

**From “The Man With the Hoe” to *Tobacco Road*: Class, Poverty and Religion and  
the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union**

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## **ABSTRACT**

SHANNON LORRAINE HARVEY: From “The Man With the Hoe” to *Tobacco Road*:  
Class, Poverty and Religion and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union  
(Under the direction of Laurie Maffly-Kipp)

This thesis explores the intersections of poverty, class and religion as they were debated and depicted within the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU). The STFU was a Christian and socialist inflected union of agricultural laborers that formed in response to the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1934. I contextualize these depictions within the larger context of debates about poverty and religion in Depression Era literature and academic scholarship, particularly as they relate to the figure of the Southern sharecropper. Particular attention is paid to the figure of minister and Socialist Party member Howard Kester, and his role as an intermediary between the union and middle class audiences.

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## Introduction

At the Third Annual Convention of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), National Executive Council member, Socialist Party member and Congregational minister Howard Kester led the audience through a call and response piece he and the union secretary, Evelyn Smith, had arranged. This work, titled "Ceremony of the Land," was comprised of quotes from a variety of sources, ranging from editorials published in local and national newspapers to the Bible, and interspersed with spirited affirmations of the power of the union. It ended with a prayer composed by Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, an indication of Kester's theological training at Vanderbilt University School of Religion.<sup>1</sup> The ceremony began with an unattributed quote from the poem *The Man with the Hoe*. This poem, composed by Edwin Markham in 1898, begins with the words the reader (in this instance, Kester) spoke on that January day in 1937:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages in his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world.

The audience at the convention responded with a condensed version of the rest of the stanza,

Who made him dead to rapture and despair...  
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This prayer was taken from Rauschenbusch's 1909 *Prayers of the Social Awakening*. Though Rauschenbusch includes prayers for many occupations and groups, such as doctors, artists and immigrants, he includes none for farmers. The prayer excerpt Kester uses comes from the prayer "For the Cooperative Commonwealth."

<sup>2</sup>Edwin Markham, "The Man with the Hoe," quoted in Howard Kester and Evelyn Smith, *Ceremony of the Land*, 1937, Folder 214, in the Howard Kester Papers #3834, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Markham's poem was inspired by the 1863 painting of the same name, *L'homme à la houe*, by Jean François Millet. When Millet's painting was first exhibited, the pictured laborer's crude and wide features, gaping mouth and slumped stance over his hoe outraged many viewers, who read the man's empty expression as an indictment of the intellectual and social capacities of farm laborers. Other viewers argued that Millet's painting and larger body of work provided a more complicated view of rural life, and described him as "an eloquent spokesman expounding the dignity of rural labor and a strident polemicist demanding the reform of working conditions among the lower classes."<sup>3</sup>

This latter argument was essentially Markham's read of the poem several decades later. Markham may have asked, "who made [the man with the hoe] dead to rapture and despair[?]" but he also prefaced his poem with the Genesis quote "God made man in His own image, in the image of God made He him." Millet, Markham and his group of interlocutors insisted, was neither degrading the peasant nor romanticizing him; rather the artist was reflecting on the difficulties of rural labor and its deleterious effects on the peasantry.

In "The Ceremony of the Land," Markham's verse and the painting to which it referred were put to new use in Depression-era debates about farm labor in the American South. In this context the discussion was no longer the terrain of art critics and writers alone, but was extended to farm laborers themselves. It was the membership of the union, laborers working at the bottom tiers of the agricultural ladder, who responded to the verses Kester read that day. By the 1930s the view that the working and living conditions of a person could impact for good or ill a person's very character had been raised to the level of scientific

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<sup>3</sup>Laura L. Meixner, "Popular Criticism of Jean-François Millet in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Art Bulletin*, 65, 1 (March 1983), 96.

dogma. In this environment, what did Markham's words mean to Kester? What did they mean to the members in the audience? Can a person be both "stolid and stunned" and recite poetry?

Working reciprocally with documentarians, journalists, and other writers, the STFU was instrumental in drawing attention to the widespread problem of rural poverty in the American South. Organized around socialist and Christian principles, the STFU sought to remedy the rampant social and economic inequality produced by farm tenancy.<sup>4</sup> The union was comprised primarily of sharecroppers and other tenant farmers. It included diverse Protestant perspectives, including preachers trained in the Social Gospel, Pentecostals, fundamentalist Presbyterians, Southern Baptists and others. Most active from 1934 to 1939, the union attempted to leverage the federal government against the restrictive local and state governments to improve farm tenants' economic, social and political standing.

For modern viewers, images of dislocated and impoverished farmers generated during the Depression have displaced Millet's portrait of agricultural labor. Instead, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* and John Steinbeck's Tom Joad come readily to mind. Before these portraits were created, and well before they became iconic, Americans debated and analyzed the southern sharecropper, spawning a multitude of images of the farm worker. As Kester explained, "the sharecropper has been hauled into the laboratory and there dissected and his innermost secrets revealed to a gaping world."<sup>5</sup> Kester's allusion to Markham and Millet is just one example of the STFU's complicated and varied imagining of the figure of the farm laborer. This image was simultaneously contested and complicated by other images, even

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<sup>4</sup>H.L. Mitchell, "News Release from the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Black Terror in Arkansas," Reel 1 of 8, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers 1934-1970, #1-4485, Microfilm Collection, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>5</sup>Howard Kester, untitled typed manuscript, February 1938, Folder 220, in the Howard Kester Papers #3834.

within the “Ceremony” itself. These images were shared and formed in conversation with non-union writers and thinkers. This included, for instance, *New York Times* reporter F. Raymond Daniell, who explained how recent government agricultural policies had thrown into bold relief “the Picture of Cotton’s Man With the Hoe.”<sup>6</sup> This thesis considers the variety of images, and of “innermost secrets” exposed, of the sharecropper that the STFU crafted, and in particular, the religious and class dimensions of those depictions.

The STFU explicitly sought to change the economic circumstances of its members, yet previous treatments of the STFU have not seriously considered the self-representations the union generated during the course of their work to encourage members and outsiders to work for changes to the system of farm tenancy. These representations are worthy of our attention. As scholar of religious studies Sean McCloud argues, “class is not just a status grounded in material conditions... it is also an identity rhetorically and symbolically made and unmade through representation and discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, “in addition to being a social location based in material circumstances, class is also about the narratives, motifs, characteristics.”<sup>8</sup> When we consider the variety of narratives and images about sharecroppers the STFU discussed and disseminated, we find a multitude of overlapping and competing interpretations of the character, potential, circumstances and future of sharecroppers. These images were rarely if ever mere descriptions of the material circumstances and person of the sharecropper, but like Markham’s man with the hoe, were bound up with descriptions of the moral, social and religious character of the sharecropper.

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<sup>6</sup>F. Raymond Daniell, “The Share-Cropper: His Plight Revealed,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1935, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>8</sup>McCloud, 14.

Most scholarship on class and religion in early twentieth-century America has focused on how middle and upper-class Christians, usually liberal Protestants, thought about and characterized the religious worlds of their poorer counterparts. By looking at the “bottom tiers” that made up the rank-and-file membership of the STFU, we find that among poor southerners religious identification was similarly entangled with economic, social, and cultural descriptors. Poor black and white southerners also described religion in classed terms, though not necessarily in the same ways as their middle class counterparts. Whereas for middle class observers a person’s socioeconomic status was usually thought to determine their religious affiliation (at least if you were poor), for poor southerners this relationship was reversed: religious faith shaped the “class” of the individuals—their moral and social worth—if not their economic prosperity. Though Christian values were central to this formulation of the class of individuals, they were not coterminous with it.

Making Christian values central to defining one’s social status had powerful implications for the work that the union did. The very poor were often cast as victims of circumstance or biology—certainly this was the case in the 1930s—and consequently as powerless to change social realities. At other times they were attributed a kind of raw power, that, unshaped by the desired social and educational training, could be easily manipulated by outsiders and consequently was “dangerous.” While the STFU was strongly influenced by socialist ideas and consequently espoused a strain of rhetoric about the power of the working class, STFU members more frequently located their power in their Christian faith. It was because of their Christian faith that they had the power to change their circumstances. In fact, without Christian hope (often conflated with hope inspired by the union), they described themselves as depressed and despairing. Consequently, Christianity was “classed” in two different senses of the term.



In the first sense, it could imbue members with moral and social standing. This standing was bound up with similar kinds of desires and aspirations—for instance, for hygienic homes and good education—that the middle class had. In the second sense, Christianity also served as a democratizing force, inspiring people to action and providing them with tools to make changes in their world. In effect, it was imagined to serve as a leveler amidst a materially inequitable society. This Christianity was not the illusory and otherworldly religion associated with the poor that so many contemporary scholars wrote about. Scholarship on religion commonly explained lower class religious preferences as very nearly pathological, suggesting that they were attracted to escapist religious traditions that distracted them from their real problems.

The imagination of the power of Christian faith that STFU members commonly reported also defied common theories about the damage that poverty could do to a person's character and ambition. Literary critic Gavin Jones, for instance, notes that in literature of the 1930s a

dominant focus was the power of poverty to damage the poor not only physically—through hunger, exploitative labor, or environmental decay—but also emotionally, intellectually, culturally, and even morally, as material need seemed to rip apart conventional human relationships and to degrade behavioral norms.<sup>9</sup>

Describing impoverished persons in these terms suggested that their psychic, moral, and even spiritual well-being potentially were attenuated. Yet the STFU's descriptions of Christian faith were checked by a desire to meet middle-class sympathizers' expectations about the realities of farm tenancy—to deliver images of pitiable persons in need of rescue that would motivate outsiders to assist them.

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<sup>9</sup>Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 110.

This project is divided into three chapters. Chapter one provides context for this project by outlining background information on the STFU and its work, as well as tracing the broad contours of larger debates about poverty, class, and religion in 1930s social scientific and literary circles. This information is outlined to serve as a point of departure and comparison for the classed and religious dimensions of the images of sharecroppers that the STFU created. Chapter two examines discourses about poverty, class, and religion in the union at large. I pay particular attention to how explanations of poverty's impact on the individual operated in tandem with a strong rhetoric about the agency of the worker and religious hope. In chapter three I explore the ways in which minister Howard Kester described sharecroppers in his writings and speeches. Kester served as a critical liaison between the union and liberal Christian and middle-class audiences, yet his role in union operations has been comparatively understudied. Crucial differences between Kester's images of sharecroppers and union members' self-presentations suggests the limits of union members' ability to determine the terms on which outsiders viewed their problems.

## Chapter 1

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union formed in 1934 in response to the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which attempted to inflate cotton prices by recommending that farmers plow under fields in return for payments from the federal government. Though sharecroppers were supposed to receive half of said payments, many landowners pocketed the full amount and then evicted their now unnecessary tenants. Membership in the STFU was open to tenant farmers, sharecroppers, small farmers, farm workers and other interested individuals who did not ally themselves with planter interests, such as educators and ministers.<sup>10</sup> Membership in the STFU was initially concentrated in the Arkansas Delta region but soon spread to other states in the South and Southwest, with highest rates of

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<sup>10</sup>Though the union was named the Southern *Tenant Farmers'* Union, the membership was comprised principally of sharecroppers, as well as wage laborers and even small farm owners and others who were sympathetic to the Union's causes and were not aligned with "planter" interests. In theory, among lower income agriculturalists in the South there was a spectrum of income and control over one's labor ranging from wage laborer to small landowner. In reality, these distinctions were not particularly meaningful in economic and social terms. Technically, a farm wage laborer was paid by the hour for their labor on other people's farms; these types of laborers were often also migrant farm workers, but the STFU did not specifically target migrants for membership until 1941. Sharecroppers worked on someone else's land, and in exchange for use of that land, a house and farm tools, they farmed their portion of land and paid a "share" to the land owner, usually half of the crop—this is why sharecroppers were due half the federal payment for plowing under crops. Sharecroppers rarely controlled the marketing of the crops they produced, and had no control over which crop they were to plant (cotton was the predominant crop in the region in which the STFU operated during the 1930s). Moreover, during months when crops were not grown, they were dependent on planter run commissaries for food and supplies, often on credit with high interest rates. Tenant farmers were in theory better off-- they rented their farms for cash, usually owned their own tools, and therefore had control over what they planted and produced. There is also such a thing as a "share renter," which like a sharecropper had no control over what they grew and paid over a percentage of their crop as rent (anywhere from 1/3 to a 1/4 depending on the crop) but owned their own tools like a tenant farmer. Often these categories were fluid from year to year or a family might occupy several niches at once. For instance, small family farm owners working small plots and paying off a mortgage might also sharecrop on someone else's land to supplement their income. In almost all cases, the entire family typically worked in the fields. This paper, like the sources it quotes, will often use "sharecropper," "tenant farmer" and "farm tenancy" as interchangeable terms and concepts.

membership in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri, respectively, and smaller numbers in Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee.<sup>11</sup> Most locals were located in the “cotton belt,” a cotton growing region stretching roughly 1600 miles east to west from the Carolinas to Texas and 300 north to south. Many, though not all members, worked in the cotton fields. In early 1937 the STFU reported that it had locals in 326 southern counties with a total membership surpassing 30,000.<sup>12</sup> Membership was expanded to women soon after the union was formed, and included large numbers of African Americans, whites, and a small minority of Mexican Americans and members of the Creek and Choctaw Nations.<sup>13</sup> The STFU organized in spite of reprisals against union activity by planters, local law enforcement, politicians, and even some churches.

The STFU was influenced by ministers from a variety of Protestant groups, particularly in its leadership and among its organizers. According to historian Elizabeth Payne, as many as sixty percent of union organizers were ministers.<sup>14</sup> This Christian influence was reflected in the structural features of the union. The STFU had a chaplain, as did every local, and meetings were started with prayers and interspersed with hymns that had been modified to reiterate the union’s mission and goals. Emphasizing their persecuted

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<sup>11</sup>There was one lone local in North Carolina, at least for a time.

