ginger, Harry finds the fairy’s gestures and voice all-consuming, as he listened to a detailed account of a drag ball. Harry “stayed at the bar until about midnight, the image of the fairy’s face and hands still in his mind, his voice still in his ear. When he finished his last beer and left for home, he was unaware of his body: partly from his preoccupation with the image and sound, partly from the beer” (145). Intoxication due to a seemingly endless supply of beer charged to the union expense account facilitates Harry’s cognitive dissociation from an awareness that his fascination is societally unacceptable and inconsistent with his identity of the masculine laborer. Image and sound follow him, distinct from the cognition of their intended meaning and electrify Harry’s senses in ways he has never before felt. He is titillated by lingering, dissociative experience, antagonistic to heterosexuality, just as he was consumed by symbols contrary to production. The narrative in this particular section echoes Harry’s thoughts and refers to Ginger with masculine pronouns—*his* voice still in his ears—suggesting that even though he is in beery haze, Harry is cognizant and accepting of the fact that Ginger is an effeminate man, not a woman.

In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey historicizes the life of the fairy at the turn of the century in Manhattan, explaining that social interaction often revolved around elements that typified the working class. The period of his study culminates at World War II, yet much of what he describes remains relevant to *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Saloons in the early twentieth century played a large role in gay subculture, and Chauncey indicates this is unsurprising due to the role that saloons played for working-class men, as “informal labor exchanges, where men could learn of jobs and union activities. Saloons cashed paychecks and made loans to men who had little access to banks, and they provided such basic amenities as drinking water and toilet facilities to men who lived in tenements without plumbing” (41). The saloon played a critical role in the social life of many men as a place to escape domestic life, discuss politics and work, and interact with unmarried women and prostitutes away from the public sphere. They were also places where fairies and men who identified as heterosexual might interact (Chauncey 42). Manhattan in the first half of the twentieth century is a place where some of the strictures of social life in the public eye were temporarily suspended, where sexuality was both defined and expressed in more diverse forms, and where working-class men interacted in overlapping social and job-related spheres; all of these characteristics are present and functioning in Harry’s world in Brooklyn as recorded by Selby over a decade after the close of World War II but before the Stonewall riots. The bar functions as a place that is neither home nor work, where alternate expressions of identity not involving husband or laborer surface.

In some ways, the period between World War II and the gay liberation movement also functions as a less-defined space. In *The Foundlings*, Christopher Nealon theorizes the

tension between two ways of understanding queer communities prior to Stonewall. He suggests that concepts relying on the explanation of sexual inversion often overlapped with an ethnic understanding of homosexual culture. He writes,

Despite their differences, the languages of psychoanalysis, Victorian sexology, and social-scientific sex research are all primarily focused on describing the genesis of homosexuals (or, in Kinsey's case, the prevalence of certain types of individual experience within a population). By World War II, however, these languages would begin to prove inadequate to historical change run by the emergence of large, urban lesbian and gay communities. Another vocabulary, generated by lesbians and gay men themselves, and more attuned to collective experience than to individual identity, begins to be visible around World War I and picks up momentum after World War II: a vocabulary for what I call the 'ethnicity' model of American homosexuality. (Nealon 4)

Thus, in some ways the same push for collective unification after World War II that created the environment in which *The Donna Reed Show* flourished also worked to make queer culture a more cohesive movement. And yet, this push also contributed to the subversion of subjective particulars in favor of the universal. The migrations to urban centers of industrialization that began during the time periods undertaken in my first and second chapters, but dealt with extensively in my third chapter although impacted a collective queer identity. Nealon suggests a "wave of urbanization" (5) at the beginning of the twentieth century brought homosexuals who would have been more isolated in their hometowns to cosmopolitan centers, where contact with each other and diverse ways of living strengthened the queer community.

This "wave of urbanization" coincides with the migration toward industrialized factory labor in the Northern United States. Nealon "supports Rubin's basic claim to the link between industrial modernity and contemporary homosexual community" (5). He pinpoints World War II as the concatenation because "the war segregated men and women

from each other in the armed forces, made possible a brief experiment in integrating women into the workforce while men were fighting, and also at peacetime, led to a massive settlement of GIs in coastal urban centers like San Francisco and New York. Each of these demographic shifts has been shown to have facilitated the development of lesbian and gay communities” (5). The complexities inherent in periodizing become clear, because though World War II is an obvious turning point, these cultural moves began closer to World War I and prior. Thus, when analyzing *Last Exit* as a pre-Stonewall text, evidence of both the inversion and ethnic models of understanding queer culture are present. Nealon is careful to respect the differences in gay culture in the different periods of the twentieth century; however, he is “tracking a dilemma or tension between individual and communal identities that animates texts across those differences” (8).

Selby’s fairies can be read as a distinct categorization within the class of men who desire men. George Chauncey writes that fairies “were not the only homosexually active men in New York, but they constituted the primary image of the ‘invert’ in popular and elite discourse alike...as the dominant pejorative category in opposition to which sexual ‘normality’ was defined” (48).³⁰ Thus, in being depicted as a clear representation of what men were not *supposed* to be like, fairies helped define and ossify heterosexual masculinity. Chauncey argues that fairies were not defined by their sexual desires or acts, rather fairies were “men who assumed the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women”

³⁰ *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, a multivolume medical examination of sexuality by Havelock Ellis, contains a volume titled *Sexual Inversion*. The first authorized English version of this volume was published in 1901.

(48).³¹ In the diegesis of *Last Exit*, sex is almost always for sale or barter; and when it is not, rape is often an alternative. For Selby, the interpretation of *fairy* as an inversion is necessary on a narrative level. He uses inversion as a plot device to reverse the link between normalized heterosexuality and normalized factory labor. The figure of the fairy combined with the strike at the Corporation ushers in this world of opposites for Harry in which sexual and social possibilities can be realized in a way they never would be otherwise. This simultaneously has the effect of delivering a narrative that would antagonize a mainstream middle-class readership, not only by challenging the consensus regarding what is acceptable fiction, but by challenging the consensus about what is acceptable living and loving. Thus, Selby makes his novel deliberately difficult to mass consume in a way that starkly opposes the Herculean efforts to make *The Donna Reed Show* consumable.

