WALKER EVANS

No Politics

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Contents

NO POLITICS whatever.

—WALKER EVANS, 1935

A Note about the Illustrations and Captions

Walker Evans's work raises important issues about how to caption photographs. For many of his photographs, Evans provided titles, which are given here. For untitled photographs, descriptions provided by the Walker Evans Archive are used in brackets. Many of the photographs, by Evans and others, are printed as they appear in the pages of the books and magazine portfolios in which they were published. Titles or index listings for the photographs are reproduced as they appear in these publications. In most cases, the captions reference the pages of the books and magazines, not the individual photographs.

INTRODUCTION

Refusals

In the spring of 1933, in the midst of a revolution that would end in the overthrow of Cuban president Gerardo Machado y Morales, Walker Evans spent three weeks in Havana. As was the case in 1935, when the young photographer took to the road as an information specialist for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration, and again in 1936 with the writer James Agee for *Fortune*, Evans did not end up in Cuba of his own accord. In 1933, he was also working for hire. The Philadelphia publishing house J. B. Lippincott Company commissioned Evans to illustrate *The Crime of Cuba*, the journalist Carleton Beals's latest anti-imperialist tract. Written in Havana on the eve of the revolution, *The Crime of Cuba* continued Beals's by then decade-long chronicling of the devastation of Latin American cultures at the hand of US economic interests.[1] To quote Beals, whom the State Department had dubbed a "Bolshevik" and placed on its list of the most dangerous journalists, "Nowhere else, certainly not in the United States, has rugged capitalism had a freer hand than in Cuba. Yet in few places in the world to-day [*sic*] are conditions quite as bad."[2] Still a staple of Cuban historiography, *The Crime of Cuba* debunks a fallacy that is now all too familiar: the free market is the surest source of freedom. According to Beals, it is the surest source of underdevelopment and revolution.

Commissioning Evans was not Beals's idea. The journalist had hoped to have his book illustrated with photographs of street demonstrations and strikes circulating in the *New York Mirror*.[3] Seeking to garner press in the rotogravure sections of the national papers, Lippincott's art director proposed Evans to Beals.[4] The young photographer was slated, so Beals was told, to become the next Margaret Bourke-White—America's great photojournalist.[5] The record Evans brought back from Havana bore little resemblance to the one then circulating in the New York tabloid, in

which death and intrigue ruled. In the over four hundred photographs that Evans produced at the height of the revolution—in the midst of workers' strikes, student marches, daily bombings, and street demonstrations—very little happens. Families stand in line (fig. 1). Men make their beds in public squares (fig. 2). Well-dressed women pose for the camera (fig. 3). Alternating between a handheld medium format camera and a view camera on a tripod, this hired hand did not capture Cuba's marching, riotous youth.[6] Rather, in Evans's record of Cuba in "the midst of a revolution," the island's citizens neither fight nor work.[7] They sit and they sleep. They watch and they wait. This book is about Evans's refusal "to bring back the news." Why hit the streets in the "midst of a revolution" and produce such a generic record? Why take the job and refuse to do the work?

The prosaism of Evans's record exceeds its subjects' inactivity. It is inscribed in the very structure of the record itself. Over the course of his three-week stay in this "frontier town," as Evans called Havana, he produced numerous variations on the same subjects, arranging and rearranging their figures and faces over and over and over again.[8] Stevedores and policemen were posed, adorned with hats and cigars. Young women were gathered in cafés and alcoves, accompanied by plants and pearls. The old, the unemployed, and the exhausted were found slumped over and splayed out on promenade chairs and park benches. They were figure and fixture. In accordance with these repetitions, Evans divided his record into several categories, which he scrawled on the fronts of thirty-three small manila envelopes.[9] These include the playful "I'm a picturesque spot" and "a bench bum" as well as the more generic "view of S. Maria Rosario," "shop," and "señorita—at café." Several of the envelopes carry the same label. "Shop," for example, appears seven times and "señorita—at café," Evans's pseudonym for his dressed-up women, four. Despite these repetitions, the envelopes were each numbered separately, carrying the numbers one through thirty-three on the undersides. In Havana, Evans did not go in for the noteworthy or the newsworthy. This "roving" photographer collected and collated what was already familiar: generic urban types and locales. The figures and fixtures of modernism make up Evans's Cuba: the "bench bums" sleeping in the opening sequence of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); the made-up women gathered in alcoves and entryways collected by Berenice Abbott for *Atget, photographe de Paris* (1930); and Charlie Chaplin's personification of "modern times," the tattered and itinerant "little tramp." Representation