<sup>12</sup>H. L. Mitchell, “Report to the Third Annual Convention,” *Proceedings Third Annual Convention Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union*, 14-17 January 1937, p. 62, Folder 112b, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; This number was likely inaccurate and possibly inflated. In addition to poor record keeping, membership is hard to track because of the huge variability between paying and non-paying members (many of the latter were nonetheless still active members but could not afford dues), defunct locals that never formally disbanded and locals that left or rejoined depending on union activities and alliances as well as other circumstances.

<sup>13</sup>“Second Annual Meeting To Be Held In Labor Temple,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 9 (May 1, 1936), 1, Agrarian Periodicals in the United States 1920-1960, Reel 1 of 1, Microfilm Collection, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Additionally at least one prominent organizer in Oklahoma, Odis Sweeden, was a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, but I do not have additional information about the extent of Cherokee involvement.

<sup>14</sup>Elizabeth Anne Payne, “The Lady Was a Sharecropper,” *Southern Cultures* 4, (Summer 1998), 12.

status, they imagined that they were surrounded by traitors—Judases and Pharaohs. It was the poor farm laborers of the South that carried on the work of that agitator from Nazareth, Jesus. Though the STFU eschewed religious as well as racial discrimination, in conceiving their predicament in these terms, members asserted their moral superiority over their enemies. Fighting on the side of justice, all the while resisting the evils that corrupted the South, STFU members also asserted that they were better Americans than the so-called “better citizens” of their community. God was on their side, and the STFU was God’s instrument.

The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union has been of interest to scholars in a variety of fields, because, as historian Elizabeth Payne has noted, it

scrambled categories: a labor union composed of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, a biracial organization in the cotton South, a radical movement with a conservative agenda... first led by white male socialists [the STFU was later] dominated by the flavor of a southern rural religious revival.<sup>15</sup>

The union also combined strains of liberal Protestantism with the more theologically conservative views of local preachers and members. In the existing literature on the religious dimensions of the STFU, scholars who highlight the diversity of theological perspectives in the STFU usually emphasize either the influence of local preachers or leaders with Social Gospel training. Historian Joshua Youngblood, for instance, more closely follows the trajectory of Social Gospel thinking in the operation of the union, focusing on the many students of Alva Taylor, a follower of Walter Rauschenbusch at Vanderbilt School of Religion that had a hand in working with the STFU. This included Don West, Claude

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<sup>15</sup>Payne, 10; For more information on the socialist dimensions of the union, its ties to the Socialist Party USA and complicated relationship with communism, see James R. Green, *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Press, 1978), Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor’s Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), and James D. Ross, Jr., 2004, “*I Ain’t Got No Home*”: *The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas*, PhD Dissertation, Auburn University, Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, (Publication No. 3136013).

Williams, Ward Rodgers, and most notably, Howard Kester.<sup>16</sup> While Youngblood notes that STFU leadership was filled with “cotton patch preachers,” he spends comparatively little time exploring their theological and social worldviews. Labor historian Jarod Roll, by contrast, focuses on a longer history of Pentecostal and Holiness social activism in the Missouri bootheel region where the STFU organized in the 1930s. Roll describes this activism among the newer and less institutionalized Pentecostal and Holiness churches as a kind of Christian populism.<sup>17</sup>

The confluence of liberal Protestantism with theological conservatism in the operation of the STFU unsettles easy narratives about the growing split within Protestantism between modernists and conservatives in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Historian George Marsden has noted that among early twentieth-century fundamentalists, which he describes as the predecessors of later twentieth-century evangelicals, the abiding concern with saving souls—coupled with strong pre-millennial overtones—caused them to disavow the social reform efforts of theological modernists.<sup>18</sup> The liberal Protestant impulse to perfect society, often using modern scientific knowledge, was most famously espoused by the Social Gospel movement in its efforts to perfect the world in anticipation of Christ’s second coming. While it is tempting to suggest that STFU leaders with Social Gospel training and socialist sympathies introduced local preachers and members to a more socially and politically radical worldview, Roll’s broader historical consideration of Pentecostal and

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<sup>16</sup>Joshua Youngblood, “Realistic Religion and Radical Prophets: The STFU, the Social Gospel, and the American Left in the 1930s,” (MA thesis, Florida State University, 2004); see in particular chapter 1; Other authors who take this tack are Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets 1929-1959* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1981) and Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup>Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>18</sup>George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 59-60, 66-67.

Holiness agrarian rebellion suggests that this was not entirely the case.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Alva Taylor's students were themselves southerners and most had grown up in conservative Protestant churches.<sup>20</sup>

What is important about this convergence of theologically liberal and conservative perspectives for this project is the fact that liberal Protestants were often socioeconomically better off than their conservative counterparts. While historian George Marsden has done extensive work to unsettle the image of Protestant fundamentalism forged by journalists like H.L. Mencken during the Scopes Trial as being allied with “the small town, the backwoods, half-educated yokels, obscurantism, crackpot hawkers of religion,” Marsden nonetheless also acknowledges that in general, “Liberal Protestants, as a group, were better off socially than any other body of Protestants.” At the other end of the spectrum holiness groups spoke of “radical separation from worldliness but ha[d], in a material sense, less of the world to renounce.”<sup>21</sup> Religious studies scholar Sean McCloud similarly emphasizes that social scientific scholarship on religion was often wielded by liberal Protestants to describe and understand their (often poorer) conservative counterparts.<sup>22</sup> While not all liberal Protestants who worked with the union were particularly wealthy, they were more likely to have seminary training and a college degree, and they were more likely to populate the leadership

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<sup>19</sup>See: Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion* and Jarod Roll, “Garveyism and the Eschatology of African Redemption in the Rural South, 1920-1936,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 20, 1 (Winter 2010); Roll has noted the strong presence of UNIA chapters in rural, southern African American churches, not to mention the slack that these churches picked up in providing social services that the state did not, often including raising funds for schools and care for community individuals unable to provide for themselves.

<sup>20</sup>Claude Williams, for instance, had previously studied in a Cumberland Presbyterian Church seminary, an Arminian strain of Presbyterianism that emphasized biblical literalism and inerrancy. Williams' church and seminary had chosen not to rejoin the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1906 when most other Cumberland Presbyterians had; see: Gellman and Roll, 24.

<sup>21</sup>George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185; Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 42.

<sup>22</sup>McCloud, 38.

of the union than to be members, though several “cotton patch” preachers were also union leaders.<sup>23</sup>

This confluence of Protestant perspectives was perhaps possible because the STFU was, on final analysis, not a church at all. Historian Alison Greene has emphasized that during the 1930s, mainline churches increasingly lost their ability to define or address social problems. Consequently, religious persons interested in social activism increasingly worked outside the church, usually in governmental agencies but also with groups like the STFU. Greene explains: “Members of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union had seen few changes in their lives when the Protestant establishment claimed responsibility for charity and social reform...But when Roosevelt oversaw the transfer of charity and reform from church to state, tenant farmers expected that he would transform their lives.”<sup>24</sup> Greene’s work suggests, as this project also does, that we need to move outside of church structures to fully understand the impact of religion on twentieth-century American history.

Among historians of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, Elizabeth Anne Payne has paid the most attention to class dynamics within the union. She traces the impact of race, class and gender on decisions about who should represent the union among northern and middle-class audiences. She does this by following the union career of white sharecropper Myrtle Lawrence. According to Payne, leaders like executive secretary H. L. Mitchell, though himself the son of a tenant farmer, as a union leader remained “a supplicant for money, support, and encouragement from (mostly) institutionally and financially secure men,” and

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<sup>23</sup>Certainly there were other ways to gain an education than through formal training. Executive secretary and avowed atheist H.L. Mitchell, for instance, was prompted by a newspaper advertisement to send off for the Little Blue Book series, which sent the recipient twenty books on a variety of topics on history, philosophy and politics and so on. These he credited with turning him into a socialist, leading him to start a chapter of the Socialist Party, USA, in the town of Tyronza, Arkansas where he lived.

<sup>24</sup>Alison Greene, 2010, *No Depression in Heaven: Religion and Economic Crisis in Memphis and the Delta, 1929-1941*, PhD dissertation, Yale University, Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, (Publication No. 3440525), 224.



consequently was always “vulnerable to outsiders’ perceptions of the union members whom he presented to the public.”<sup>25</sup> Wary of how middle-class observers viewed poor white southerners, Mitchell sidelined Lawrence in the organization, despite also describing her as the most successful white woman organizer the union had.<sup>26</sup> This project builds on Payne’s insights regarding the politics of representation that union leadership negotiated, focusing primarily on Howard Kester rather than H. L. Mitchell.

While Payne notes that Lawrence was embarrassed by her bad teeth and handicapped by illiteracy, Payne emphasizes that in the hill region of Alabama, where Lawrence was from, “class often refers to a moral universe rather than an economic and educational designation,” and that according to that definition, as a committed Christian, hard worker and mother, Lawrence was a “lady.”<sup>27</sup> Payne’s insights about how poor whites created definitions of class and religious identity that countered and reframed middle-class definitions of class, rendering it an internal rather than “externally ascribed status,” accord with much of the evidence available in the STFU’s records.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless this description of how sharecroppers defined class does not attend to the ways in which STFU members did engage with the impact of material conditions on a person’s character and status. The STFU records suggests that members’ engagement with issues of cleanliness, education, and economic wealth was more complex than simply disavowing their importance for defining

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<sup>25</sup>Payne, 7-8.

<sup>26</sup>Payne, 15.

<sup>27</sup>Payne, 18; Payne’s assessment of Lawrence fits within historian Wayne Flynt’s review of recent scholarship on poor white evangelicalism in the South during the Depression. He notes that this literature has shifted away from explanations for religious affiliation that emphasize escapism and emotional excess to studies that attend to the “the way such religion afforded the rural poor a sense of dignity, self-worth, and promise of future vindication.” See: Wayne Flynt, “Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression,” *The Journal of Southern History* 71, 1 (February 2005), 11.

<sup>28</sup>McCloud, 16.

who possessed “class” enough to be termed a “lady.” While they usually dismissed outright the most blatantly offensive caricatures of rural poverty, the material circumstances of their lives mattered and shaped how they described their faith.

### *Poverty Debates in the 1930s*

The STFU made their appeals within a broader society trained to think about the relationship between poverty, class, and religion in particular ways. Here I draw on secondary literature on scholarship of religion, sociology, and literary criticism to trace common thematic relationships. Describing a shift in scholarship on religion in the 1920s and 30s, Sean McCloud notes that “it was no longer nature, but rather the social and economic environment, that was seen as the factor driving people toward certain religious beliefs, practices and communities.”<sup>29</sup> While in some ways this was a “radical shift” away from biological explanations, nonetheless, “scholars still felt the need to use them on many of the same religious groups that occupied the attention of eugenicists, psychologists, and rural church sociologists... Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, sectarians, new religions, and movements attracting poor whites, Native Americans, and African Africans.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, this new explanatory model was applied selectively to understand the religious

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<sup>29</sup>McCloud, 53; though McCloud uses the terms “social and economic environment” here rather than culture, the larger context of this chapter suggests he identifies this shift as being in line with the larger “cultural” shift in social scientific work. Though the exact relationship between social, economic and cultural factors is ambiguous here and in other work on this period, the general idea seems to be that environmental (rather than natural) factors shaped certain cultural responses; among the poor, these were often seemingly “dysfunctional” responses so far as outsiders could tell, but made sense in their social and economic position. The idea of a “culture of poverty” as a more deterministic force took shape in later decades, and these cultural forces were thought to outlive, at times, the social and economic circumstances that created them. Consequently, African Americans migrating north and west were thought to have brought with them matriarchal family structures, originally thought to have been an adaptation to the disruption of “normal” family structures under slavery.

<sup>30</sup>McCloud, 53-54.

practices of socially and economically marginalized persons, what McCloud describes as the “usual suspects.” Middle-class and upper-class churches and more established religious traditions were not subjected to this same critical analysis.

While the religions marginalized persons were purportedly attracted to were often considered unhealthily emotional and little more than distractions from real social and economic problems, under the cultural analysis paradigm marginalized persons’ affinity for these religious traditions could be explained as a result of their social and economic environment.<sup>31</sup> Moving away from genetic determinism allowed for the possibility that well designed social programs could have wide ranging impacts on a variety of social ills—properly directed, this religious energy could be made “relevant” and the appeal of illusory and possibly even dangerous religious traditions would die off. Cultural explanations for religious affiliation also laid the groundwork for deprivation theories that would dominate after WWII, in which social, economic and psychological crises were used to explain religious affiliation. “In many studies,” McCloud writes, “religion was the salve, the peyote, the opium of the masses.”<sup>32</sup>

Detailing the history of the production of poverty knowledge in the twentieth century, historian and public policy expert Alice O’Connor also notes a shift away from biological to cultural and behaviorist explanatory models in the 1930s. O’Connor notes two competing explanatory models that focused on culture—one stressed that cultural breakdown and dissolution attended poverty, while the other argued that socioeconomic circumstances spurred the development of a coherent lower-class culture that was nonetheless pathological. This lower-class culture was “a way of life so limited by

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<sup>31</sup>This shift was, McCloud notes, part of a larger shift from biological determinism to the “rise of the ‘culture’ concept,” particularly in the social sciences. McCloud, 55.

<sup>32</sup>McCloud, 83.

circumstance as to render poor people incapable of pleasure aside from immediate gratification, and devoid of moral or political agency.”<sup>33</sup> Even when the socioeconomic constraints that caused a person to be impoverished were removed, a maladaptive culture of poverty could indefinitely perpetuate this cycle.