The reversal through inversion is not to be read as a blind swap of one sex for the other, however. As I noted previously, Harry Black is cognizant of the fact that Ginger is a man. He does not simply treat Ginger as a substitute for a woman; the recognition that he desires men is critical to the narrative, and inversion serves as a trope to enable the realization of this desire. After his first periphery encounter with Ginger, Harry comes home from the bar, and he is once again faced with the inescapable fact of Mary's female sexuality. However, he remains intrigued enough by the lingering memory of the fairy to stave off the feeling of revulsion at first: "When she first started caressing him it was still with

³¹ The word *fairy* in the late 1950s and early 1960s could refer to men who dressed as women, sex workers, or as a pejorative for all homosexual men. In *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton refers to "street fairies" in the mid-sixties as unemployed homosexual men who "flaunt an aggressively nellie style" and often exchange sex for money. Newton suggests that the "distinguishing characteristics of the street fairy are (usually) his poverty and his public assumption of a modified drag style" (38).

him and excitement shocked through him. Then he became aware of her and there was nothing but her and anger, the anger keeping alive the excitement. He bolted around immediately and pounded on her trying desperately to evoke the image and sound but it was irrevocably gone for now and Mary groaned and scratched” (149). He is unable to substitute his memory of Ginger for the reality of Mary and is angered by his inability to force the image and sound of a man, albeit a feminine one, onto his wife. Harry’s growing desire for fairies is not a displacement, not a way to trick himself into thinking he desires a woman by desiring feminine men, and defies binary categorization.

The next day, Harry goes to “work” at the union headquarters, still preoccupied with thoughts of Ginger. He then continues to the union office and awaits the morning shift of men with anxiety and anticipation. Alone in the office, Harry looks around disoriented. “Nothing seemed to really exist. The objects in the office were there, they could be seen each in its place, yet still there was confusion. He knew what each object was, what it was for, yet there was no real definition. He sat at his desk for a while, walked around for a while...sat...walked...sat...walked...looked...sat...walked...the only important thing was that the men get there. They had to. The day had to start” (150). Harry’s old method of maintaining a grip on his sexual identity through spatial orientation was no longer working. His anxious anticipation of the men’s arrival is indicative both of his sexual desire for men and his anticipation for the work day—the inversion of work as signified by the strike, the cessation of activities typically associated with “work”—to begin. “And yet there was not a definable thought in his mind...the door opened and three men came in. Harry jumped up. The python slithered into the match box. The day had begun” (150). The work day,

routine expectations, affirmation of duties, and roles to be performed in this anti-work environment eliminate the confusion of his sexuality and put order back in the world. Simultaneously, the presence of *men* has the ability to calm Harry and make him feel at ease.

The language Selby uses to describe the men filing into the union office emphasizes the work-like quality of the anti-work implicit in striking. He writes,

A few more men came in and Harry said ta grab a sign and he stamped their books and told them where to walk, and ta keep movin, and more then came in and grabbed signs and the day was really there now and soon the man came with the beer and Harry told him to come back with two more kegs later and Harry called for boxes of cakes and buns and signed all the bills spreading his signature across the bottom of the paper and putting his title, shop steward local 392, under it and Harry kept his glass filled with beer all through the day and the men came and went, took signs, returned them, had their books stamped. (152)

The sentence, uninterrupted but for rhythmic commas and *ands*, mimics the workday routine and assembly line cadence in a more effective way than his conversation with the foreman and plant manager. Harry's dialogue is not blurred by anyone else's; it remains discrete and his speech and actions are in line with accomplishing the task at hand.

However, the language soon devolves slightly, as an alcoholic fog once again falls over the narrative voice. Harry's cognitive slips between work, violence, heterosexuality, and same-sex desire reveal themselves. Homosocial camaraderie around the beer keg, a debauched inversion of the traditional water cooler, forms over resentment of the corporate hierarchy: "Hanging over the keg, pumping and pumping until nothing came out of the tap but a hiss. Harry put his arms around the shoulders of the two near him and told them they would show those sonsofbitches. And especially that punk Wilson. I'll show that fuckin fairy, that queer punk" (153). Threats toward his boss turn into insults that are, in truth,

desires. Selby frequently uses slash marks in place of apostrophes, emphasizing the sharp dissonance between the subject and the action.

A few pages later, the cadence picks up, there are fewer pauses and repetitions, words merge, and the thoughts are often unfinished before moving on to the next. Chatting up his union buddies, “Harry couldn’t stop: he soliloquized about the babe who picked him up a few weeks ago and took him home and she had a new car and the blond and how many more women who damned near fucked the ass offim, but they couldnt do it that, he could out fuck any woman around and he never did like queers, everytime he saw one he wanted ta rapim in his mouth” (156). Harry’s bragging follows a symbolic chain of thought from women to cars to heterosexual sex to homosexuals to violent sexual acts committed against anonymous “queers.” It is clear that women, blondes specifically, and cars are what Harry is supposed to want, the acquisitions necessary for social status and community involvement, the verifications of masculinity, which had come to be defined, much like femininity, through consumption. Here the blondes are in the sequence of objects to be attained, just as “housewife” followed in line with book, pencil, and chair in the episode of *The Donna Reed Show*. Yet, here the women pursue him—as Mary pursues him at home—and as Harry’s thoughts wander yet again to queers, the insertion of violence through rape crudely masks the basic statement that every time he sees a homosexual man, Harry would like to put his penis in that man’s mouth.

Here, alone and once again drunk with thoughts of the fairy in the union office, he regains his critical sense of control: “Harry sat alone for a while listening to his radio, toying with the dials, drinking the beer, laughing his laugh, gripping the knobs tighter and

twirling them fast then slow, moving the dial where and as he pleased, listening to a station for a few minutes, changing it, tuning in shortwave and feeling that he could drag the foreign countries in as he pleased” (159). Forgetting the remnants of desire for Ginger that made sex with his wife bearable, “the usual resentment against Mary filling his thoughts. She was once more responsible for his misery as were the bosses for the fact that he didn’t make much money. Between them they tried to make his life miserable; they tried ta fuckim everytime he moved; if it wasnt for them things would be different” (161). For Harry, the social mandates to be heterosexual and enact the role of the perfect worker are always coupled in an effort to restrict him tightly enough to strangle the life out of him.

Ginger and Harry finally meet and interact in the union office, brought by her friends with the promise of free beer. Ginger does not return Harry’s affections. She manipulates his desire and gets a Pavlovian response: Harry is “unaware of the spasmodic jerking of his fingers, the moisture in his mouth” (180). Ginger however, felt “the power she had over him and [despised] him” (180). This power literally manifests itself when Ginger crushes Harry’s hand in her bicep. Harry was “too drunk to comprehend the congruity of the situation: the little faggot conquering the giant with the crotch of her arm” (181). Selby, who typically refers to all of the queens, fairies, and transvestites throughout the narrative as “she” when the perspective is removed and third-person, writes a gender pronoun reversal into this scene: “Ginger stared directly into his face, smiling still, wanting to crush him, to force him to his knees. **He** bent **his** arm to one side, still not using **his** other hand against Harry, **his** face stiffening as Harrys body started to lean with the pressure, Ginger wanting to yell IM MORE OF A MAN THAN YOU, then suddenly *she* opened her

arm, spun around and left Harry standing there, looking after her as she mixed herself another drink, holding his hand and rubbing it” (182, my emphasis, author’s capitalization).³² And with that singular move, Ginger arm-wrestles Harry over to the world of gay New York subculture. Masculinity, as displayed through control and strength, belong to Ginger in this scene, despite her sexual orientation. Once the battle against Harry is won, the feminine pronoun returns. Ginger’s thoughts are angry ones; she is resentful of the social privilege of masculinity that Harry maintains due to his closeted status and resentful toward his unwanted sexual advances.