Fig. 1. Walker Evans, [People Waiting at Trolley Stop, Havana], 1933. Film negative, 2½ x 4¼ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.251.645). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 2. Walker Evans, [Man Sleeping on Bench in Public Square, Havana], 1933. Film negative, 2½ x 4¼ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.251.760). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

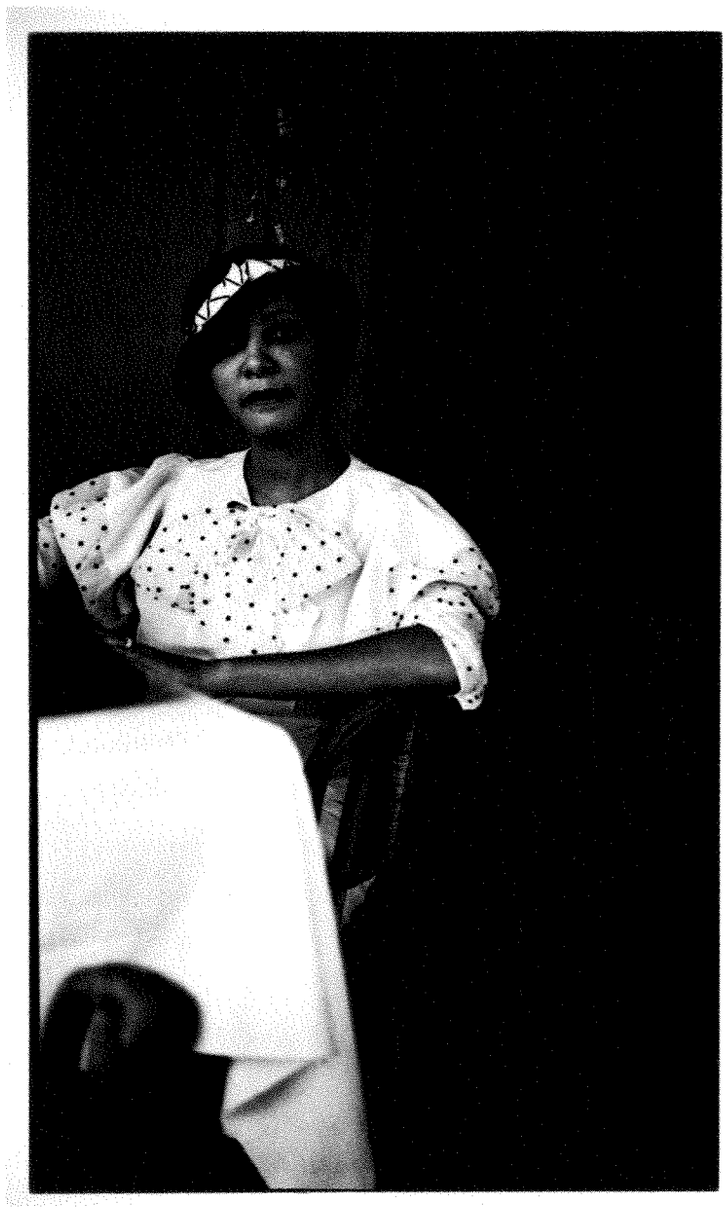

Fig. 3. Walker Evans, [Woman Seated at Table, Havana], 1933. Film negative, 4¼ x 2½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.251.704). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

certainly preceded this record. Cuba, for Evans, was already seen and made.