Sociologists at the University of North Carolina Institute for Research in Social Science added another dimension to this larger debate about the relationship between culture and poverty. Treating the South as a unified whole, “they argued that poverty was deeply imbedded in the South’s culture as well as its political economy, a product of sectionalism and white supremacy as much as of low wage, inefficient land management, and the absence of an industrial base.” They hoped that this analysis would “shatter the then-prevailing mythology that economic backwardness could be blamed on the natural inferiority of the labor force.”<sup>34</sup> The dependence on one commodity crop had produced a “cotton culture,” these regional sociologists argued, and “the most devastating impact of the ‘cotton culture’... was on the attitudes and behavior of tenants themselves,” which though unsuited to promoting an individuals’ success in the wider society were nonetheless the natural learned responses to impoverished conditions.<sup>35</sup> In essence, these sociologists defined the dysfunctional culture in regional rather than simply socioeconomic terms, yet they looked to the region’s poorest members—farm tenants—for evidence about the impact of this culture. While they noted that white supremacy was a problematic cultural legacy in the South, this

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<sup>33</sup>Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>34</sup>O’Connor, 68.

<sup>35</sup>O’Connor, 69-70.

group generally advocated measures to address poverty rather than racism directly and emphasized the common plight of black and white workers.<sup>36</sup>

As noted earlier, literary critic Gavin Jones has emphasized that while fiction in the 30s “offers a dizzying array of responses to poverty,” nonetheless a “dominant focus was the power of poverty to damage the poor.” While within Depression-era literature the causes of this poverty were more often omitted or more varied than in social scientific analyses, the effects of poverty on the character and psychological integrity of the poor in these works were fully developed and often extreme in their depictions. Even when poverty was explained in socioeconomic rather than biological terms, the characterizations of impoverished persons verged on the grotesque, particularly, Jones notes, when those characters were poor southern whites.<sup>37</sup> These portraits of damage and degeneration were sometimes countered by literature that emphasized that “men are driven toward populist revolution by [hunger],” as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, written in 1939, suggested.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in proletarian novels of the period, Jones notes “suffering is presented as an inevitable stage in the developing class consciousness of the disinherited.”<sup>39</sup> Yet Jones argues that eventual socialist conversion or populist revolution at the end of these novels, much like the socioeconomic explanations that prefaced this suffering, did “little to counterbalance the overwhelming sense that the material misery of poverty indelibly scars and wounds individuals both physically and psychologically.”<sup>40</sup> In the shift away from biological explanations for poverty to environmental and cultural explanations, the study of poverty

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<sup>36</sup>O’Connor, 72.

<sup>37</sup>Jones, 110.

<sup>38</sup>Jones, 112.

<sup>39</sup>Jones, 112.

<sup>40</sup>Jones, 112-113.

nonetheless remained resolutely fixed on the poor themselves, as scholars and writers searched for evidence of its causes and effects in the behaviors and traits of poor individuals.

These academic and literary explorations of poverty, class, and religion overlapped and borrowed from each other, and the South and southern farm labor were favorite subjects. In a pamphlet on the place of the South in the nation sociologist Rupert Vance argues, “Honest, God-fearing folk, ignorant and poor can be dangerous. The Southeast has six hundred counties without library facilities of any kind. Here is fertile soil for the ignorant, and loud-mouthed demagogue.”<sup>41</sup> Vance belittles William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and other writers who featured the rural South in their writing for providing “facile intellectuals their facile explanations of a land that is hard to know,” yet Caldwell, in his 1937 photodocumentary project with photographer Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, similarly underscores the dangers of mixing politics and religion with ignorance and poverty. Caldwell writes, “Politics furnishes the fireworks, religion supplies the consuming heat... [Politics] can be counted upon to confound and conspire; it can be expected to instill and generate prejudices, and to make capital of the prejudice ignorance breeds.”<sup>42</sup>

The consuming heat that religion provided, though, provided no light; Caldwell describes this religion as a panacea, a “release and escape.” “As a mere promise of something in the future,” Caldwell elaborates, “religion has no competitor among tenant farmers in the cotton country.”<sup>43</sup> Avoiding socially sensitive topics out of fear of how landlords might respond, local churches are “burlesques of religion,” and instead are places “where once a week men and women go to elevate themselves into a state of religious ecstasy that enables

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<sup>41</sup>Public Affairs Committee, “The South’s Place in the Nation,” *Public Affairs Pamphlets* 6 (Washington D.C.: 1936), 21; Vance worked for Howard Odum’s Institute for Research in Social Science at UNC

<sup>42</sup>Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>43</sup>Caldwell and Bourke-White, 39.

them to forget their troubles.”<sup>44</sup> Bourke-White’s photos inside churches feature ecstatic worship services among black and white congregations in which both ministers and congregants gesticulate wildly. Caldwell, like many contemporary scholars of religion, suggests that religion should be socially relevant and appropriately restrained in its emotionalism.

Pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explained the religious proclivities of tenants living on the Delta Cooperative Farm, a Christian socialist experiment in communal farming for tenants evicted because of their membership in the STFU, in slightly different terms. He noted the role of environmental pressures in shaping religious identity when he explains, “if in the past they have interpreted [the Bible] in fantastic terms the pressure of the social situation has taught them to find in the Bible the passages which are relevant to their social needs.”<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr positioned himself somewhere between thinkers who argued that escapist religious traditions appealed to the marginalized and impoverished, and proletarian authors who argued that suffering would lead to a renewed sense of class consciousness. In this instance, Niebuhr charted a movement from an illusory religious worldview to one that was “relevant to their social needs.” Both of these religious orientations, presumably, were rooted in their adherents’ marginalized socioeconomic status. In mining the Bible for its fantastic qualities or social relevance, these tenants were at least performing a kind of cultural work, whereas President Roosevelt’s Committee on Farm Tenancy saw only cultural and social dissolution among farm tenant populations. Spelling out the long-term effects of deleterious living conditions, the report suggested that under these conditions people lose the will to improve their circumstances, “let alone participat[e] in the cultural life of the

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<sup>44</sup>Caldwell and Bourke-White, 40.

<sup>45</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, “Meditations from Mississippi,” *Christian Century*, 10 February 1937, 184.

community.” These are people that are marked by “ignorance, inertia, ineptitude, and unreliability” as well as “poverty, malnutrition, morbidity, and social discriminations.”<sup>46</sup>

An editorial by Herbert Agar in a Tennessee newspaper deals directly with the tension between biological and environmental explanatory models by omitting black tenants from the equation and foregrounding the ancestry of white tenants:

These men in Arkansas and the Delta are the sons and grandsons of the men who made the Southern armies. It is not possible that they should already be degenerated by nature. Many of them may be degenerated by their environment. But the environment is our fault because we have permitted it, not their fault because they have suffered from it.

The second answer is that the whole of history shows the tenant and cropper status is one which destroys man’s hope, his ambitions, and ultimately his morals.<sup>47</sup>

Invoking the heroic ancestry of white male tenant farmers, Agar rejects the possibility that they are by nature degenerate and instead locates this degeneracy in their environment (controlled by “us,” perhaps his middle-class readership, and not by tenants themselves). He does not quibble, though, with the view that tenancy destroys a person’s character. Another writer summarizes this nature versus environment debate more simply: “certainly the common run of people in the South are poor, and we are told this poverty is born of their laziness. But this is upside down, as their laziness is born of their poverty.”<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps because they labored on the land, when poverty analysis was turned towards agricultural workers, metaphors of erosion were as popular as those of damage, degradation, and degeneracy. Roosevelt’s Special Committee on Farm Tenancy uses the imagery of erosion and leaching to illustrate the problem: “erosion of our soil has its counterpart in the erosion of our society. The one wastes natural resources; the other, human resources.

Instability and insecurity of farm families leach the binding elements of rural community

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<sup>46</sup>Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, “The Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 8-9.

<sup>47</sup>Herbert Agar, “Herbert Agar Says: Answer to Sharecropper Evil is Land Ownership—Tenant Unions Can’t Solve It,” *Press-Scimitar*, 28 September 1936, Reel 1 of 8, in Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #1-4485.

<sup>48</sup>Howard Snyder, “Negro Migration and the Cotton Crop,” *North American Review* 219, 818 (January 1924), 23.



life.”<sup>49</sup> The 1936 Farm Tenancy Commission of Arkansas similarly associates eroded soil with damaged people when it notes “tenancy has become a serious menace to American institutions, and threatens the fertility of the soil and the character of the people.”<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere was this depiction of people eroded and drained of vitality like the land they worked on more dramatically articulated than in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. In the book’s concluding and somewhat contradictory thoughts about the fate of impoverished tenant farmers, Caldwell writes:

Ten million persons on Southern tenant farms are living in degradation and defeat. They have been beaten and subjected. They are depleted and sterile. All has been taken away from them and they have nothing... The older ones can be helped by charity and relief... beyond that, there is little else anyone can do for them. They are the wasted human beings whose blood made the cotton leaves green and the blossoms red... The young people still have strong bodies and the will to succeed. They can change the agricultural system that broke the bodies and wills of their parents.<sup>51</sup>

Caldwell and Bourke-White’s “depleted and sterile” ten million persons are also the same people so enraptured with a better future that they grasp onto religious panaceas. They may, as the end of this quote suggests, also have the ability to overcome their circumstances. These somewhat contradictory assessments capture several of the tensions evident in other environmental and cultural models for understanding the lives of the poor and of sharecroppers in particular. While environmental models for understanding poverty suggested the possibility of changing circumstances and thereby changing the people in

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<sup>49</sup>Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, 7; the later 1938 National Emergency Council (NEC) report, which described the South as the nation’s number one economic problem drew heavily on the work of Odum’s Institute for Research in Social Science but had less direct influence on this study. W. L. Blackstone, preacher and STFU officer, sat on the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy and the Farm Tenancy Commission of Arkansas, and issued minority reports for both.

<sup>50</sup>Farm Tenancy Commission of Arkansas, “Findings and Recommendations,” 24 November 1936, 2.

<sup>51</sup>Caldwell and Bourke-White, 49; *You Have Seen Their Faces* includes an anonymous extended quote in the text (all quotes are anonymous and “quotes” on the photo captions are fictional, meant to represent what Caldwell and Bourke-White felt the photographed person might express, not what they actually said) from a union organizer in Memphis, Tennessee, almost certainly someone who worked with the STFU.

those environments, often the renderings of the effects of poverty on individuals were so bleak as to suggest that no escape was reasonably possible.

Though *You Have Seen Their Faces* was well received in its time, it was nowhere as influential as Caldwell's 1932 novel *Tobacco Road*, in which the socioeconomic reasons for the physical and moral disfigurement of the family at the center of the novel are barely discernable amidst the grotesque spectacle of their decline. The novel sold millions of copies. The wildly successful stage adaptation by Jack Kirkland was performed in all but seven states by 1939, and it is estimated that between 1934 and 1940 seven million Americans viewed the play.<sup>52</sup> Author Lewis Nordan describes the cultural reach of this text, referring to his childhood in the Mississippi Delta in the 1940s:

When we spoke of the poorest, or the most hopeless, or even the morally reprehensible among us, we said, "They might as well be living on Tobacco Road." I had never heard the name of Erskine Caldwell, let alone read one of his books; yet these words, and this vision of the rural South, had made their way into the American mind and into our vernacular. Long before I knew that *Tobacco Road* was a work of fiction, it existed for me as a scrap of fictional geography, vague but real, and I shuddered to imagine its inhabitants.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike Nordan, members of the STFU came by Caldwell's literary imaginations of the rural South more directly. In a quiz on the objectives and organization of the STFU, the Fishing Lake Local in Widener, Arkansas was awarded first prize for sending in a perfect set of answers. They were sent a copy of *You Have Seen Their Faces* as their award.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Dan B. Miller, *Erskine Caldwell: The Journey From Tobacco Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 199; two of the seven states that had not staged performances were southern states—Mississippi and Florida. The Mississippi Delta region is just south of where the STFU did most of its organizing.

<sup>53</sup>Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), v-vi.

<sup>54</sup>"Widener Rings the Bell," *S.T.F.U. News* (July, August 1940), 5, Agrarian Periodicals in the United States 1920-1960. One prospective organizer listed having viewed the stage version of *Tobacco Road* among his qualifications, suggesting the ways in which this text was seen to have direct bearing on the actual lives of sharecroppers and was used as a touchstone for people interested in working on the sharecropper "problem." See: Gordon May to J.R. Butler, 10 July 1936, Folder 47, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers #3472.

The 1930s saw a proliferation of literature on the nature of poverty, most of it focused not on systemic economic and social issues but on the poor themselves. It was into this world of literary, academic, and public policy debates about the relationship between a person's character, behavior and poverty that STFU members entered when they challenged the socioeconomic position of farm tenants in the rural South. This scrutiny of the poor dictated how the STFU articulated their critiques of tenancy, and demanded that they, too, consider how the poor themselves could be read for marks of their personal worth and failings, as well as for signs of how tenancy had shaped their lives and characters.

## **Chapter 2: Performing Class and Religion in the STFU**

This section considers the multiple images of sharecroppers that members and union officials generated between the 1934 and 1939. STFU members repeatedly offered their experiences and expressions of suffering as proof of the failures of farm tenancy. In crafting these narratives and images, they did not simply serve as passive evidence of the effects of the tenancy on individuals. These narratives served multiple purposes, helping to form community bonds with other tenants and to attract the sympathy of outsiders. Modifying environmental theories about the relationship between a person's socioeconomic circumstances and their moral and religious orientation, members suggested that Christian faith could rescue even those people most numb to hope and seemingly most unable to effect change in their world. A person's faith and basic morality might be lost due to the effects of sustained impoverishment, but it was always recoverable—a person could always be redeemed. That potential for redemption consequently meant that their Christian faith was key to initiating any meaningful social change, and was not a faith that distracted from worldly problems.