However, historically, a person like Harry would not have faced easy choices with regard to an ability to openly express his sexuality. Miriam Frank has written an account of the relationship between gay activism and labor unions based primarily in a decade’s worth of collected interviews. In *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, Frank writes of the experiences of Gary Deane, “a labor educator for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America’s Midwestern region in the 1960s, Deane specialized in union-sponsored cooperative housing” (51–52). Deane tells Frank, “You couldn’t be openly gay and expect to maintain a job in the union” (51). He continues:

I never lied, but I did sometimes change genders in a conversation....I would go to union socials as a bachelor, but there was this assumption that I wanted to get married. People would angle to see if I was interested in dating their daughters or their sisters. Sometimes at union retreats there would be a woman who would steal my room key. (Frank 52)

³² Because Selby uses *she* in perspective-neutral narratives when discussing feminine men, I’ve chosen to do so in this essay as well.

Here, Deane also suggests a woman is in pursuit of his sexuality, a problem to be solved through the reversal of gender pronouns. Frank continues, “Deane was turned down for a high-profile job and later found out that rivals were gossiping ‘that I was something less than a man.’ In the late 1960s, he moved from Chicago to New York City to work for the union-sponsored United Housing Federation. Here, too, a promotion was blocked with the comment, ‘No, not that fag’” (52). Deane’s experience supports an interpretation of the historical reality that success within the job market and the union depended on his masculine identity; “being a man” was considered at odds with the admission of sexual desire for other men.

Treatment of homosexuality within unions was far from uniform. Queer union members were treated differently from trade to trade, and in some instances, gay men and lesbians were treated differently within the same trade. For example, Frank provides evidence that within unions serving “telephone crafts,” lesbians occasionally found support from their union and straight, male coworkers, but gay men found no such acceptance (21). Frank writes, “Gay men in the high-wage, blue-collar crafts of the telephone industry were never open, though in service jobs such as billing and sales or as operators, the atmosphere was more tolerant” (21). Bus drivers’ unions, however, were more tolerant of homosexuality because, Frank argues, the occupation was predominantly a solitary one and there were plenty of available jobs. Thus, conflict did not play out elbow-to-elbow on the floors of factories that were being threatened with relocation and closure.

Prior to Stonewall and the gay liberation movement, however, very few union officers and staff members who identified as homosexual were out of the closet. Frank suggests that in the 1950s, unions represented 36% of the workers and tended to be liberal politically and conservative socially (49). Therefore, “Homosexual labor leaders did not come out. Many gay union staff and elected officials feared blackmail, and many others became targets of smear campaigns or were fired or turned down for promotions. Unions then were no safer for queers in leadership than the Democratic Party, liberal churches and synagogues, universities, or IBM” (49). She notes that many labor leaders were not openly gay within their unions until the 1970s and 1980s, and at that point, the act of coming out of the closet was a heterogeneous experience. Some were celebratory, others were hesitant, and some only did so if they were openly forced to declare their sexual orientation through social pressure. She writes, “Closeted union officers and staff members were concerned that openness would risk their campaigns or damage their careers and therefore divided their public lives from their sexual identities. Their fears were not unfounded” (50).

Frank interviewed Gary Kapanowski about his experience in the 1970s as a young, gay labor activist and part-time student at Wayne State University, working at Briggs Beautyware in the Detroit suburb of Sterling Heights, Michigan. Briggs manufactured auto parts and was purchased by Chrysler in 1953; the Beautyware arm of the company made enameled bathtubs and plumbing fixtures. Unionized workers at Briggs Beautyware were members of UAW Local 212. Kapanowski, known around the shop as Beetle because of his distinctive haircut, opposed Chrysler’s plan to shut down the factory and relocate to Tennessee, giving workers, several of whom were Kapanowski’s family members, a raw deal

in the process. Their pensions were eliminated and men who wanted to relocate to Knoxville would get their salaries cut nearly in half. The primary membership of Local 212 worked at a Chrysler stamping plant on Mack Avenue in Detroit's east side.³³

In the 1970s in Detroit, expectations about the forms of sexuality that were allowed under the radar in the work environment were more relaxed than those depicted in the 1950s setting of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Kapanowski tells Frank that he fell in love with a married, male co-worker and devout Catholic. He says, "We would have oral sex in the stockroom, during breaks...I always knew when he had gone to confession, because that's when he wouldn't want sex. For special occasions, we would have beers and go to the motel on the corner, a half-mile from the factory" (Frank 67). Kapanowski would have trysts with other men at the factory, too, an opportunity that was not infrequent, even among workers who identified as heterosexual, according to Kapanowski, who "would do it with anybody that I was attracted to, and I wouldn't get turned down" (67). His illicit behavior went unnoticed by the older generation of employees, including his father and uncles who worked at the factory unaccustomed to the codes signaling a new sexual openness after the gay liberation movement and the free love era. Neither was Kapanowski socially sanctioned by the other men at the factory: "the guys who did know about me didn't harass me. There was a lot of overtime, so after work we would go out to somebody's trailer and drink, and sex would follow. I was the one for sex. Those guys didn't usually run into people like

³³ According to Frank, the Mack Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (MARUM) joined with other groups using the acronym RUM to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1969 (67).

me” (67). As in *Last Exit*, an overlap between the spheres of work life and social life provided an opportunity for same-sex experimentation, heavily fueled by alcohol.

Despite Kapanowski’s relative freedom with his coworkers, his sexual orientation became part of an attempt to intimidate him, utilized by political rivals within the union. The incumbent faction assured members that there no critical issues at stake; however, Kapanowski ran for chairman on the platform that the union should resist closing and relocating the factory. Beetle explains one attempt at sabotage thus: “Someone from the opposition came and asked me for oral sex in the frit room, where they made enamel. It was a setup. There’s a roof with windows, and we were being observed by the committeeman” (Frank 67). After this incident, Kapanowski narrowly lost the election, and a new contract that gave in to a number of concessions was signed. A Florida conglomerate bought Beautyware, and employees were offered the jobs in Knoxville at \$2.40 an hour, less than half of the \$5.00 average wage (Frank 68).