Evans submitted sixty-four of his photographs to Lippincott for publication. The editors were instructed to select half the lot and not to mess with the titles. As Evans wrote to Beals in June 1933, once he had returned to New York:

> The publishers will doubtless send you proofs of the reproductions, perhaps you will have some things to say about the titles. I often felt presumptuous, having so much to do with another's careful work. I made a selection which as to number of prints and order and titles seems not to bear any changing at all, and have prayed Mr. J. Jefferson Jones to leave it thus.[10]

Evans was exacting. *The Crime of Cuba* went to press on August 17, 1933, five days after the fall of the *machadato* (as Machado's regime was called), with thirty-one of the sixty-four photographs printed following Beals's text, as well as after the book's appendix, bibliography, and index.[11] Introduced by a separate frontispiece, which carries the title "Cuba: A Portfolio of Photographs by Walker Evans," Evans's selections are printed full-bleed and one per two-page spread (figs. 4 and 5). A title and number appear in the footer of the photograph's anterior facing page. Similar to the categories that he had penciled on the fronts of the small manila envelopes, Evans's titles refer to generic urban types and locales. They are commonplace and predominantly singular: Havana Street, Public Square, Butcher Shop, Street Corner, Parque Central, Woman, Beggar, Cinema, Lottery-Ticket Vendors, Newsboys, and so forth. Interspersed among Evans's photographs, as well as his numbers and titles, are three photographs that he had culled from the archives of Havana's newspapers. These photographs of Havana's marching, riotous youth—captured and killed—were ripped from their headlines, rephotographed, cropped, and retitled. Evans credited them the way they would have been credited in the press: Anonymous Photograph (fig. 6). If, in Cuba, Evans did not record the noteworthy or the newsworthy, his portfolio of photographs from Cuba certainly functions like the news. The generic is inseparable from the local and the specific, the newsworthy becomes commonplace, the commonplace becomes newsworthy, and the monotony of everyday life in this "frontier town" drips on one page after the next.

In Cuba, Evans refused to bear witness. He did not document "the crime." His portfolio repeatedly declares: *There is no crime to see here.* There is only the possibility of more of the same old thing again. Any "señorita—at café," stevedore, "bench bum," or vendor could replace another, could be slotted into place on the book's page. Even the final photograph in the portfolio, the only photograph that seems to directly reference the strikes and marches taking place in the streets of Havana in the spring of 1933, does not refer to the crimes about which Beals wrote (fig. 7). "We support the strike of the cigar workers" and "Down with the imperialist war" were old slogans.[12] They were yesterday's news.

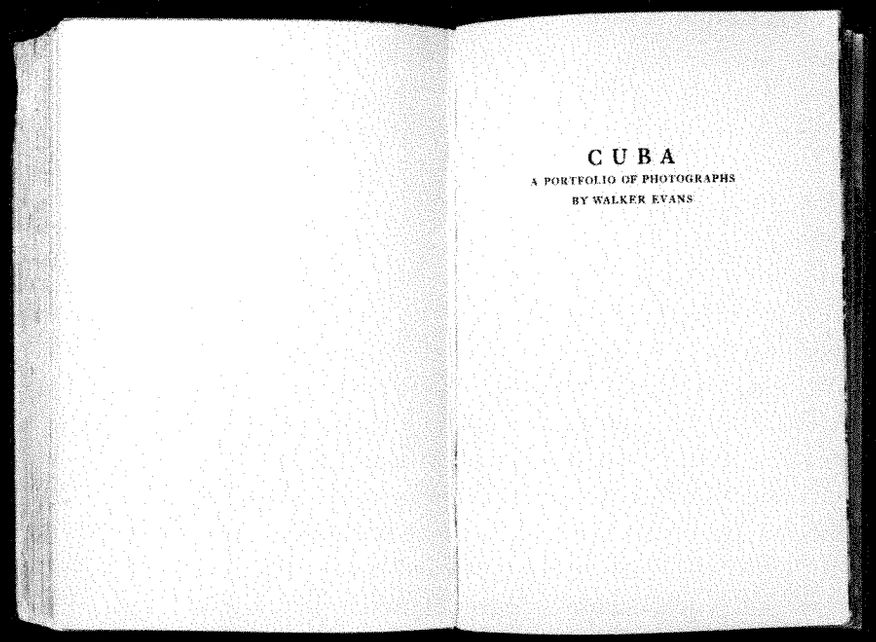

Fig. 4. Walker Evans, frontispiece. From "Cuba: A Portfolio of Photographs by Walker Evans," in Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1933). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ian Jones.