These images and narratives were sketched out in songs, plays, letters, speeches, and articles written by and for union members. Plays and other creative endeavors were important aspects of the work locals performed. Union locals wrote and staged their own productions, and sometimes invited prominent union leaders to view these plays and give talks. Though copies of these plays do not exist, we have copies of poems, songs, and letters

that members sent to union headquarters, often requesting that they be published. Some locals had robust educational and cultural programs for their members. For instance, one local secretary describes in a letter to headquarters that their entertainment committee had organized a union supper and a play that would be staged for at least two weeks (as soon as the Holiness revival in town ended), and requested any “entertainment books of any kind with skits, short plays, games and short pieces in them. I surely do need some over here.”<sup>55</sup> The STFU newspaper, the *Sharecroppers’ Voice*, the union songbook, and a published collection of members’ letters provided a variety of other stages for these creative retellings. These endeavors not only furthered the message of the union and provided much needed entertainment, but they also repudiated repetitive assertions that sharecroppers had no meaningful cultural or social life.

I have structured this section around a play performed at the STFU annual convention in 1938, titled *One Bread, One Body*. In bringing together a wide variety of characters, events, and union practices, and in offering a desired if not always achieved narrative ending, the play provides a useful structure for considering the myriad ways that union members thought about themselves and others. Dramatists Lee Hays and Dan Burnet are credited with writing the play, but they did so in conjunction with the assistance of other organizers and students at Commonwealth College. Located in Mena, Arkansas, Commonwealth College trained labor leaders, including several STFU organizers, from 1924 until it closed in 1940.<sup>56</sup> After the STFU formed, much of its work was devoted to union

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<sup>55</sup>Thad B. Hodge, Flotine Hodge and Pierce Scott to H.L. Mitchell, 8 September 1936, Folder 57, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472; Flotine Hodge to H.L. Mitchell, 9 September 1936, Folder 58, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>56</sup>Commonwealth College was frequently accused of training communists and endured various rhetorical attacks and threatened closures by the Arkansas state government. Claude Williams was director from 1937 to 1940. He took in the self-educated Hays, who had left home early in life to work after his father, a reverend, died and his mother was institutionalized.

causes. In this particular play, union songs based on hymns, biblical exhortation, villainous characterizations of planters, recent events, and admonitions to join the union culminate to demonstrate that the righteous and united members can secure a fair labor contract from even the worst of planters.

While the text examined here was mimeographed after the 1938 performance, later iterations ideally would have varied to suit local performers and events, making it a “zipper play,” as Hays later described it.<sup>57</sup> While never a perfect mirror of union life, these representations and reiterations of events and union themes shaped and extended the meaning of union member’s experiences. Professor of performance studies Della Pollock explains the process of narrative retellings in the following way:

To tell and retell historical narratives is, then, to participate in the continual re-creation of the world: it is to pile interpretation on top of interpretation and possibility on top of possibility until we can no longer distinguish between experience and the stories we tell about it.<sup>58</sup>

The recasting of union history and union characters in performances like *One Body, One Bread* can be read not only for how they structured the meaning of union history for members but also for the meanings ascribed to certain classed and religious performances, discernable in how characters speak, dress, and act. This play was designed to resonate with viewers’ experiences. Presumably the way actors embodied their characters was key to crafting this believability. Desiring to close the gap between experience and the stories about the experience, and between audience and performer, playwright Hays explained “we must make our play material recognizable in speech, action and principle to the workers who view the plays, whom we are attempting to portray dramatically.” A review of the 1938 convention suggests that the play achieved this goal, reporting that the audience made “such comments

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<sup>57</sup>Koppelman, 69.

<sup>58</sup>Della Pollock, “Telling the Told: Performing ‘Like a Family,’” *The Oral History Review* 18, 2 (Autumn 1990), 10.

as ‘Sure is true!’ and ‘That’s just the way it is!’”<sup>59</sup> Union delegates were also recruited to appear in the play, serving both as audience and performers in a dramatic reenactment of events some of them had participated in originally, further blurring the line between experience and the stories told.

### *Planters and Ministers*

In *One Bread, One Body*, a sharecropper named Happy Tucker is cheated by the planter he works for, named Bagley, and his crooked accountant, Sam, whose accounting tricks include imaginary services and goods, inflated interest, and reneged on agreements. Happy, fed up with falling behind financially every season, disputes the planter’s accounting, causing Bagley to shoot at him. Happy flees and he and his family are protected by other union members from the gangs of planter cronies searching for him. After a secret meeting and the successful recruitment of most of Bagley’s sharecroppers into the STFU, the united members are able to force a fair contract from Bagley.

Bagley, our planter villain, does not limit his crookedness to fixing books. He takes active pains to diminish the quality of life of his sharecroppers and to prevent union activities. He justifies withholding their earnings by explaining that they only spend their money on “trivialities” such as school books for their children, claiming “it don’t take no education to pick cotton.”<sup>60</sup> Bagley thwarts sharecroppers’ attempts to gain the education they are frequently criticized for not having. Additionally, this moment decodes critiques

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<sup>59</sup>“Arkansas Farm Audiences Cheer Plays as Dramatics Field Work is Inaugurated,” *Commonwealth College Fortnightly* 14, 4 (1 March 1938), 1.

<sup>60</sup>Lee Hays and Dan Burnet, *One Bread, One Body: An Original Labor Play in 3 Scenes*, (Mena, AK: Commonwealth College, 1938), 4.

used against sharecroppers and the poor more generally. Withholding or diminishing their pay is justified because they “waste” their money, but the play unmasks this rhetoric as not only simple greed but also willful resistance to investing in sharecroppers’ social opportunities.

Bagley’s unsavory character is further confirmed by his hypocritical stance towards Christianity. When the sharecropper Happy says, “the Bible says— ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’” Bagley responds flippantly “that’s a great book, Happy... I wrote a check out the other day for the First Methodist Church. Give ‘em a hundred dollars. Course, I give to ‘em all, like to see ‘em all git along.”<sup>61</sup> This scene suggests the corrupting influence of planters on middle-class churches. Bagley is a lowlife, yet he funds churches attended by the middle and upper-classes of society, the “First” churches of each town. One is about the same as the next, so long as they “all git along,” that is, support Bagley’s social and economic status. Happy responds, “I belong to the Church of God, myself.” The Church of God is either a Holiness or Pentecostal church with minimal institutional structure, catering to and generally attended by poorer parishioners.

Bagley’s allegiance to the “First” churches of the community recalls the STFU’s battles with local ministers who opposed the union. The most infamous of these was Reverend Abner Sage of Marked Tree, Arkansas, pastor of the First Methodist Church; perhaps the same church that the fictional Bagley donates money to. The local in Marked Tree had grown quite quickly and had as many as 800 white and black members, alarming local planters, law enforcement, the mayor, and Reverend Sage. Sage and his associates undertook a successful campaign to require a permit for all meetings in Marked Tree, jailed several union organizers for violating antiquated laws, and intercepted telegrams sent by the union

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<sup>61</sup>Hays and Burnet, 6.



sympathizers, including one to President Roosevelt sent by Norman Thomas. Sage also wrote extensively to local newspapers and to his US senator to protest the union's work in Arkansas. Sage and other Marked Tree officials freely admitted all this and more to *New York Times* reporter F. Raymon Daniell. Complaining about a mixed-race union parade, Sage explained:

I saw one man reach into his hip pocket for a gun [upon seeing a “nigger with a cane” approach a white woman in a car] and I grabbed him. I don't know, though, but what it would have been better to have a few no-account shiftless people like that killed at the start than to have had all this fuss raised up.<sup>62</sup>

By suggesting that union members were disposable persons, Sage quickly became a favorite villain in union literature. One *Voice* article decried the collusion of local planters and law enforcement with night-riders who had perpetrated acts of violence against the union, including shooting at STFU chaplain Reverend A. B. Brookins' home that wounded his daughter, and attacking a local black church during a union meeting. This article reserved particular venom for Sage.<sup>63</sup> Sage, they explained:

serves his masters, the Planters, rather than the MASTER who unlike brother Sage, was crucified for driving the 'Money Changers' out of The Temple... Jesus of Nazareth was sold for thirty pieces of silver. How much did the 'Judas Iscariots' of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union receive?<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, the minister of Providence Methodist Church in Earle, Arkansas, a church described as “large and influential,” attempted to work with poor and homeless field workers in neighboring communities. The *Voice* explained, “his congregation... controlled by planters forbade him to engage in any more such ‘subversive activity’... we cannot believe that a true follower of the ‘Agitator from Galilee’ would submit to dictation by a gang of

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<sup>62</sup>F. Raymond Daniell, “Arkansas Violence Laid to Landlords,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1935, 18.

<sup>63</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, “A Statement Concerning Farm Tenancy, Submitted to the Governor's Commission on Farm Tenancy by the Executive Council Southern Tenant Farmers' Union,” 10 October 1936 (typed report, Memphis, TN), 12.

<sup>64</sup>“Judas Iscariot Exposed!!!” *Sharecroppers' Voice* 1, 3 (June 1935), 5.

planters.”<sup>65</sup> Reading the scriptures for evidence of the corrupting influence of money, the STFU speculated as to how money shaped the actions of local churches. By contrast, the ill-funded churches sharecroppers attended generally suffered from few such pecuniary temptations.

The fictional Bagley and Reverend Sage share another notable quality: they have similar speech patterns. Though for union members Sage represented elite interests at their most hypocritical, another kind of classed performance was evoked in Daniell’s *New York Times* articles. Daniell’s series very nearly parodies this close-minded minister and his associates from the South. He preserves the regional inflection and syntax of his speech and threads his accounts with farcical narrative details, for instance the obsessive reliance of Marked Tree townspeople on Elizabeth Dilling’s *The Red Network*, a “who’s who” of the radical left in the United States, to determine just what kind of group they were dealing with.<sup>66</sup> Similar to Daniell’s portrayal of this group of townspeople as comically backwards and provincial, *One Bread, One Body* unmasks the lowlife lurking behind Bagley’s elite social status through his speech. His grammar, syntax, and accent, are more “incorrect” than Happy’s, the presumably less educated sharecropper. Rather than establishing a simple hierarchy based on wealth, these works also played on region, racial attitudes, religion, and accent to shape how individuals were read and viewed by their respective audiences in classed terms. Readers of the *New York Times* and the STFU membership would by few people’s definition have occupied the same socioeconomic position, yet speech patterns could be wielded to convey similar messages to both these groups. While union members

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<sup>65</sup>“Minister Forbidden to Follow His Masters Footsteps,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 11 (February 1936), 4.

<sup>66</sup>F. Raymond Daniell, “AAA Piles Misery on Share Croppers,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1935, 6. Daniell explains that *The Red Network* lists Jane Addams of Hull House and Mayor LaGuardia as dangerous radicals.

were favorably depicted by Daniell, perhaps the comparative wealth and openly prejudiced views of the Marked Tree elite made them fair game for his lampooning.

STFU publications criticized existing class hierarchies, but often differentiated between southern elites and their middle-class and upper-class supporters. The latter were embraced and often praised as “really giving the true expression to Christianity.”<sup>67</sup> Christian faith could also be used to make appeals across class divides. One letter to Senator Hattie Caraway of Arkansas attempted to stir her conscience regarding the problems faced by sharecroppers by directing her to specific passages in the Bible. The author Henry Peters asked, “will you consider the poore[?]... I no that you are Christan.”<sup>68</sup> Peters underscored sharecroppers’ identification with the tillers of the soil described in those passages. In so doing Peters advertised the contemporary social relevance of the Christian scriptures for elected officials, encouraging them to think of the poor in their midst as being comparable to poor and the farmers described in the Bible.

These characterizations of the middle and upper classes, through the fictional Bagley and the real Sage, suggest how local elites were used to construct the self-imagination of union members and sharecroppers more broadly. These characterizations often functioned as exposés, revealing the hypocrisies of the planter and ministerial elite, and ascribing to them the moral vices and shortcomings often assigned to the lower classes. In *One Body, One Bread*, the union members value and more fully embody the traits their middle class counterparts found desirable— education, fair wages and religious values.

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<sup>67</sup>“Churchmen Send Money and Clothes to Help the Needy,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 1 (April 1935), p. 3.

<sup>68</sup>Henry Peters to Senator Hattie Caraway, 1 January 1938, Folder 226, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472; Peters misspells Senator Caraway’s name with two Rs. Caraway was the first woman to serve as a US Senator. He directs her to Malachi 3 and James 5. This letter was sent to STFU secretary Evelyn Smith requesting that she send the letter on to the Senator. The original handwritten letter is available in the union archives but it’s possible that Smith typed the letter and then sent it; carbon copies of similarly typed letters to officials from members exist.

*Suffering Sheep and Bootlegging Goats*

In *One Body, One Bread*, the planter Bagley and his accountant Sam are not the only characters ridiculed and disdained. The Jacksons, a family of sharecroppers, are also mocked. Bagley has hired them to work the land that the hero Happy used to tend. The father Ed Jackson is described as “nocount,” “so lazy he makes that little boy... get out and plow,” unlikely to stay for the full duration of the crop, and a bad farmer. He is deceitful and involved in the illegal and morally suspect business of bootlegging. For instance, he provided a doctor with some of his moonshine in exchange for a sick note so he “wouldn’t have to go to court on a bootleggin’ charge.”<sup>69</sup> The union members in the play joke extensively about the family’s filth. Recounting that Ed Jackson once ate a bar of soap to feign illness, they remark “he needs it on his outers more than his innards,” and that the family “need a bath, every one of ‘em.”<sup>70</sup>

While Bagley is clearly the primary villain in this play—a lazy man who not only steals from his sharecroppers but who is also violent towards them—the Jacksons are also traitors. They have replaced Happy’s family on the land, and are the agricultural equivalent of scabs. Moreover and not coincidentally, they are immoral and literally filthy people, comical examples of how not to behave. Their characterization is not unlike Caldwell’s portrait of the Lester family in *Tobacco Road*, and they embody stereotypes of sharecroppers more generally. Notably, the Jacksons are only ever discussed by other characters in the play—no union members portray them, and viewers are not privileged with witnessing how these characters would be dressed and speak. The Jacksons serve as a kind of morality tale.

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<sup>69</sup>Hays and Burnet, 10.