In 1973, Kapanowski once again ran for chairman in order to oppose the pension deal that older employees who would not relocate were set to receive in the next round of negotiations. During this intense campaign, he stayed at a motel room close to work after a night of mandatory overtime. Kapanowski states, “Some of the stewards came over to the room to play poker. Then a new guy came in, a foreman from Briggs. He had a projector and several short porn movies, and there was pot. I drank until I passed out” (68). The unstated implication is that Kapanowski was once again set up by rivals because when he arrived back at the motel after work the next day, three Sterling Heights detectives arrived to arrest him. “They found the porn films and the projector and an ounce of marijuana, not

mine. They also found my stack of flyers for Monday morning, about the plant closing. One of the cops said: ‘You’re a communist. We know all about you’” (Frank 68). Kapanowski spent two days in jail for the incident before he was bailed out. In court, he was offered a deal: charges would be dropped if he quit his job and blamed the other members for the marijuana and pornography. He declined the deal and fought the charges, which were eventually dropped.

The day before the election, Kapanowski was forcibly outed by a flyer distributed around the factory by the incumbent opposition. “It was all over the plant, everywhere,” he said, “in huge letters, black against orange, ‘BEETLE IS A FAGGOT—DO YOU WANT A FAGGOT TO BE YOUR CHAIRMAN OF THE SHOP COMMITTEE?’ They were saying that as a steward I had had sex with people, that I was not a good steward. At dinner, my father took the flyer out and asked me in front of my sisters and my mother, ‘Is this true?’ I said, ‘Is it true that I’m gay? Yes’” (69). Despite the incendiary tactics of his opponents, Kapanowski won the election.

Once Kapanowski was installed as chairman, Frank goes on to describe an incident involving a wildcat strike—a strike held without union leaders’ consent—at Mack Stamping plant that lasted from August 14 to August 16, 1973, shutting down the factory. It ended when a thousand UAW officials and retirees approached the factory, some with bats and pipes, and beat picketers. They also barred Kapanowski from entering the union hall to bring strikers food. Kapanowski opposed the violent suppression of fellow union members and ended up in a scuffle with UAW sergeant-at-arms that had to be settled by placing the local union into trustee receivership. Ultimately, a deal was struck: Kapanowski would

represent all the workers, mandatory overtime would continue, but the company would put \$1 million into the pension fund. Frank writes that the union was unable to stop the plant from closing but it was “Beetle Kapanowski, the 27-year-old gay shop chairman, who handed out severance checks to his fellow workers. He was the last to exit the plant” (69). Kapanowski’s sexuality was initially understood, but it was unread by those who were unaccustomed to same-sex desire being openly addressed. Once he was outed publicly by union members, Kapanowski was still able to continue his job and role within the union. The 1970s in the United States maintained a different social climate than the one of the 1950s and early 1960s, and yet the facts of Kapanowski’s sexual desire were still wielded against him as a weapon in an attempt to gain corporate interests, albeit with less success than they may have had in previous years and through the union that, in other instances, could have protected his rights.



Harry Black’s desires, on the other hand, are less perceptible in his attraction to Ginger. After Ginger brings Harry to his knees, Harry spends that night sleeping in his union office, reversing the home/work binary, part of the trope of inversion. The next morning, he awakes with excitement and misremembers the events of that night as pleasant ones in which everyone liked him. He is, however, capable of remembering that Ginger mentioned a bar called Mary’s the night before, a bar that shares the name of his wife, and he takes a cab there. Even though Ginger rejected him, Harry is able to explore his desire with two other men. Through his connections to the gay subculture at Mary’s, he meets two fairies named Alberta and Regina, with whom he has subsequent relationships.

Harry's first encounter with Alberta is portrayed as uniquely sweet and domestic compared to the relationships between just about any other Selby characters. When Harry is with Alberta, he experiences "a pleasure that he, with its excitement and tenderness had never experienced—he wanted to grab and squeeze the flesh he felt in his hands, he wanted to bite it, yet he didn't want to destroy it; he wanted it to be there, he wanted to come back to it" (196). After being with Alberta, "Harry was happy" (196). The simplicity of this statement belies its singularity and significance to the narrative world of *Last Exit*. Selby's characters are rarely happy. In fact, Harry's happiness confused him because he had nothing to compare it to and realized he had never actually felt happy before. The pair spent the next day together, went to the movies, had dinner. "When they got home Harry made love to Alberta then they sat drinking and listening to music" (198). Likewise, Selby's characters do not "make love"; they have violent, nonreciprocal sex, like Harry with his wife. Back in his own home, Harry ignores Mary and gets into bed thinking of Alberta, "remembering many times the last kiss in the doorway" (199). He doesn't have to take out his aggression on Mary for being the source of his problems. He is able to silently let her exist. For Harry, this relationship with Alberta is romance. *This* is domestic bliss. He returns again and again to Mary's (the bar) and finds a comfortable place for himself in the social life there and gets to know members of the queer community, suggesting Nolan's ethnicity model of gay culture is replacing the binary choice of the home and work environment, allowing Harry to find peace for the first time.

In the meantime, the strike drags on and the Corporation finally makes a move to settle, but one of their negotiating points is to demand the right to fire Harry Black. The

union immediately balks, but secretly they just want to get rid of Harry as well so they can negotiate a better contract. While Harry continues his work at the union office and his new social life within the queer community, his wife, Mary, fades into the background. Harry ignores her; the two don't speak. When he goes to bed at night, Harry drifts to sleep thinking not only of his new friends and lovers, but hoping that he will find someone to settle down with, "hoping he might meet someone who wanted to live with him and they could make love everynight or just sit and hold hands and feel her small, soft, and weak in his arms...not all slimy like a ballbreakin cunt" (209). The only way Harry experiences the Donna Reed version of domestic bliss is with another man. The small, soft, weakness of femininity Harry desires is only present in a male body, not one with a "ballbreakin cunt."

The End of the Line: Harry's Demise and Reed's Resolutions

On *The Donna Reed Show*, you can depend on the half hour plot being happily resolved; in *Last Exit* the inevitability of any seemingly happy resolution being violently destroyed is just as reliable. After his relationship with Alberta, Harry meets Regina at a drag ball. She is wearing a sport shirt and slacks, not a dress like the drag queens, and Harry finds this attractive. He doesn't desire the queens; however, he thinks they are some of the most beautiful women he has ever seen. Selby again complicates the urge to create a simple inversion of desire within Harry whereby he deludes himself into being attracted to the men who most closely resemble women. Harry acknowledges on some level the queerness of his desire. Harry begins dating Regina, who is not as emotionally invested in him as Alberta was. Regina enjoys being taken out and lavished with gifts and affection.