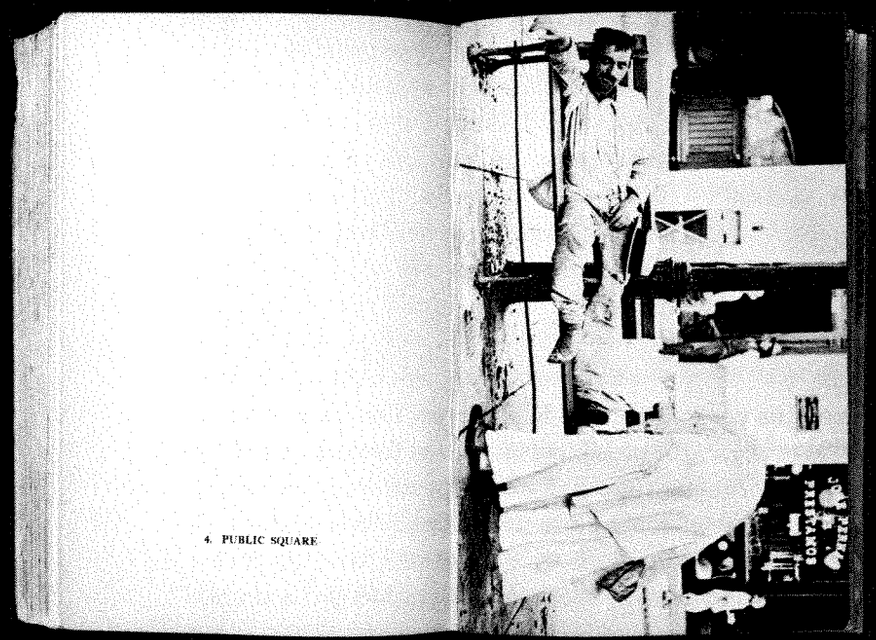

Fig. 5. From Walker Evans, "Cuba: A Portfolio of Photographs by Walker Evans," in Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1933). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ian Jones.

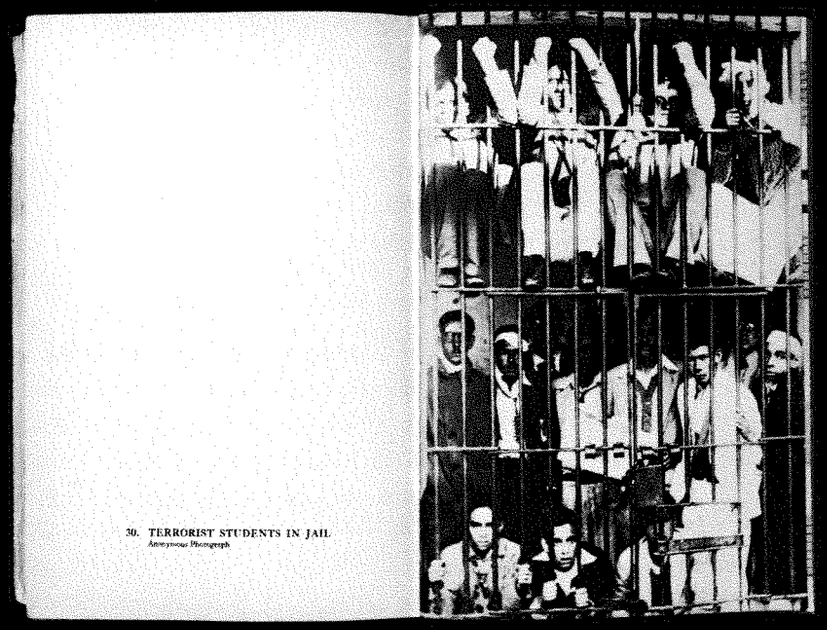

Fig. 6. From Walker Evans, "Cuba: A Portfolio of Photographs by Walker Evans," in Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1933). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ian Jones.