<sup>70</sup>Hays and Burnet, 11.

They are always hovering in the background, but seemingly not modeled after any particular person or family.

What would the Jacksons' story look like had they told it? Would it resemble Caldwell's tragicomedy of selfishness and moral and physical decrepitude? How does an impoverished family living in a house without plumbing that isn't weather proof stay clean? How might bootlegging provide revenue streams that sharecropping does not?<sup>71</sup> The fictional Jacksons point to the difficulties of the union's self-presentation. In highlighting their persecution and the injustice of their living conditions, union members nonetheless attempt to eschew any effects of those conditions that could tarnish their image. Rather than omit or deny these stereotypes altogether, the playwrights have incorporated them into their portrait of farm tenancy, and contrast this type of person with the moral upright, Christian soldiers that belong to the union.

This depiction of the Jacksons and the ways in which they are distinguished from union members recalls a defense of the union posted in the *Sharecroppers' Voice*. Charged by a local newspaper with being comprised of the "lazy shiftless type of person, gambles all night, etc.," the *Voice* responded "as every person above average intelligence knows a shiftless lazy type person whether white or black never has the energy to blaze a new trail and organize a Union."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in a draft of his autobiography, H.L. Mitchell explains "While some tobacco road character[s] got in the Union occasionally, at least 99 percent of both the white and colored members of our Union were honest decent people. Even though they were poverty stricken, joining the Union was evidence of their desire for a better life."<sup>73</sup> In a

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<sup>71</sup>Executive Secretary of the STFU H. L. Mitchell, here as in many other instances, proves an interesting exception: he was a bootlegger in his youth, and freely admitted as much, as well as an avowed atheist.

<sup>72</sup>"The Southern Liberator," *Sharecroppers' Voice* 2, 1 (May 1936).

<sup>73</sup>H.L. Mitchell, draft, "Henrietta and Myrtle," quoted in Payne, 19.

rather circular fashion, joining the union is offered as evidence of the quality of the character of members while also justifying the union's larger project.<sup>74</sup> Strategies to lighten the burden of poverty, such as bootlegging or even "shiftlessness," for instance, may have been rationalized by sociological theories as logical if ultimately dysfunctional responses to poverty, but these responses were beyond the pale for union members attempting to demonstrate that they were worthy subjects of public concern.<sup>75</sup> Even in the worst of circumstances, not all things were permitted.

Rather than adopting or condoning these less desirable behaviors, members crafted narratives that emphasized their suffering, often framed in Christian terms. By focusing on their suffering, they neither implicated themselves as having caused their circumstances nor suggested that their responses to those conditions had been less than virtuous. When framed in biblical terms, their suffering could be read as a kind of martyrdom or a mark of chosenness. By describing their condition as "suffering" at all, their accounts are distinct from Kester's descriptions, discussed in part 3, and numerous other observer's portraits of sharecroppers that rarely if ever, used the term. This term emphasized that they were subjects that suffered, not objects that were damaged or eroded.

Anthropologist Talal Asad has written about the difficulty of thinking of persons in pain as agents from a secular perspective. "When we say that someone is suffering," Asad writes, "we commonly suppose that he or she is not an agent. To suffer... is, so we usually

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<sup>74</sup>As Elizabeth Payne has argued, though, union leadership's anxieties about outside audiences reading union members as "tobacco road" types led to the marginalization of organizers like Myrtle Lawrence. According to Payne, this problem was particularly acute for white sharecroppers as liberal white audiences were less likely to sympathize with them than with black sharecroppers. That said, debates about the suitability of different union members to represent the union extended to both genders and all races. For instance, the wife of black sharecropper Frank Weems, presumed murdered, was considered for speaking tours but it was decided that she didn't have the right qualities to effectively represent the union.

<sup>75</sup>Some historians of slavery, such as Thavolia Glymph, suggest that white owners' complaints about their slaves' laziness indicate willful resistance to obeying their masters.

think, to be in a passive state—to be an object, not a subject.”<sup>76</sup> This assumption, Asad argues, follows from the presumption that pain and suffering has the power to destroy or inhibit thought.<sup>77</sup> Asad counters this assumption by noting that not only is pain both a physical and mental experience, moreover, suffering is culturally mediated. It is in the process and form of communicating or failing to successfully communicate suffering that pain can be viewed as a form of agency. He elaborates that “what a subject experiences as painful, and how, are not simply mediated culturally and physically, *they are themselves modes of living a relationship*. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one.”<sup>78</sup> Asad includes in his examples the use of pain to “structure agency” among early Christian martyrs. A more contemporary example is Robert Orsi’s description of mid-twentieth century Catholics, for whom “physical distress of all sorts... was understood... as an individual’s main opportunity for spiritual growth.”<sup>79</sup> For these Catholics the relationship between distress and spiritual growth was ideally accomplished through a firmly delimited range of allowable expressions of suffering: “there was only one officially sanctioned way to suffer even the most excruciating distress: with bright, upbeat, uncomplaining, submissive endurance.”<sup>80</sup>

In the slippage between descriptions of people suffering due to poverty and people damaged and degraded by poverty, we see a rhetorical move that more dramatically signals

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<sup>76</sup>Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 79.

<sup>77</sup>This is similar to the way poverty has been imagined in literature to threaten literacy, as Gavin Jones explains: “writing about the poor always has the potential for a troubling power dynamic in which states of structural inferiority and social barriers that threaten literacy are brought, ironically, into the literary sphere,” suggesting that poverty is a liminal state that threatens self-expression. See: Jones, 19.

<sup>78</sup>Asad, 84; emphasis in original.

<sup>79</sup>Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>80</sup>Orsi, 26.

the problems with poverty. “Damage” suggests that poverty literally breaks a person, physically and psychically—but this same rhetoric also diminishes or elides the agency of impoverished people. Juxtaposing damage with suffering more readily evinces how the experience of pain and suffering might be read as a kind of agency. Suffering among tenants was expressed within and shaped by their social relationships with each other. It was patterned and attentive to the gaze of outsiders. As the fictional Jacksons suggest, it was, like mid-twentieth century Catholics, a condition that required that sharecroppers circumscribe their behavior in certain ways so as to make their suffering meaningful. These individuals desired to comport themselves in a way that suggested their suffering was unmerited. Furthermore, their behavior ideally reinforced their identification with early Christians and other martyrs, and reaffirmed the contract that identified the poor as God’s chosen.

Their suffering might have material causes, but it was ultimately also psychological and spiritual crisis. Literary critic Gavin Jones’ description of poverty as distinct from other socio-economic statuses attends to the way suffering bridges the material and psychic dimensions of poverty:

Poverty loses its urgency if it is not at least potentially absolute, if it is not defined by the lack—or by the threat of the lack—of the resources necessary for subsistence, for life itself, or for health or well-being. We can thus attempt to look at poverty objectively as a line, a threshold of human welfare. But if poverty is ultimately marked on the body, as hunger or as physical suffering, then it is always as much subjective as it is objective... Here poverty, as a socioeconomic level, becomes impoverishment specifically when it is experienced, by an individual or a group, as a kind of suffering. The materiality of need thus opens into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture, with poverty moving away from the absolute and the objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical.<sup>81</sup>

STFU members explained that they lacked adequate food, clothing and shelter: “I am in a suffering condition, no way to get clothes or enough to feed myself and children on... I am sick, no way to get a Doctor.”<sup>82</sup> Describing the circumstances that have led them to seek

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<sup>81</sup>Jones, 3.

<sup>82</sup>Mary L., “People’s Column,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 5 (August 1935), 2.



assistance from the STFU headquarters, the secretary of the local in Portland, Arkansas explains “we have suffered for the necessities of life an account of this condition. Sounds like slavery dont it.”<sup>83</sup> Other members wrote in to emphasize the suffering of those members of their communities that were particularly bad off, who often could not write in themselves.<sup>84</sup> For instance one man enumerated the illnesses and recent deaths in a tent colony of evicted sharecroppers to the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day, explaining “One man died last night... he shore suffered afore he died.”<sup>85</sup> Frequently members expressed frustration with their lack of options, and appealed directly to the STFU headquarters for assistance. Describing the upcoming work season, one member protested that it “will not be enough to keep us from suffering so now if you all [STFU officials] wont help our suffers we Dont no what will become of them.”<sup>86</sup>

They suffered not because they didn’t work hard, but because they had nothing to show for their hard work. Writers frequently explained that they labored relentlessly yet had nothing to show for it. “We are working men, and till the soil, and all we want is Justice. if we 12 had Justice we would not have to owe no man on 1936 crop” wrote one local secretary, while another explained, “I want only a chance to make my own living, and not the other get the profit of my labor and I suffer.”<sup>87</sup> Hard work was central to the narrative of suffering that members crafted, both in the fields and for the union cause. However, these

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<sup>83</sup>W. M. Tippy to H. L. Mitchell, 6 January 1938, Folder 227, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>84</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, *The Disinherited Speak: Letters From Sharecroppers* (New York: Workers Defense League, 1937), 23.

<sup>85</sup>Dorothy Day, “Sharecroppers,” *Catholic Worker*, 17 March 1936, 517.

<sup>86</sup>Steve Turner and Lee Wright to STFU Headquarters, 15 July 1936, Folder 47, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>87</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, *The Disinherited Speak*, 19; Lula Parchman to H.L. Mitchell, 5 April 1936, Folder 27, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

letters sometimes feature unnamed persons who are not as loyal to the union as the authors. At times these figures are used to favorably highlight the devotion of the author. “Any one can Investigate any Time They wish to and See That I am in a suffering condition,” one anonymous local secretary explains, “but yet I am loyal to the Strike call. all of my members have better advantages Then I have, yet Some of Them Trys to get me to break my pledge.”<sup>88</sup> Other writers are more sympathetic towards members who did not participate in union actions or who hid their union membership, knowing that they could be harmed or evicted and lose much needed income.<sup>89</sup>

These expressions of support for the union, even in the face of those who might try “to get me to break my pledge” underscore the common associations of the union with the church or as the means for tenants to be “saved,” so to speak. Almost without exception, members praised the union using Christian language and motifs. These ranged from simple statements like “God bless the Union” to Ansley Garrett’s explanation of the necessity of the union because “these people [the planters] they are far worse than Fairrow was in his day.”<sup>90</sup> Lula Parchman, a particularly verbose local secretary who frequently wrote to the STFU headquarters, includes in one letter what amounts to a testimony of faith. She combines several of the aforementioned themes, including the irony of poverty despite their labor, their suffering, faith in God and the union’s unique role:

I write to inform you That I am yet keeping The faith and my obligation as best That I can understand. I believe The Southern Tenant Farmers Union is a god Send to The Poor and Suffering Classes, who Till The Soil for a living, and yet We are Starveing, being driven from place to place, and pressed down by The unjust laws of man. The Union is needed. Though out The universal world among The poor

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<sup>88</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, *The Disinherited Speak*, 28.

<sup>89</sup>Typically the original grammar, spelling and syntax of the author are preserved in these published accounts, and suggest a wide range of education among sharecroppers. The union leadership’s decision to print them this way conveys additional information to outsider readers that the authors may not have intended, testifying to inadequate schooling. This is even more evident in handwritten notes as you can tell which writers are more systematic in their cursive handwriting.

<sup>90</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, *The Disinherited Speak*, 19.

classes. Regardless of color or creed, and Pray to god for the continue growth and Strength of The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and want to do every Thing I can do to help make The union Strong. I wouldnt do one Thing That I Thought would hinder Such Rightious cause.<sup>91</sup>

N. T. Williams similarly pledges his faith, but uses more biblically-specific metaphors to interpret the work of the union. His letter explains how the STFU is God's vehicle, that "their is Justice and Freedom in the union." He elaborates that

a compremet to Mr. H. L. Mitchel, I asteam him as a Moses, The Great leader of the children of isreal. He suffered with them, But were sucesfull in Bringing Them out. Faro was a hard task master. God sent Moses out and I do believe he has sent you and Mr. Butler and your other corworkers with you, as he did Moses, to lead the Poor White and colord Man and Their familys out from under The hands of the cruil Planters.<sup>92</sup>

Not only are the leaders of the STFU figured here as new Moseses for the tenant farmers of the South, but Williams vows that members will be even better followers than the Israelites were, explaining that "we are not goint to Be disobient and Gromble as the Children of isreal did we mean to do what you say do and what you cormand us to do and follow you to sucess."<sup>93</sup> Williams' letter was not published, perhaps because Executive Secretary H. L. Mitchell, an avowed atheist, cringed at the characterization of himself as Moses, but in other instances union leaders encouraged this conflation of the STFU with the Church or as the bearer of God's work. Moving from Moses to a more millennial view of the union, one member explained that "in the effert of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union this is to maintain the Kingdom of God and without such efferts the Kingdom will not come... let his Kingdom come and his will be done."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, *The Disinherited Speak*, 27.

<sup>92</sup>N. T. Williams to STFU Headquarters, February 1937, Folder 117, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472; H.L. Mitchell was the executive secretary of the STFU and its longest serving officer (later president). J.R. Butler was president at this point.

<sup>93</sup> William to STFU HQ, Folder 117.

<sup>94</sup>Local 194 from Duncan, MS to STFU Headquarters, 24 September 1937, Folder 232, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472.