Shortly after Regina and Harry begin seeing each other, a settlement is reached between the Corporation and the union, bringing an end to the strike. On his way to see Regina, Harry realizes that some of his expenses, like cab trips to visit her, must be cut because he can't put them on the union expense sheet anymore. Regina, who has been afforded a carefree lifestyle thanks to the blank check Harry's union status provided, is uninterested in him if he can't take her out on the town. She resolutely breaks up with him.

Devastated by Regina's rejection, Harry goes home and wakes Mary out of her sleep, slapping her. "IF IT WASNT FOR YOU ITD BE DIFFERENT. ITS ALL YAFAULT" (224). Rather than blaming the patriarchal, capitalist systems that insist his desires are unacceptable or taking responsibility for the choices that led him to marry Mary, he blames the woman whose simple existence stands as an accusation and constant reminder that he is a failure as a husband and as a worker. Expunged from the dreamlike queer social life and forced to return to work, Harry is defeated. Regardless of whether or not the union received their demands, he had not once considered that the strike must come to an end. He had eagerly adopted the temporary suspension as a way of life, complete with spending cash and a love life that the break from the regimented workday awarded. At his first day back on the job, Harry makes one cut with his machine but can't bring himself to reset it. He gets up and walks out. He heads to the bar and gets drunk, repeatedly calling Regina, who will not pick up.

At this point, Selby reverts to the narrative's former excruciatingly brutal realism. Harry gets insensibly intoxicated. He leaves the bar and runs into a neighborhood boy,

whom he sexually assaults. The boy breaks free and reports Harry to the local neighborhood gang, Harry's former "friends" who are eager to serve up their characteristic vigilante justice. The men pin him to the crossbars of a billboard, punching and kicking him, snapping Harry's arms as his coat catches, effectively hanging him on the billboard pole. Bloodied and left for dead on a commercialized crucifix, Harry sobs, attempting to scream but unable to produce a sound.

The end of the strike is the reversal of this inverted narrative world that allowed Harry to explore his more nuanced homosexuality. Harry loses the source of his inexhaustible bank account and as a result, Regina; he has to go back to his wife and his job, and it breaks him. While it is clear that Selby holds no respect for the union or the strike itself, neither does he admire the Corporation—they are both depicted as bloated bureaucracies, cultural systems that serve to subjugate individual desire. During the fantasy furlough of the strike, Harry is able to escape from the social structure within which he could never succeed. The return of the normal workday signals the proscription of his newfound sexuality. Harry's reaction to this profound loss in combination with his inability to produce on the job, is to lash out violently in retaliation, to the point of ultimately creating the circumstances of his own societally sanctioned death—social suicide.



For Mary Stone, social suicide meant scheduling two dates on the same night. Luckily, Donna would always think of an equitable solution in the next twenty-three minutes. For me, the almost unbridgeable stylistic and thematic differences between *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Donna Reed Show* highlights not just the lengths Selby would go to push

the limits of obscenity in order to provoke thought—or the fact that Donna Reed had to take one step backward for every two steps forward toward progress for women on television. The disparity between the two texts also illustrates the extent to which television narratives were controlled and contained in order to present the image of the middle-class nuclear family as a consumable fantasy at the cost of suppressing desires that were inconsistent with its corporate ideals. Ultimately the homogenization of popular culture and commodity sold to the public concealed a different reality: a clash over limited housing that was often brutal, violent, and consumed with issues of race. This interaction was also played out on the factory floor in a competition for jobs, and both of these conflicts are vividly displayed in historic Detroit throughout the middle of the twentieth century.

Much like the feminist roots of Betty Friedan's work and the evolving interpretation of gay culture, the relationship between American corporate structure and an American identity began prior to World War II and, while taking new shape, continued into the time period during which Selby writes and Donna Reed acts. After World War I, the Ford Sociological Department literally indoctrinated factory workers with the core values portrayed in every episode of *The Donna Reed Show*, values proven impossible to attain in the *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. In order to qualify for Ford Motor Company's renowned \$5-a-day wage, employees were subjected to a system of rules and regulations. Sociological Department investigators dropped in on workers' homes unannounced in order to assess a variety of cultural standards, including cleanliness, whether or not the home took in boarders, and how well children were doing in school. They even accessed employees' bank accounts in order to affirm that they were making enough deposits and spending the money judiciously.

Last but not least, “Sociological Department investigators also assisted worker’s families by teaching wives about home care, cooking and hygiene” (“Ford Motor Company Sociological Department and English School”). If an employee was to earn this widely acclaimed pay rate of \$5 a day in order to be able to purchase and consume the products they made at Ford Motor Company, the corporation was going to dictate cultural values as they pertained to the home, family, and body. Furthermore, graduation from Ford’s English School, an arm of the Sociological Department whose purpose was to help immigrant employees learn to speak and read the language, was “considered so valuable that an immigrant seeking naturalization could use it to meet many of the requirements needed before taking the final citizenship exam” (“Ford Sociological Department and English School”). The implementation of the Ford English School at the Highland Park plant was perceived as such a success that other national companies followed its lead. Fordist ideals became, in part, translated into American ideals.

Although there has been a great deal of interest surrounding the Ford Sociological Department, its goals and means are rarely stated this simply: workers in one of the most successful American corporations were compensated monetarily for adhering to the cultural beliefs of one man. They were paid to have nuclear families, abandon the cultures of their heritage, cook American food, and maintain clean homes. Similar models of corporate management were adopted by other corporations and unofficially integrated into the fabric of American worklife. In her assessment of the Ford Sociological Department, Martha Banta writes that it “insisted upon the tight fit between laborer, citizen, and homeowner” (215). Although these principles resulted in some cultural ideals we could read as positive,

such as access to education, Selby's characters display all the fissures inherent in forcing this fit, showing how Fordist coercion has violent results. Banta continues:

All the logic Fordism bequeathed to American house ideology were in place: 1) the good worker as the good family man (or the ambitious bachelor about to become one); 2) the good family abiding by the 'American (end quote?) model for the virtuous life; 3) the American model predicated upon ownership of one's own little house—modest perhaps but tidy, clean, and warmed by the vital heat of acceptable conduct... To implement the standardization of one element in this basic triad was to attempt the standardization of all three: the worker, the citizen, the single-family home. (215)

Harry Black was unable to be a good worker or a good family man. Only during the strike was Harry able to make the fragments of his identity fit together in a workable way, one in accordance with his desires, but in total opposition to cultural expectations.

In 1951, C. Wright Mills published *White Collar*, a text that supplied theories about class and work structure and the ways in which the collective masculine identity of the American man had changed after World War II due to his relationship to entrepreneurship. Mills argued that a shift from industrial capitalism—the business model that, according to him, best embraced uniquely American frontier-like ambitions—to monopoly capitalism had put men in a feminine subject position. According to Mills, “In the generation before World War II, the number of proprietors of manufacturing establishments declined 34 percent; the number of wage and salary workers employed in manufacturing rose 27 percent. Manufacturing is no longer a small business world; it is increasingly dominated by large-scale bureaucratic structures. The war economy, built on top of this already extreme concentration, further concentrated American industry” (24). Mills terms this “extreme busi-

ness concentration,” in which “small business becomes smaller, big business becomes bigger,” ultimately creating two polarized categories of entrepreneurship: “large industrial corporations and small retail or service firms” (24).