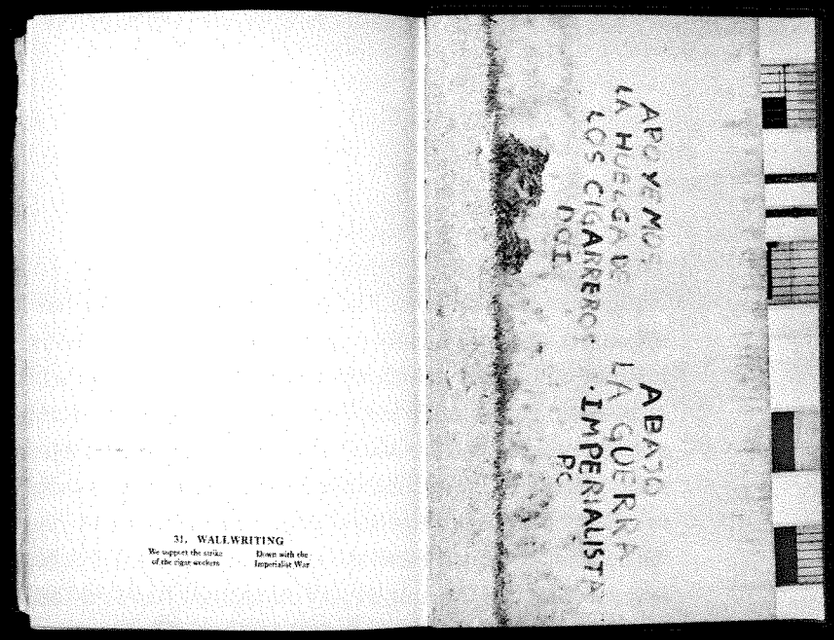

Fig. 7. From Walker Evans, "Cuba: A Portfolio of Photographs by Walker Evans," in Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1933). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ian Jones.

In the spring of 1933, Evans did not, as Beals had most likely hoped he would, stockpile evidence of imperial violence and dictatorial misrule. With Evans and through Evans, readers of Beals's prose get to see very little. They are encouraged to flip the page, to read the signs, and to count a succession of entirely familiar features. They are presented with what had already been accounted for elsewhere and by others. The news they are given had already been recorded.

This book is not about Evans's photographs of Cuba. Instead, it takes the Cuba portfolio as a model for the work Evans completed over the four decades in which he worked as a photographer. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, Evans continued to work for hire and with others to compile words and photographs into portfolios. He also continued to refuse instrumentalizing his photographs and words for and through others' work. "NO POLITICS whatever" is how Evans eventually verbalized and institutionalized his refusal. Penned in the spring of 1935, these three words close a memorandum Evans wrote to himself outlining the desired terms of his employment as an information specialist for the Resettlement Administration. "Never make photographic statements for the government," Evans began, "or do photographic chores for gov [*sic*] or anyone in gov, no matter how powerful—this is pure record not propaganda."[13] Certainly stubborn and self-directed, Evans was hardly naïve. He knew that his photographs would be used to do a variety of chores. He knew that they would do political work, as they had done on the pages of the new literary journals, such as *Hound & Horn*, since the early 1930s. In 1932, a photograph by Evans of a prostrate man without work, which he shot for the New York State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, closed a suite of photographs of workers speaking, convening, and marching that appeared on that journal's pages (figs. 8 and 9). The ends, it seems, justified the means. With his emphatic declaration not to engage in politics, Evans does not deny the photograph's work, its tasks and chores. Rather, he neatly—simply—historicizes his work as a photographer. Evans's demand for the photograph's pure presence recalls photography's motley past: its status as evidence of the naturalization of work and the negation of politics. Photography, as several of its inventors and early champions had insisted, was, first and foremost, the sun's work.[14] Nature's work, it required neither head- nor handwork. Historically speaking, that is, photography had been defined by a refusal to be able to claim a right to work. Without this history, without an acknowledgment of calls for and