In *One Bread, One Body*, the Christianity of the union members is favorably highlighted. The first indication of this is the hero Happy's affiliation with the Church of God. In a later scene, Happy and others meet with STFU organizer Brother Paul, and they discuss a recent talk by Preacher Rodgers in which he extolled the virtues of education (in contrast to Bagley's dismissal of it). Demonstrating their knowledge of the Bible, a sharecropper named Bill quotes St. Paul as saying "study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed."<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, they note that Rodgers "said the planters is Pharisees" but "we're the chosen people." They compare their persecution to that of the early Christians, explaining that "seems to me like this is the way the early Christians were persecuted. Look at Happy here. They chase him from house to house... just because he tries to live like a Christian."<sup>96</sup>

A popular union slogan, paraphrased in a prayer in *One Body, One Bread* and repeated in "The Ceremony of the Land" and on signs in union headquarters in Memphis, read "what mean ye that ye crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?"<sup>97</sup> Union members embraced and reiterated this sentiment in a myriad of ways, claiming their poverty, emphasizing their chosenness and locating blame for their problems with unscrupulous and hypocritical planters, ministers and other elite figures. That chosenness was not extended to all poor people, though. A person needed to embrace certain codes of conduct and ideally support the union. Proper conduct, and even bodily hygiene, not only emphasized that they were good Christians, but also increased the chances that they would be seen as deserving of government and societal attention. Despite their best efforts, though, the self-

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<sup>95</sup>Hays and Burnet, 11.

<sup>96</sup>Hays and Burnet, 13, 12.

<sup>97</sup>Isaiah 3:15.

representations of members were only ever part of how they were viewed. This is particularly evident in the challenges faced by black members in their attempts to represent themselves.

### *Race and Class*

Reverend Sage's complaints about the STFU were often centered on members' aspirations for social respectability and greater wealth. "We've had a pretty serious situation here," he explained, "what with the mistering of these niggers and stirring them up to think the government was agoin' to give them each forty acres."<sup>98</sup> Linking titles of respect with increased wealth, his criticism illustrates the social and economic dimensions of the threat the union posed to existing hierarchies based on race and class. This threat was met with derision and violence, often in the same instance. For example, sticks of dynamite were tossed into a churchyard accompanied by an anonymous note with warnings for "Mr. Nigger" and "Mr. Unionman." This action mocked union aspirations in the same instance that it threatened imminent harm and possibly even death.<sup>99</sup>

Sage's comments and the note accompanying the dynamite suggest the ways in which race and class politics were intertwined yet not synonymous. African American members often were disproportionately targets of ridicule and violence but white members were not exempt from similar attacks. The interracial nature of the union was pointed to by sympathizers as a positive attribute and by opponents as evidence that its white members

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<sup>98</sup>Daniell, "Arkansas Violence," 18.

<sup>99</sup>Photo of unexploded dynamite, Folder 2, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #p-3472; Letters using "Mr." and "Mrs." to address to black members of the union caught the attention of local postmasters, and consequently much of the union's mail was intercepted and read. To avoid this problem without singling out black members as being unworthy of formal titles, STFU headquarters requested that no titles be used when addressing white or black members and officials.

were truly disreputable. Even in non-union contexts, poor whites were at times described as distinct from middle-class whites, and were disparaged in terms similar to those used to describe African Americans. One unsympathetic reporter, Lev Flourney, for instance, explained to readers that “there is in the South a large class of poor whites, a dependent *race*, shiftless, wandering, ignorant, underprivileged, debt-ridden, largely disenfranchised... That the same applies to the negro cropper... except that the negro has and represents some problems peculiar to himself.”<sup>100</sup> Set apart from other whites, poor southern whites are cast as “a dependent race,” more or less similar to poor blacks who are, nonetheless, still further handicapped in Flourney’s view.

The STFU leadership saw this kind of parsing of distinctions between black and white sharecroppers as purposely divisive. It was a means for planters to maintain control of the workforce. To this end they suggested that working together was their best line of defense, as this would both minimize the use of black and white sharecroppers as competing work forces and mitigate the violence that black sharecroppers would face if they organized independently. Though they were adept at recognizing the economic function of white supremacy, union officials at times downplayed the impact of racism within and outside the union. The union underscored the fact that most sharecroppers were white so that they could assert that this was “not a race problem.” When non-union writers similarly made this claim, it was usually as pretext for setting aside the question of black sharecroppers altogether and turning their attention to whites. In other moments, union literature suggested that the work of black membership and leaders was somewhat distinctive in light of the legacy of southern racism.

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<sup>100</sup>Lev Flourney, “Cotton: Picking Machine Changes Picture,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 5 January 1937, Reel 1 of 8, in Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #1-4485. Emphasis mine.

One article in the *Voice*, for instance, celebrated the work of a local leader and organizer John Allen, who “was nearly lynched, driven from his home, and forced to leave his family alone.” Dramatizing these near misses, the author adds that “he barely escaped the bands of planter’s agents who were searching the highways and fields for this daring negro who was showing his people the way to freedom... this splendid character will never be forgotten.”<sup>101</sup> The decision to note Allen’s race, coupled with the language of “showing *his* people the way to freedom” builds on the resonances of Exodus and struggles for freedom from slavery in the United States, locating Allen in this noble lineage of freedom fighters. Suggesting an African American freedom struggle that is related to but nonetheless distinct from the struggle of poor whites is intriguing, and repeated at other moments, as when E. B. McKinney and A. B. Brookins, both officers for the union, are nonetheless described as being among “dozens of other Negro Ministers who lead the struggles of their people from day to day.”<sup>102</sup> Their designation as “Negro Ministers” calls attention to the double and sometimes triple duty that officers played, but also verges on marking “negro” leaders as leaders of “their” people rather than as of union membership as a whole. These distinctions could also be read as acknowledging that the specific challenges members faced varied based on their race and social position.

Violence against the union was not arbitrary—black members and their property were disproportionately targeted and middle class members were comparatively more protected from this violence. This was indirectly acknowledged by the STFU. For instance, white members were sometimes served as guards for meetings of locals that had only black members. In another instance, the STFU attorney went to court to hear charges against

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<sup>101</sup>“Dedicated to the Heroes of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 8 (November 1935), 3.

<sup>102</sup>“The Gold Dust Twins of Plantation Interests,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 9 (December 1935), 2.

elderly black union organizer C. H. Smith, who had been badly beaten by law enforcement. The attorney was accompanied by several dozen white sharecroppers. Historian Alex Lichtenstein argues that the threat of violence that this crowd implied, a threat that could not have been made by a similar crowd of black sharecroppers without repercussion, led the judge to dismiss the charges.<sup>103</sup> Though the disparate abuse suffered by black members was not highlighted per se, the heroism of black and white members was celebrated and violence against all members decried.

Reverend Owen Whitfield, a particularly adept and popular union organizer, was perhaps most successful within the STFU at navigating the tricky terrain of self-representation as a poor black man in a racist and classist society. He employed common assumptions about the poor and African Americans to his rhetorical advantage, and successfully drew the attention of newspapers photographers and writers to the problems of black tenants when they were largely ignored by most writers and documentarians. In December of 1937 Whitfield traveled to Washington D.C. to press national leaders on the plight of farm tenants. He wrote an editorial on the subject saying, “so many citizens have asked me why I went to Washington, D.C. I guess it is great news for a lowly sharecropper to go to the Nation’s Capitol.”<sup>104</sup> Whitfield capitalized on that novelty. He played up his humble roots for maximum effect, explaining “I, a lowly, insignificant Negro sharecropper thought it best to step out and try to do something about” the problems facing sharecroppers. He cites his position as a minister as privileging him with knowledge about the people, and attempts to play on readers’ Christian sensibilities, saying “I am a Gospel

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<sup>103</sup>Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 38; this is from Alex Lichtenstein’s introduction to Kester’s text.

<sup>104</sup>Owen H. Whitfield, “Why I Went to Washington,” *Enterprise-Courier*, 14 December 1937, Reel 1 of 8, in Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #1-4485.



minister, preaching peace on earth and good will to all mankind, but I find it quite a task to preach a gospel of peace and goodwill to people facing eviction, and facing winter without food!”<sup>105</sup> He suggests that he came to issue of sharecropper living conditions almost accidentally, as an obstacle to doing the real work of preaching the gospel. This framing of his work de-radicalizes it, while it also gently criticizes the view that Christians can preach about peace and goodwill to people whose basic necessities are threatened. Among his parishioners and union members he was more blunt: “anyone can tell you about Heaven and can’t tell you how to get a loaf of bread here—he’s a liar.”<sup>106</sup>

Whitfield used a similar false naïveté with great success in a meeting with President Roosevelt. Historians Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll recount the episode in the following way:

Roosevelt asked Whitfield if he was a communist. Feigning ignorance, Whitfield said that he had “spent my life on a cotton patch” and did not know what the word meant. Could the president explain it? Roosevelt replied by saying that a communist was someone who thought they could take someone else’s property for free. Based on this definition, Whitfield deemed whites to be the real communists, having stolen so much land from the Indians.<sup>107</sup>

His ability to perform for and play to the prejudices of wealthy whites may have been developed early in his life. Before he worked as a sharecropper and a preacher, Whitfield was a minstrelsy dancer.

Whitfield’s meeting with Roosevelt was a result of his organization of a demonstration of evicted sharecroppers in tent colonies alongside the highway in southeast Missouri. In his speeches to the recently evicted sharecroppers leading up to the demonstration, Whitfield was attentive to the sharecropper’s self-imaginings and the need to manage outsiders’ expectations. “Moses,” he told them, “got ’em to the Red Sea and they made camp there. But here came old boss Pharaoh’s ridin’ bosses in their chariots. And Moses raised his hand,

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<sup>105</sup>Owen Whitfield, “Why I Went.”

<sup>106</sup>Owen Whitfield quoted in Cedric Belfrage, “Cotton Patch Moses,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1948, 97.

<sup>107</sup>Gellman and Roll, 98.

and the waters parted, and the children of Israel walked across on dry land... We're gonna make an exodus likewise! It's history repeatin' itself in 1939!"<sup>108</sup> But, he warned the latter day children of Israel, "we must obey the law. People maybe gonna see what we're up against. Maybe we'll get our names in the papers for somethin' else than stealin' hogs and corn."<sup>109</sup> While they desired the attention to their problems, the sharecroppers needed to ensure that the media exposure did not backfire by depicting them as disreputable.

The demonstration of at least 1,000 sharecroppers and their families, mostly of them African American, attracted newspapers nationwide and photographers from the FSA, including Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange. As author Cedric Belfrage explained, reporters and sightseers "were astonished by the character of the demonstration and the cotton-belt living standards which were suddenly dumped in a display window."<sup>110</sup> Along Highway 61, Americans witnessed family life among sharecroppers, children sleeping on the ground in winter, and observed religious services attended by whites and blacks. While local officials attempted to brand the group as agitators and eventually relocated the camps from public view purportedly because of health hazards, public sympathy was overwhelming with the protesters. Local and national officials, by contrast, were portrayed as callous, as this photo caption implied: "Negroes... offered little objection when state highway patrolmen loaded their belongings into state trucks and carted them to various shelters... Chief question of the 'roadside refugees' was, 'What about that something to eat?' but the state patrolmen said that problem wasn't included in their instructions."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Owen Whitfield quoted in Belfrage, 94.

<sup>109</sup>Owen Whitfield quoted in Belfrage, 94-95.

<sup>110</sup>Belfrage, 95.

<sup>111</sup>"Exodus Underway for 'Roadside Refugees,'" 1939, Reel 1 of 8, in Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #1-4485.

## *Christian Hope*

While public and governmental attention to the problems of farm tenancy was sought and desired, the STFU also devoted extensive energy to encouraging sharecroppers to help themselves. Christian faith was crucial to this, and was commonly cited as a necessary antidote to apathy, fear, and despair. Imagining themselves as God's chosen was one way of moving members to action. "Fear," Zella Whitfield, Owen Whitfield's wife, explained, "has done more harm to the Negroes than any white man in the South."<sup>112</sup> In a letter to H. L. Mitchell, secretary of the local from Tarbottom, Arkansas D. E. Dawson recited the difficulties of organizing workers in the area. "It has been a sloww and tedious task to get started in this localety," Dawson explained, "Surfdom with allits raveges has blasted allmost all hope from the breasts Of these people. They are all reduced to a blank, like the man with the hoe by Edwin Marcum." Specifically, Dawson noted that of particular difficulty was "how to get the fear out of the poor dejected Colored Peopel," and to that end he asked if Mitchell could "send some colored man here to help us inspire hope and courage in the Colored peopel."<sup>113</sup> Dawson emphasizes the importance of inspiration and hope in motivating people to organize and as an antidote to apathy and fear. His reference to Markham's poem suggests that while the quote used in the "Ceremony of the Land" was unattributed in printed form, conversations about the poem and its meaning nonetheless occurred at the level of individual locals. In Dawson's interpretation, the reason the people "are all reduced to a blank" is environmental, attributable to "surfdom with allits raveges."

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<sup>112</sup>Zella Whitfield quoted in Belfrage, 102.

<sup>113</sup>D. E. Dawson to H. L. Mitchell, 14 September 1936, Folder 59, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472.

In a song sent to the STFU headquarters by Walter Pannell, this theme of defeated laborers renewed by an inspirational message is repeated. Pannell writes that the workers with “saddened hearts [that] were still and numb,” awoken by a bard who sang that “the earth is owned by a few men now,/But sure as the world we know,/Labor shall be from her fetters freed,” causing the “entire world... to lift its voice in song.”<sup>114</sup> Pannell’s verses suggest that inspiring “saddened hearts” is the precursor to being freed from “fetters.” A similar song, “Our Song,” sung to the tune of “Swanee River” states that:

We are all children of the people, toilers and slaves  
Brotherly union, peace and freedom  
Stir our dead hopes in their graves.  
Long have we suffered in the struggle  
Long have we starved,  
Dark clouds are rolling now behind us  
The day of redemption’s [sic] arrived.<sup>115</sup>

“Swanee River,” a love song for an idyllic southern plantation was re-imagined by Barnes not as a nostalgic remembrance but as a hopeful prayer for a world not yet realized, in which there are “land and home for all who want them.” Barnes’s rewriting of the song was particularly appropriate given the union’s attempts to disabuse regional and national audiences of certain romantic images of the South. The original song had been written by a New York songwriter, Stephen Foster, for a minstrelsy troop in the 1850s. This layering of meanings and resonances suggests something less like the emptying-out implied by Lee Hays’ description of retooled hymns as “zipper songs” and something more like a palimpsest. The residual resonances in these songs and texts are themselves crucial to the repurposed meaning of these songs, perhaps even especially useful when the new lyrics, as in Barnes’ song, serve as a rejoinder to the original meaning. The importance of this layering is

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<sup>114</sup>Walter Pannell, “Two Songs,” 1935-6?, Folder 82a, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>115</sup>Mrs. M. H. Barnes, “Our Song,” 1935 or 1936?, Folder 82a, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472; “The Swanee River” is the more popular name of the song “Old Folks at Home.”

suggested in a letter to H. L. Mitchell from member J. W. Washington, in which he writes of the song “We Shall Not Be Moved,” sung to the hymn of “Jesus Is My Captain,” “That song i Do believe sprung from our lips with the voice of God... It re[mem]bered my mind back to time when Moses was Leading his childrens to Isrel.”<sup>116</sup> Through union organizer John Handcox’s rewriting of an originally Christian hymn for union purposes, Washington is able to inhabit the Exodus narrative suggestively, as if it were his own memory.