We can see the shift Mills describes at play in the story of Beetle Kapanowski. Kapanowski, who worked for bathtub manufacturer Beautyware, became part of the UAW during a tumultuous time for Detroit unions because of corporate consolidation. Beautyware was owned by Briggs, which was purchased by Chrysler, which then sold the company to a Florida conglomerate who moved Beautyware to Tennessee, dismantling the shop and lowering the wages of employees. In this way, Kapanowski’s life and sexual habits became political fodder in the internal battles within UAW Local 212. Frank marks this as the initial stages of the end of the “postwar industrial boom,” the beginning of a trend that would be dominant by the 1990s (Frank 69). “Nevertheless,” she writes, “as early as the 1970s, when queer people were first articulating their unique political visions for justice and democracy, the two movements did attempt to find common ground” (Frank 37–38). Furthermore, Kapanowski’s struggle with his own union members who would use his sexuality against him in order to relocate the shop and slash wages also resonates with Selby’s blurred distinction between union and Corporation, each bureaucracy depicted as more invested in the perpetuation of its own interests than those of the individuals it serves.

For Mills, these new ways in which business was being structured impacted not only how men related to their labor, but how they viewed their personal identity within the framework of American culture. Robert Corber, author of *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, adeptly contextualizes *White Collar*

and what he refers to as Mills's intention "to recover an outmoded form of male identity"

(33). Corber writes:

Mills stressed the contradiction between the fantasies and desires inspired by the American dream of upward mobility and postwar realities. According to Mills, the growth of bureaucratic structures and the increasing division of labor had transformed the American character. Whereas in the nineteenth century the qualities that distinguished the American worker were thrift, discipline, persistence, and initiative, in the twentieth they were caution, efficiency, and a desire to please others. (32)

Thus for Mills, the transition in business modes directly relates to a shift in cultural ideals, placing value on a different set of not just work habits but personality traits. Efficiency, I would argue, is the quality most prized within Taylorism and Fordist schools of management.

To Seek Fulfillment By Established Routes

Utilizing Mills's *White Collar* in juxtaposition with the theories Betty Friedan first outlined in "Women Are People, Too!" and developed in *The Feminine Mystique* further illustrates the connection between Donna Reed and Harry Black. Mills and Friedan produced philosophies contemporary to these works and dealing with the dilemmas that faced men and women in the 1950s and 1960s. Each author highlighted the ways identity was related to gendered performance of work. Furthermore, both Mills and Friedan suggest that the shift in the nature of these types of labor was in some part a reaction to postwar economic prosperity.

Friedan argued that the perpetuation of the perception that women were supposed to find fulfillment through their devotion to their husband, children, and home was a reaction to earlier feminist movements that occurred after World War II and "spearheaded by

Freudian psychiatrists, conservative social scientists, and educators who increasingly claimed that when women prepared themselves for anything other than marriage and motherhood, they were turning their back on their true feminine nature” (Coontz 37). For Friedan, this emphasis on domesticity and fulfillment located in the nuclear family and women’s roles as wife, mother, and homemaker coincided with a collective sentiment for reunification felt on a national level after the hardship, fragmentation, and trauma families suffered throughout the Great Depression and World War II (Coontz 37). Economic prosperity, she argued, enabled Americans to move past the basic necessities of worrying about food, shelter, and survival; consumer culture, then, “filled the void created by women’s lack of identity” (Horowitz 2). Mills, as I have indicated, also argues that the shift in men’s roles from producers to consumers is central to understanding how, in his view, masculine identity became corroded.

Moreover, an examination of both Mills and Friedan suggest that these gender identities became internalized through collective guilt. While conducting her research on the reception of *The Feminine Mystique*, Stephanie Coontz collected a number of letters written to Friedan. Many of these letters from housewives indicate that they had no idea other women felt this way, too. They admit to feeling guilty because they assumed they were the only women who had these thoughts, due no doubt in part to the fact that discontentment was not portrayed in the media. What Friedan tapped into was the sense of relief in knowing that other housewives were also dissatisfied. Likewise, Corber suggests that in Mills’s view, “mass culture naturalized capitalist structures of oppression by manipulating and diffusing the fantasies and desires inspired by the American dream. Having internalized the

myth of the self-made man, the American people were more likely to blame themselves than the 'system' for their lack of freedom and mobility" (Corber 33). Thus, both Friedan and Mills believed that women and men were unable to see the larger shifts in the economy and bureaucratic structures at work over the course of decades and, because of this, assumed responsibility on a personal level for being unable to live up to ideals that American culture embraced and repeated back to them through the media.

For both Mills and Friedan, men and women were failing to find value in the efforts of labor, and this led to intense dissatisfaction that was difficult to locate. Friedan wrote of it as "a strange stirring, a dissatisfied groping, a yearning, a search that is going on in the minds of women. This is not easy to put into words because those women who struggle with it struggle alone, afraid to admit that they are asking themselves the silent question 'Is this all?'" Corber sites the fact that Mills believed "men had lost the ability to 'realize [themselves] in [their] work' (14). The increasing division of labor reduced them to 'cogs in a business machinery'" (34). This inability to source out the chain of command, to identify both the supervisor of one's work and the product one produces, in turn leads to the misplacement of a trait associated with American masculinity: aggression. In Mills's view, "The corporation was a highly centralized organization in which the delegation of responsibility insured that those in power remained inaccessible. Consequently, they were unable to 'locate the enemy and declare war upon him. Targets for aggression are unavailable, and certainty is taken from men.' What was most disturbing to Mills about the emergence of a Fordist regime of capital accumulation was its potential to insert men into a feminine subject-position" (Corber 34).

The concepts of guilt and misplaced aggression are both at work in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Donna Reed Show*. First, when they compare themselves with her, Donna's peers feel a sense of guilt because they cannot live up to Donna's unparalleled patience and sweetness when it comes to parenting. In all likelihood, this sense of guilt was also experienced by many viewers in the audience at home. But secondly, when the primary problem to be solved in an episode is one in which Donna wants to express her individual desires, desires that conflict with those of her children and husband, she resolves the crisis by fixing her own attitude. Rather than persist in following through with her initial instinct to hold others individually responsible or fight against the gender and economic systems in place that work contrary to her desires—the very systems that overlap to dictate the existence of *The Housewives' Corner*—she instead realizes that her persistence would only create more problems she would then have to solve, increasing her workload. The best, most efficient solution becomes to change her own perspective and transform those initial desires into ones that more easily align with others. Donna Stone's social network creates a loop, a bureaucracy, within which she can find no locus for the frustrations, causing her to turn them inward or else be perpetually frustrated.