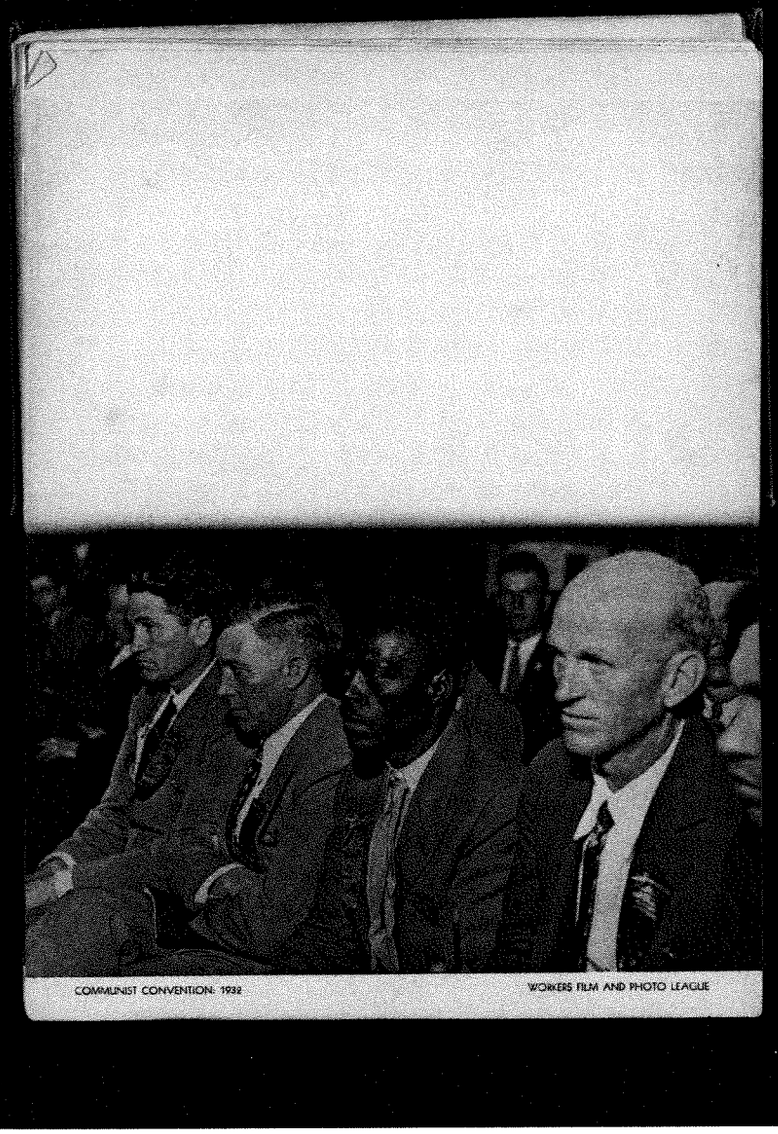

Fig. 8. Workers Film and Photo League, *Communist Convention*, 1932, as it appeared in *Hound & Horn* 6, no. 1 (October–December 1932). Photo: Harvard University Library.

convictions about the record's latent or given purity, Evans cunningly declares: there is "No politics whatever."