These works that feature a return to hope from a state of numbness or despair were reinforced by articles in the *Voice* and other STFU literature. For instance, in an early edition of the newspaper, one writer argues that the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union “Represents The One Hope That The Sharecropper And Tenant Farmers In The South Have.” Warning against “false Moses [that] lead you astray,” the writer elaborates that union leaders “pledge you their honor and their faithful services; all they ask of you is confidence and faith in them.”<sup>117</sup> Here officers actively enjoined members to follow them using terms that relied on prophetic models.

In *One Bread, One Body*, the union members ask God in a prayer “we work hard, but we are hungry, and our children are starving... who will bring the evildoers to justice?”<sup>118</sup> The answer to this question is embedded in the prayer, “Father, give us courage to do battle in Thy name! Teach us to live as brothers and sisters, that we may build Thy Kingdom on earth!” When Happy asks who will help defend him against Bagley, Brother Paul reiterates this message; he is the union, and the union will defend him. The union members, consequently, must “learn to fight together! We being many are one bread, one body!” In

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<sup>116</sup>J. W. Washington to H. L. Mitchell, 19 January 1936, STFU papers, quoted in Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 422.

<sup>117</sup>“Plea for Solidarity in Arkansas,” *Sharecroppers’ Voice* 1, 2 (May 1935).

<sup>118</sup> Hays and Burnet, *One Bread, One Body*, 12.

short, their struggle is made powerful by their unity and by God's direction. Joining together en masse and confronting Bagley while singing hymns turned into union songs, they earn their fair contract and the right for evicted families to return to their homes.

As in the play, union leadership emphasized that the union was an organization that empowered individuals through collective organizing. God might have been on their side, but God was not going to do their work for them. Minister Claude C. Williams drew on American history to remind listeners that "God could have freed us from England, but he did not do it. We had to do it ourselves," and that "We are the co-workers with God."<sup>119</sup> This bottom up approach to reform was echoed in the *Sharecroppers' Voice*, which ran an article declaring "tenantry will be abolished when those who are ground down by it make up their minds to abolish it."<sup>120</sup> In an article by Howard Kester, he insists that without the participation of farmworkers themselves, "neither private or governmental philanthropy will move to give us these things... We will get them as we build a powerful organization of the sharecroppers and agricultural workers."<sup>121</sup> As much as government and outsider intervention was desired and needed, union literature explained that this assistance was insufficient without sharecroppers setting the course.

Rank-and-file members reiterated these sentiments. Stressing gains achieved through union organizing, including higher wages for picking cotton and reduced violence in the areas where the union operated, many members concluded, "the Lord helps those who help themselves. And that's why we're in the Union."<sup>122</sup> One delegate from the Delta Farm

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<sup>119</sup>"Address by Claude C. Williams," *Proceedings Third Annual Convention Southern Tenant Farmers' Union*, 14-17 January 1937, 16, Folder 112b, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472.

<sup>120</sup>"Abolish Tenantry!" *Sharecroppers' Voice* 1, 10 (1 January 1936).

<sup>121</sup>Howard Kester, "King Cotton," *Sharecroppers' Voice* 2, 1 (1 May 1936).

Cooperative in Mississippi to the annual convention remarked on the many professional guest speakers who had described the intractable problems related to agriculture in the South who did “not know what the solution is.” He responded to these expressions of doubt about how the myriad problems surrounding tenancy might be solved by offering that “We are going to do it, aren’t we?”<sup>123</sup>

This image of sharecroppers as powerful agents was intertwined and sometimes at odds with other images of sharecroppers as the suffering poor, damaged persons, Christian reformers and Christians who had renounced the world. C. A. Withers, speaking at the third annual convention of the STFU, introduced himself and his local of 271 members in a way that captures some of these tensions in how union members viewed their world and themselves:

Now we are not looking after the spiritual side only, but on the economic, social and political side of religion. We have awakened to the fact that we are men— and not crushed men. We realize that it is the capitalist system that crushes us.<sup>124</sup>

“We are men—and not crushed men,” Withers explains, yet adds in the next breath, “We realize it is the capitalist system that crushes us.” The seeming paradox of Withers’ assessment—that they are crushed and not crushed—points to the challenges of articulating how poverty shaped sharecroppers’ lives. As this section has attempted to demonstrate,

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<sup>122</sup>F.C. Cotton, quoted in “Evening Session,” *Proceedings Third Annual Convention Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union*, 14-17 January 1937, p. 42.

<sup>123</sup>Wilmer Young, quoted in “Evening Session,” *Proceedings Third Annual Convention Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union*, 14-17 January 1937, p. 45; Despite these affirmations, striking the balance between offering relief and empowering members to fight for themselves through collective action was often difficult. Many members were severely impoverished and were evicted for their membership. Striking for increased wages left them without income and without a safety net. A letter from a local in Whitmore, Arkansas, for instance, wrote headquarters pleading for assistance after a failed strike: “the land law would not come to the union Rules around here an that was you all order that cause them now to be naked an hungry... so now if you all wont help our suffers we Dont no what will become of them.” Frustrated by failure despite their loyalty and unable to secure employment, the members of this local now expected union leadership to assist them; Steve Turner and Lee Wright to STFU Headquarters, 15 July 1936, Folder 44, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>124</sup> C. A. Withers, quoted in, *Proceedings Third Annual Convention Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union*, 14-17 January 1937, p. 43.

similar messages and images of the material, spiritual and psychological plight of the sharecropper could mean very different things to different audiences. When sharecroppers described themselves or their associates as depressed and despairing, they almost always coupled this with the possibility of overcoming this despair through Christian faith. When sharecroppers were described in editorials, depression and despair more commonly described a people irrevocably damaged. Withers' use of the word "crushed" here is particularly tantalizing in this regard, and not only because he contradicts himself about whether or not they are crushed men. Does he mean "crushed" in a sense similar to Caldwell, who described southern sharecroppers as "depleted and sterile," or is he referring to the quote from Isaiah "what mean ye that ye crush my people?" In either case, rarely did the Christian dimensions of the union's representations of their own poverty make it into popular depictions of their circumstances.



### Chapter 3: Howard Kester

Howard Kester wrote most of the literature for and about the union and had a strong editorial hand in the STFU's newspapers. He was crucial to bolstering liberal Christian support for the union, which provided much of the charitable aid that the union received. More than any other person, he was responsible for articulating and disseminating the union's message to a larger audience.<sup>125</sup> Some of his texts, such as an early history of the union titled *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, were distributed widely among union members and sympathizers. His editorial work and writing for the newspaper the *Sharecroppers' Voice* was read primarily by union members, but also circulated among other subscribers. In other venues, Kester spoke as a representative of the union, but the general membership was less likely to hear or read these pieces. This included a report on farm tenancy written for the governor of Arkansas, radio appearances, public speeches, and several newspaper editorials. Other publications, such as articles for *Radical Religion*, reflected on Kester's work with the STFU but were specifically for an audience of like-minded coreligionists.

While Kester served an invaluable role for the fledgling union and was crucial to its fundraising and publicity successes, the image he propagated of members and sharecroppers more generally has received little attention in the scholarship on the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. A close reading of his descriptions of farm tenancy suggests that Kester was fully versed in the broader debates about the environmental causes of poverty and its effects

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<sup>125</sup>Marsden, 42.

on the rural poor. Additionally, Kester infused his reading of southern history with a Marxist analysis of the prevailing form of land tenure and race relations. His depictions of damaged people are more bluntly rendered in his work for non-union audiences but are evident in work he did for the union as well. These depictions were juxtaposed, at times awkwardly, with a call to arms that insisted that southern poverty would not be solved and the Kingdom of God could not be achieved without the participation of the poor themselves.

In an unpublished manuscript, Kester reflects on *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell. *Tobacco Road*, mentioned previously, is the story of a family of sharecroppers, the Lesters, who are morally and physically disfigured by their circumstances. They act only on their lust, hunger, and selfishness.<sup>126</sup> Though Caldwell's novel pauses to reflect on how the Lesters ended up in their predicament and suggests a way out of their dire circumstances, these brief reflections are overwhelmed by their rush toward disaster, which ends, predictably and ignominiously, in death. Kester reflects on *Tobacco Road* in the following way:

Erskine Caldwell has painted a horrible picture of human decay and disintegration in *Tobacco Road*. A great many eminent churchmen protested against the play on the grounds that it was indecent, and vulgar. Of the millions who saw the play and read the book [sic] noted any religious implications. In *Tobacco Road* we have a superb illustration of what happens to people when the bottom drops out of their economic trough. They become vile and bereft of elementary human decencies. Religion amongst the folk in *Tobacco Road* was a monstrosity and life was perverted toward unworthy ends.<sup>127</sup>

Reading Caldwell's novel as an imaginative exercise in sociological theory about the effects of an impoverished environment on a person, Kester asserts a near deterministic relationship between extreme poverty and moral dissolution. Presumably this correlation only works on the lower end of the economic spectrum, or else Kester would not have been able to account for the immoral actions of rich planters. He repeats many of the themes of

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<sup>126</sup>Notable scenes include a teenage girl with a harelip scooting her butt across a dirt yard toward her brother-in-law to seduce him, and a man running over his mother-in-law with a car and then allowing her to drag herself into a field to die.

<sup>127</sup>Howard Kester, untitled and undated manuscript, Folder 212, in the Howard Kester Papers #3834.

contemporary social scientific and popular literature that connect impoverished socioeconomic circumstances with damaged peoples, in this instance, “human decay and disintegration.” Here not even the religious lives of these individuals escape the destruction wrought by economic insecurity.

How did Kester conceive of the moral and religious character of the group of sharecroppers with which he so closely worked? His reflections on Caldwell suggest that he might have understood *The Man with the Hoe* to accurately reflect the spiritual degradation caused by exploitative farm labor practices, that poverty could reduce a person made in God’s image to little more than an animal. His view of the state of religion in the South broadly speaking was more complex than these ruminations on Caldwell suggest, though. In one of his most extended deliberations on the subject in *Radical Religion*, the journal of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, Kester explores the diversity of Christian churches in the South.<sup>128</sup> Moving from an overview of the variety of religious expressions and their mixed record on the issue of helping labor, he spends most of this article on African American churches and the religion of poor whites. Defending black churches, Kester asserts that “it has become the fashion in sophisticated circles to condemn in a wholesale manner the Negro church... for its emphasis on the otherworldly aspects of Christianity,” however, “it has none the less provided a fortress for the weak and despairing and a deep well from which the strong could gather renewed strength for their struggle in this unfriendly world.”<sup>129</sup> Admitting that the “Negro church” evinced some undesirable otherworldliness, Kester still credited it with protecting and assisting the black community. Kester does not believe that poor rural whites have a comparable institution, instead, they are nominal

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<sup>128</sup>Howard Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” *Radical Religion* 1, 4 (Autumn 1936), 23-24.

<sup>129</sup>Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” 25-26.

Christians but “unchurched.” For this group “a religion of escape plays... a prominent role in their lives.” Among poor whites, he explains, social revolutionaries have a real chance of productively illustrating how Jesus can be viewed as “a workman struggling with the problems of his people, selecting and organizing a band of followers from among the poorest of people,” turning a religion of escape into one of social relevance.<sup>130</sup>

Though Kester does not foreclose on the possibility that these “prophetic” leaders might come from middle-class churches, his examples of the most effective of these leaders currently working in the coalfields, mills, and cotton fields that he cites are local preachers, black and white, from the communities in which they labor—“they have lived under the same conditions as their people. They have lived close to the soil and close to the people.”<sup>131</sup> For these religious leaders, Kester has only praise. He ends his article extolling their perseverance and visionary fortitude:

They carry on in one of the most violent and explosive areas in America but they never turn back nor murmur for they are religious men and when a religious man has put his hand to the plow and stuck in God’s earth he doesn’t turn back, he goes on with a song on his lips and purposefulness in all that he does and says.<sup>132</sup>

Kester’s analysis of religious affiliation has elements of sociological approaches that describe lower-class religion as essentially escapist. For many scholars and theologians studying lower-class religiosity, and certainly for Kester who emphasized the need for a socially relevant church, this was an undesirable quality. Nonetheless, like his associate Reinhold Niebuhr, he allows for conversion to a “prophetic religion” that gives rise to class-consciousness and struggle. Kester emphasizes that the poor are God’s chosen and connects

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<sup>130</sup>Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” 27.

<sup>131</sup>Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” 29.

<sup>132</sup>Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” 31.

this assertion with a socialist-inflected valorization of “hard working, honest folk.”<sup>133</sup> He repeats this conversion narrative from “escapist religion which sought sanctuary in another world” to religious indictments of the existing social order in a 1939 article. Here he explains that even without much clerical guidance:

the prophets... spoke too plainly about the common ordinary facts of life to be misunderstood or greatly misinterpreted. Their ringing denunciations of the rich and powerful have found ready acceptance by the masses of people who are today victims of oppression and injustice.<sup>134</sup>

While his primary focus is on the South’s rural poor, black and white, he also turns his critical lens on the middle class. Brick churches with high steeples, too, could be full of “illusion and sham.”