Likewise, Harry Black is just a cog in the machine that Mills identifies. Unable to recognize and express his sexual desires for other men, the targets of his aggression become misplaced. He blames his wife: "ITS ALL YAFAULT" (Selby 224) and hits her. His aggression often then turns to his boss at work, but because his boss is just one of many bosses at the Corporation, one with whom he can only pick petty fights, he is left unable to resolve his anger. The chain of Harry's thoughts then turns to men hitting each other in boxing

matches, buildings crumbling, rape, destruction, and violence. Harry's fear and frustration due to an inability to control his environment is present throughout the narrative, save for moments in the middle of the strike. Once the strike is resolved and Harry is expected to return to work, he acts out by forcing himself on a boy. The behavior ensures that Harry will be brutally punished. The social constructs of the narrative set in the 1950s and surrounding the fictional character ensure that he is unable to work toward effectively changing his circumstances, unlike the lived experiences of Kapanowski two decades after this setting. Although Kapanowski could not change the fate of his work environment, he was able to make his desires known to his fellow workers and his family without being forced to rein them back in—a fate Harry Black and Donna Stone never met. The billboard Harry is hung from functions as an advertisement for an unachievable dream, one fueled by the image of consumption, not production.

As I have previously suggested is true for *The Feminine Mystique*, Mills's work has some theoretical flaws. Primary among them, as Corber suggests, is that "For the mass of Americans, it was not that the shift from industrial to monopoly capitalism had eroded the basis of the American dream, but that American workers lacked the skills necessary for succeeding in an increasingly competitive labor market" (33). Historians have suggested that Friedan "exaggerated the popular approval of feminism in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, as well as the novelty of the antifeminist propaganda of the 1950s. The feminine mystique was not a postwar invention, but rather a repackaging of old prejudices in more modern trappings in the aftermath of the suffrage movement" (Coontz 38). Coontz agrees, and yet, she still asserts that the telling of this account "rang true" with women and still

presents a basis for truth (Coontz 39). According to both Friedan and Mills, women and men, respectively, were more likely to blame themselves than the cultural and economic systems at play. Likewise, both suggest that a shift from a culture of production to one of consumption had a profound impact on the feminine and masculine identity, as men and women became increasingly unable to find a meaningful connection to their work.

Production and reproduction are symbolic of the Fordist ideal to which Harry cannot conform; after years of trying, he is not the perfect worker, the perfect father, or the perfect husband. Donna Stone, however, is the perfect mother and wife *because* she is the perfect worker. And if Donna Reed masquerades excessive femininity through Donna Stone in order to wink at gender codes, Harry masquerades heteronormative masculinity, becoming the enforcer of culture in order to conceal the ways in which he falls short of it. He controls Mary with brutality because he cannot control himself. Eve Sedgwick writes that she believes what May Bertram would have wished for John Marcher is “a progress from a vexed and gaping self-ignorance around his homosexual possibilities to a self-knowledge of them that would have freed him to find and enjoy a sexuality of whatever sort emerged” (207). Instead Marcher progresses to a state that society dictates, “a completed and rationalized and wholly concealed and accepted one” (207). Harry experienced a temporary reprieve from having to rationalize and conceal his desires from himself and from others. However, he does not live in a world in which he is able to explore his own sexual possibilities. Unable to force himself back into the closet, Harry chooses death. For Mills, “The Fordist organization of production and consumption had reduced the utopian

promise of American to paying off a mortgage. The shift from industrial to monopoly capitalism had made a mockery of the values and ideals America traditionally symbolized. Although America continued to inspire dreams of personal freedom and unlimited social mobility, those dreams increasingly revolved around homeownership and the achievement of economic security” (Corber 41). Well, these may have been the dreams for men at least.

At the time that *The Feminine Mystique* was published:

Only four states allowed a wife the full right to a separate legal residence. When a woman married, most courts ruled, she ‘loses her domicile and acquires that of her husband’s, no matter where she resides or what she believes or intends.’...Even when a wife lived apart from her husband, she could seldom rent or buy a home on her own. In 1972, the *New York Times* carried a story about a woman who could not rent an apartment until her husband, a patient in a mental hospital, signed the lease. (Coontz 6)

The American ideal propagated by mass media had become the middle-class, nuclear family living in a free-standing single home. The children were overseen by a mother whose primary job and sense of fulfillment was to kindly and patiently raise her children while their father worked to accrue enough capital to stock the home with name-brand consumer goods and appliances. *The Donna Reed Show* worked as part of the media’s reinforcement of this ideal in the same way that *Last Exit to Brooklyn* worked to reveal it as an impossibility to a literary counterculture sometimes at odds with mainstream cultural and political values. Of course, there is nothing inherently *wrong* with this version of the American dream, save for its repetition and rigid reinforcement—the insistence that all who fall short of it are somehow defective, and the establishment of the ideal as a machine in its own right, within which we are all cogs who must follow a specific route. Because, after all, “A woman doesn't have to seek fulfillment by established routes, for why should a woman's

pattern be the same as a man's? Or why should it be like that of any other woman? But every woman who makes the search helps another get started. Every woman helps to paint the new picture of femininity that all women need and only women themselves can paint” (Friedan).

THE END OF THE LINE

The Ford River Rouge Plant's longstanding tradition of offering public tours halted in the 1980s. Designed by Albert Kahn in 1917 and hailed as an aesthetic and technological wonder in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Rouge had become a cumbersome, outdated and expensive vestige of the height of manufacturing in Detroit during a time period that arguably coincided with the height of manufacturing in the United States. Throughout the 1990s, Ford Motor Company considered halting the production of the Mustang—the similarly iconic Ford car that was predominantly made at the Rouge—and closing the plant down. However, U.A.W. leaders twice persuaded the company to reinvest in updating plant technology and refreshing the Mustang's design concepts in exchange for the union's agreement to measures aimed at increasing worker efficiency (Muller). In 2000, Henry Ford's great grandson Bill Ford, urged for a \$2 billion reinvestment in the Rouge Plant. Presently, the Ford River Rouge Complex has massive skylights—which the company calls monitors—and energy efficient heating, cooling, and fresh air ventilation. The factory has a “living roof,” padded with sedum plants in soil, which drains and filters rain water. Fields of native perennials like aster and cardinal flower are used in experimentation aimed at eliminating the toxicity of polyaromatic hydrocarbons left behind as a byproduct of decades of steel production near the Rouge's coke ovens (“Ford Rouge Factory Tour”). And the tours of the Ford Rouge Factory, open to the public, have since resumed.

Henry Ford capitalized on technological innovations that had been evolving in the previous century and set them to motion by adding a conveyor belt to the assembly line. He was not the first to accomplish much of what he is known for today; he was just the

best at it. His personal work ethic and private beliefs formed the foundation upon which the profit-generating company that shared his name grew exponentially. The success of the Ford Motor Company's principles are, in fact, responsible for the incorporation of these principles into the fabric of American culture. However, for all of my emphasis on rigidity and organization, I hope I have also shown a few of the ways in which the Ford Motor Company stepped outside its own controlling logic; for example, by asserting that the flexibility of the massive car company in combination with a skilled work force allowed for factory conversion during World War II. In addition to presenting the structure that authors and artists rebel against, Fordist logic also works in conjunction with art. This can be seen literally in an industrial aesthetic that includes the workers as a component of the artistic representation of technological innovation like Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry*. However, the expansive Ford Motor Company network also provided the means by which *Detroit Industry* was sponsored and preserved when Edsel Ford commissioned Rivera to paint the mural and the Ford public relations team likely helped prevent an outraged public from insisting it be removed.

I would like to think that theories I have laid out here also have enough flexibility to extend to other texts and time periods. Appealingly simple, optimistic, and ultimately consumable, Lewis's traditional boy-meets-girl love story is a narrative form that presented nothing new in terms of twentieth-century literary innovation. These are common themes in American culture in the first half of the twentieth century, but the stories still maintain their thematic relevance now, nearly one hundred years later, resonating particularly for any reader who has ever worked in a cubicle or retail store. Some of the plots resemble

scripts for an episode of the television show *The Office* (2005-2013) or the movie *Office Space* (1999). Like both of these contemporary examples with a wide viewership, Lewis's texts deal with workday pressure through humor and love, appealing to those who are dissatisfied with their jobs. The ways in which themes of destruction and devolution are contrary to Fordist principles in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* could easily extend into more canonically postmodern texts like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. The economy of decentralization is an entropic suburban freeway spiraling out the city. Detroit locations such as the Heidelberg Project, an art installation largely made of discarded found objects that covers several city blocks, could make complex sites for an analysis of the collision between housing and commodification created by the wave of outward migration known as white flight. The next period of Detroit economic development is currently in transition. Young, white residents have begun to return back to the city's center while African Americans have continued to move out to the suburbs. Detroit has become an unlikely tourist attraction for urban explorers and photographers hunting to capture ruin porn—aestheticized images of abandoned factories, churches, hospitals, and schools often reclaimed by nature. Corporations like Quicken Loans have purchased large swaths of urban land with the intention of redeveloping it. The themes of migration and stagnation, prosperity and decline, are still ever-present while continuously evolving.

Not long ago, I took the Ford Rouge Factory tour. In under two hours and for about \$15, you can see five components of the factory, including a short theater presentation of narrated historic film footage and a view of the living roof from the observation deck. The

Assembly Plant Walking Tour provided, for me, the most interesting portion of the afternoon. A catwalk is suspended above workers assembling the Ford F-150, and the spectators can see the vehicles being built and watch the men and women assemble the trucks. Although signs warn against it, interaction between the “tourists” and the workers seemed inevitable to me. Workers looked up and waved; spectators said hello. I asked a man if it was weird to have strangers watch him work—he shrugged and smiled. A few of the women I was with were wearing skirts, a fact that they became very aware of as they stood suspended above the heads of workers looking up. Although the interior of the Rouge is vastly different than the depiction Diego Rivera painted more than half a century ago, snake-like conveyor belts hang from the ceiling and carry parts from one station to the next like they do in the mural. Interested in the resemblance, I pulled out my camera phone and snapped a few pictures. Moments later a young man in a short-sleeved, buttoned down shirt and black tie hustled down the catwalk in my direction and demanded my cell phone. Smiling at the remnants of the concealed Ford surveillance techniques, I refused at first but in the face of only minor threats, I deleted the photographs while the man watched over my shoulder to verify their erasure.

Detroit’s perceived successes have always been inseparable from economic prosperity and technical innovation; its failures are directly linked to the inverse qualities. The texts and visual media in this dissertation illustrate how profit and innovation are created through the labor of men and women and how the conditions of that work and the products created by it alter the patterns of people’s lives. In representing this process, the authors and artists illustrate that labor as art through a combination of the raw and vernacular with

the lyrical and sublime. Both of these sides have an inherent rhythm to them: the pounding repetition of machinery, the metallic clink of parts cascading off a conveyor belt, the chorus of voices in unison—whether in agreement or dissent with the management. Because the culture of the United States was shaped by the same economic and technological forces that twentieth-century Detroit so clearly puts into focus, American literature reflects this aesthetic in form, subject, language, and expressions of gender and sexuality.

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ABSTRACT**SEX, LABOR, AND THE AMERICAN WAY:
DETROIT AESTHETIC IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE**

by

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Advisor: Dr. Barrett Watten**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This analysis of mid-twentieth-century American literature examines Sinclair Lewis's short fiction in *If I Were Boss, U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr. The primary literature is juxtaposed with a study of visual texts and historic research with a locational and thematic basis in Detroit. *Ford Times* and early automobile advertisements, Diego Rivera's mural *Detroit Industry*, photographs of the Sojourner Truth housing project riots, and accounts of gay union workers comprise a framework for each of the central texts. Detroit aesthetic is gritty, realist, and shaped by and in the defiance of the organizational logic of the Ford Motor Company. This aesthetic is observable in the following ways: 1) form— publishing format is shaped by commercial concerns that sometimes determined the content and distribution methods of the work. Some texts are self-reflexive about their own consumption. The narratives are of each are crafted in distinct components that often resist the temptation to be read as working together like a well-oiled machine. 2) Subject—

labor, production, consumption, and advertising are all recurring motifs the authors use figuratively and literally. 3) Language—the wording and punctuation represent the fast-paced modern dialect; the assemblage of new signifiers do not line up with the objects they traditionally signified in. 4) Gender, sexuality, and reproduction—control and order rein in desire and sexuality. Women in the workforce cause traditional gender codes to be redesigned, resulting in fear of the loss of efficiency. Masculine identity is as equally shaped by capitalism as women’s roles are. Production and consumption are tied to sexual reproduction in different ways in each text. Examining these four components illustrates how standardized production, advertisement, centralized distribution, and social organization shape the concerns of authors of these texts, their subjects, and their readers.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Jenna Gerds was born in Eastpointe, Michigan, in 1980. She earned her Bachelor of the Arts degree from the University of Michigan in 2002 and a Master's degree in English Literature from Wayne State University in 2006. Growing up in and around Detroit profoundly shaped her impression of the working class and the ways in which work organizes life.