Kester places a special burden on those at the bottom tiers of the Kingdom to redeem that system. They were not only most in need of this reform, but were presumably least implicated in the perpetuation of the system of farm tenancy.<sup>135</sup> This emphasis on the radical potential of a poor and unchurched but biblically well-versed population is more understated or omitted in works in which Kester speaks as a representative of the union. Rather than elaborate on this redemptive role for union members as he does in his writings for his coreligionists, in works for broader audiences, Kester emphasizes civil rights abuses and attacks on members as well as the degradation that impoverished living conditions caused.<sup>136</sup> In so doing Kester deemphasizes tenant farmers’ agency and dramatizes the need for outsiders to intervene.

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<sup>133</sup>Kester, “Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South,” 27.

<sup>134</sup>Howard Kester, “The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen: A Religion For Today,” *Mountain Life and Work* 15, 1 (April 1939), 4.

<sup>135</sup>Howard Kester, “Ceremony of the Land,” typed draft, 1937, Folder 112b, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>136</sup>See, for instance, Howard Kester, “Terror Stalks Cotton Belt Again As Planters Fight Tenant Union,” *New York Post*, 11 February 1926, Reel 1 of 8, in Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Papers #1-4485.

In these publications and speeches he returns almost invariably to the potential of poverty to destroy a person's religious life, their character and spirit. *Tobacco Road* is a consistent touchstone for Kester. Speaking on the radio program America's Town Meeting of the Air in 1937, Kester dramatizes these effects using particularly violent imagery:

For seventy-five years, the land and its people have been cursed by an iniquitous system of farm tenancy or sharecropping which has poisoned and blighted the intellectual and social life of the entire region. It has compromised religion, prostituted justice, ravaged democracy, raped and exploited the soil, debased landlord and tenant, and made of the agricultural ladder not a thing on which men climbed, but a thing down which men, women and children, Negro and white, descended into increasing economic serfdom, frustration and despair. As a result, millions of hitherto free men have not today the security and comfort once accorded chattel slaves, and "Tobacco Road" may be said to be a true picture of an element of our population which has abandoned hope.<sup>137</sup>

His choice of verbs to explain what has happened to everything from the land to tenants—"compromised," "prostituted," "ravaged," "raped," "exploited," and "debased"—connote sexual violation and a woman's loss of virtue through voluntary and involuntary sexual activity. By gendering this discussion in this way, Kester suggests that tenants have been emasculated. They are not participants but victims in this system of land tenure. This language is fruitfully compared to an anonymous union preacher that Kester cites approvingly and at length in his earlier article for *Radical Religion*: "God is God and Man is Man: be a Man. God has done his work, now you do yours."<sup>138</sup> Through a correct understanding of God and God's place for man, this "element" of the population can move from the "frustration and despair" of repetitive assault to restored hope, masculinity, and agency. This binary of exploited (and suggestively emasculated) persons and men who work to change their circumstances elides the experience of suffering that members highlighted. This suffering may not have been coded in overtly heroic or masculine terms, but suffering was a language that farm tenants used to express the direness of their situation and to

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<sup>137</sup>America's Town Meeting of the Air, "Should There Be Government Control of Agricultural Production?" *Bulletin of America's Town Meeting of the Air* 3, 5 (2 December 1937), 21-22.

<sup>138</sup>Kester, "Religion—Priestly and Prophetic—In the South," 31.

reinforce their identification with early Christians and the biblical poor; figures identified as God's chosen.<sup>139</sup>

Kester was not alone among union advocates in emphasizing how poverty could damage a person. Another such person was Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, who was credited by executive secretary H.L. Mitchell with suggesting the necessity of a tenants union in Arkansas and who used his national prominence to draw attention to the union. He explained of sharecroppers "the amusements, the religion, the culture, which go with this economic condition are about what one would expect."<sup>140</sup> A report by the Memphis chapter of the League for Industrial Democracy, a group with which the STFU worked closely, and the Tyronza Socialist Party, in which several union leaders were members, explained that "these people are probably the most depressed body of workers in America, exhibiting grave cultural, moral and intellectual deficiencies."<sup>141</sup> Another person with regional influence was C.T. Carpenter, a lawyer who worked for the union and who advised the Arkansas Commission on Farm Tenancy. He was frequently quoted in regional presses and offered a bleak view of the sharecropper's potential when he stated that tenancy "not only destroys what character there is, but makes the development of character impossible. There is no way for it to grow, except worse."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>It is important to note that Kester focuses on the system of farm tenancy and indicts the entirety of that system, treating the South as a whole in ways similar to the work of regional sociologists at UNC. In so doing he does not suggest that agricultural workers alone are ill affected by this system, though he does reserve special attention for farm laborers. This indictment of a whole system of agriculture is parlayed into Christian discourse when Kester describes the agricultural South as the "Kingdom of King Cotton," a twist on the more common designation "King Cotton."<sup>139</sup> By highlighting the domain of King Cotton, Kester called attention to the failures of the South to effectively strive for the Kingdom of God. This was, in Kester's view, a society with inverted values that worshiped cotton and neglected its people. See Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 52.

<sup>140</sup>Norman Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-Cropper," (New York City: Martin Press, 1934), 10.

<sup>141</sup>Thomas, 20. The Tyronza, Arkansas Socialist Party branch was started by H.L. Mitchell and Clay East.

“Human erosion in rural America is beyond comprehension,” Kester informed an audience in Lansing, Michigan, “unless one has lived among the masses of landless tenant farmers and sharecroppers in this country.”<sup>143</sup> By positioning himself as someone who has lived among the masses and speaks for the union, Kester used his authority to perpetuate the prevailing view that impoverished environmental circumstances could cause human decay and disintegration. Moreover, he privileged himself and individuals like him with the power of “comprehension,” rather than allowing that the “masses of landless tenant farmers and sharecroppers” possess this understanding. In another text, Kester links tenants’ power to their faltering comprehension when he states that:

Whether they fully comprehend the significance of the pitiless economic forces gradually engulfing them and the other millions of tenants and sharecroppers in the southeast and southwest is of little importance as compared to the tremendously significant and historical contribution they have already made toward a larger and more clear understanding of the problem of farm tenancy on the part of the American public.<sup>144</sup>

According to Kester, tenants likely do not comprehend the larger system in which they are caught; yet they have contributed to the more significant task of advancing “a larger and more clear understanding of the problem of farm tenancy on the part of the American public.” This calls into question just how tenants will reform the South—by serving as aides to comprehension for people with power, or through their own actions?

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<sup>142</sup>C.T. Carpenter, “King Cotton’s Slaves: The Fate of the Share-Cropper Becomes a National Issue,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, October 1935, 194.

<sup>143</sup>“‘Human Erosion’ Deplored by Man To Talk Tonight,” *Lansing State Journal*, (date unknown), Folder 2210, in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union papers #3472.

<sup>144</sup>Howard Kester, untitled typed manuscript, February 1938, Folder 220, in the Howard Kester Papers #3834.



## Conclusion

During a cotton chopping strike in 1936, a union meeting was disbanded by law enforcement. Several members were beaten, including sharecropper Frank Weems, who then disappeared. The STFU presumed, quite reasonably given prior shootings and beatings of members, that Weems had been lynched and his body disposed of. The STFU demanded that officials reveal the location of Weem's body. Ballads were written for him, and his wife was interviewed and toured as a speaker. The STFU organized a funeral for Weems to be officiated by Claude Williams. Weem's funeral program called for the singing of working class songs and hymns like "Lord, I Want to Be A Christian." A reading from James 5 was seemingly tailor written for the occasion. The selected verses read:

Ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you... Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord... Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you. Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.<sup>145</sup>

Within the union, Weems was a martyr unjustly killed, and his funeral program served as a warning to the "rich men" who killed him and a promise to his union brethren that the earth would be returned to them. His funeral notice ended with the declaration "The blood of our martyred workers shall become the seed of a new social order in which the will of God shall be the practice of men."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup>James 5:1, 4, 6-7. Verses 2, 3 and 5 were also read, but omitted here for brevity.

Yet Weem's disappearance was overshadowed by events involving Memphis socialite Sue Blagden and preacher Claude Williams. The two attempted to determine what had happened to Weems before holding the funeral. In the course of their investigation, Blagden and Williams were accosted, beaten, and instructed never to return to Arkansas. The news of the beating of a prominent white woman and a white minister was irresistible to journalists, who devoted a remarkable number of columns and front page space to Blagden's retelling of the incident, stories that usually featured large images of her bruised thigh. The beaten and missing black sharecropper, honored as a martyr by the union but disparagingly referred to as an "unreliable corpse" by the press, could not compete with images of a white woman's injured leg and dramatic pronouncements of the death of southern chivalry.<sup>147</sup> Perversely enough, these beatings generated far more publicity and interest in the union than Weem's suspected death. Historians James Green and Donald Grubbs have suggested that Blagden's beaten thigh, rather than any of the many incidents of violence against the union and abuse of civil rights, most directly led President Roosevelt to organize a commission on farm tenancy.<sup>148</sup> A year later Weems was located in Chicago, having fled there for fear of being killed after his encounter with Arkansas law enforcement. While the STFU may have attempted to honor its members regardless of their race or class, not all members' experiences were equally valuable in generating press for the cause.

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<sup>146</sup>Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, "Latest News Flash," 16 June 1936, Folder 41, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472.

<sup>147</sup>See "Norman Thomas Asks Roosevelt for Flog Probe," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 June 1936; "A Woman Flogged," *Press-Scimitar*, 17 June 1936; "Preacher Won't File Charges in Alleged Attack," *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 June 1936; "Woman's Account of Being Flogged By Arkansas Men," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 18 June 1936, Reel 1 of 8, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #1-4485; see also *New Republic*, 1 July 1936, 236-237; "Woman Flogged," *Literary Digest*, 27 June 1936, 29.

<sup>148</sup>Green, 427; Donald Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 113; Grubbs paints a rather dismissive portrait of Blagden, portraying her as flighty and immature.

Weem's temporary martyrdom provides an interesting thinking point for considering the discrepancies between union and outsider images of sharecroppers. That these images—in this instance of a martyred laborer—were produced by representatives of this group does not necessarily make them more accurate or truthful than outsider's representations. While reporters' extensive attention to Blagden's thigh reveals much about the race, class, and gender politics of the wider society, the STFU's branding of Weems as a martyr was no more innocent, even as it attempted to mark poor people and African Americans as figures worthy of admiration. Weems, it turns out, was not only not actually martyred in the full sense of the term for the cause, but when found in Chicago, he made plain his unwillingness to return to Arkansas only to be killed.

Descriptions that STFU members offered of their experiences may not have sensibly applied to other individuals or fit their experiences. Others were plainly useful performances designed to achieve union and personal goals. Often members crafted images of themselves in contradistinction to other groups and prevalent stereotypes of sharecroppers and the poor more broadly. These stereotypes constrained and shaped the terms members used to explain their experiences. The inexorable turn back to the sharecroppers and their conditions, encouraged by union officials, reporters and documentarians, reinforced the view that sharecroppers needed to be worthy subjects of the public's attention, regardless of how difficult their circumstances might have been.

Yet the production of images and portrayals of sharecroppers by sharecroppers is important if only because of the long history of outsiders going into the "field"—quite literally in some instances—and observing poor and lower-class individuals almost as if they were a part of the landscape itself. This was presumed to be true of Millet's method of painting. "He "devoted himself to the study there of Nature and the peasants around him,"

explains one art critic.<sup>149</sup> This was certainly a common way of depicting rural African Americans.<sup>150</sup> Social scientific theories about the effect of the environment, so powerful that it could damage and destroy a person's very character, elevated this naturalistic view of the rural worker to scientific dogma.

Yet as this thesis has shown, that sharecroppers crafted and presented a range of images about themselves did not mean, despite union rhetoric, that they had the social influence to disseminate those images widely. As McCloud has noted, class is a category that is both self-defined and ascribed.<sup>151</sup> The relative power of groups to define or be defined varies. Even in their "own" union, members were not able to control completely how they were depicted, including how their class and religion were described and characterized, before the broader public. Howard Kester's work for the union, though often praised by members, most clearly demonstrates the limits of members' ability to shape the discourse about their experiences, and to assign their own meanings to popular cultural touchstones like *Tobacco Road* and "The Man With the Hoe" in wider conversations.<sup>152</sup>

Organizer and minister Owen Whitfield's experiences suggest that even when sharecroppers successfully presented a version of their story to the public, the resultant image was inevitably a negotiation between other people's expectations and sharecroppers' narratives about their own experiences. It is possible to trace how members' imaginings of

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<sup>149</sup>Eugene Benson, "The Peasant-Painter—Jean Francois Millet," *Appleton's Journal* 8, 185 (12 October 1872), 404.

<sup>150</sup>See Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 31. In fact Benson, Millet art critic, directly compares French peasants and African Americans, explaining that "the peasant of France... is a careless and unambitious being, much like the negro of our Southern plantations."

<sup>151</sup> McCloud, 16-19.

<sup>152</sup>For instance one member wrote to thank him for taking an interest in their affairs and describing their life in *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*. See: Lester Robinson to Howard Kester, 25 March 1936, Folder 26, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union papers #3472.

themselves were shaped by the broad strokes of prejudices against the poor and minorities, but more difficult to discern how they might have accommodated or critiqued specific representations, like Markham's poem, Caldwell's works, or literary creations that fall outside of the period studied here, such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Members of the STFU embraced their poverty, suffering, and faith as marks of chosenness, and articulated their critique of existing social and economic relations from that position. Within the framework of Christianity, members could voice the effects of material deprivation in their lives, and also locate the will to change those circumstances. Typically the broader public, transfixed by images of dirty and ill-dressed children, dilapidated homes, and meager possessions, saw only degradation and erosion.

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