Evans's refusal to instrumentalize his work shapes this study of the work we ask or expect Evans to do—namely, documentary. What, I ask in the pages that follow, does Evans's desire for autonomy, a desire that he continued to act out and verbalize well into the late 1960s, tell us about the ways in which we have historicized documentary work produced in the United States since the 1930s? Have we, to pose the question differently, refused to give it a history? Like Evans's emphatic three words, this question is meant to be provocative. There are, of course, countless histories

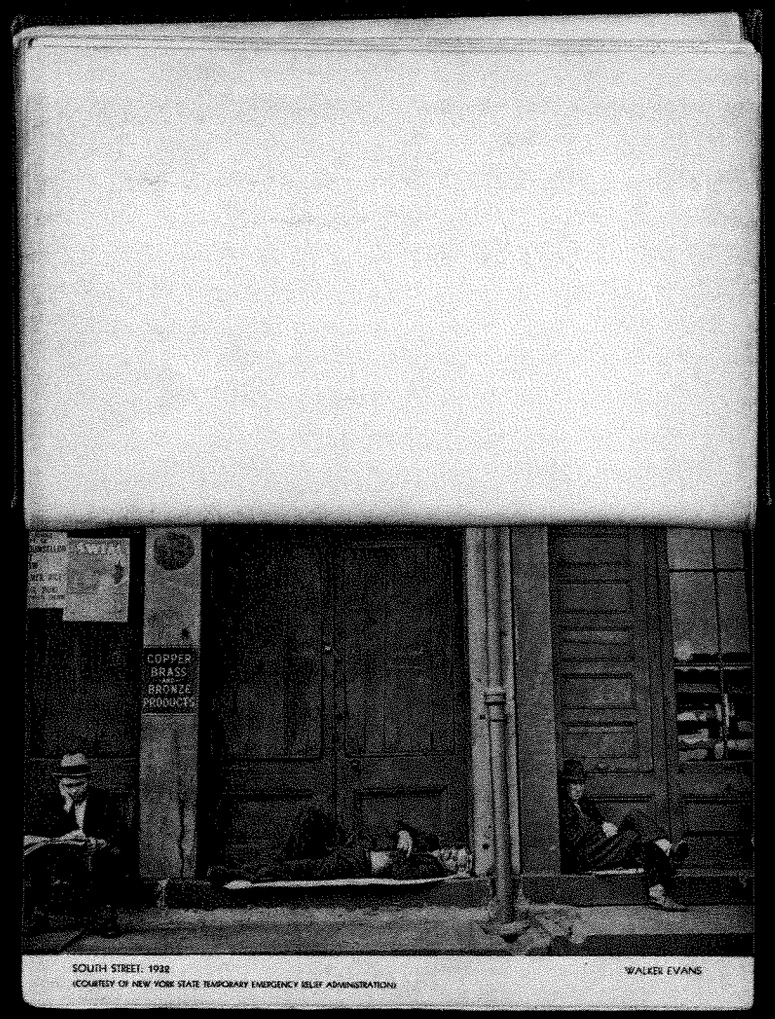

Fig. 9. Walker Evans, *South Street*, 1932, as it appeared in *Hound & Horn* 6, no. 1 (October–December 1932). © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Harvard University Library.

of American documentary, numerous and important detailed accounts of its emergence in the 1930s as a response to the Great Depression. American documentary, the now-established histories argue, was an invention of the New Deal state.[15] It emerged as a novel and necessary means of keeping that state intact once the Depression had subsided. Accordingly, its chore or "task," to quote Roy Stryker, the manager in charge of specialists like Evans and the photographic file at the Resettlement Administration for which Evans was hired to produce, "was to confront the people with each other."[16] And on the pages of the newly illustrated magazines and numerous books, a selection of the over one hundred thousand

photographs produced for and by the state between 1935 and 1942 did just that.[17] They created a space for the nation to confront itself as a nation.

It is hard to argue with this narrative, and that is not the aim of this book. Undoubtedly, the beginning of American documentary could be moved back in time and removed from the hands of the state. The Workers Film and Photo League did come "first." Operating under the auspices of the Comintern-affiliated Workers International Relief, this league of photographers and filmmakers did define documentary on the pages of *Hound & Horn*, for example, several years before the files of the Resettlement Administration were established.[18] Likewise, the British filmmaker and theorist John Grierson penned his "First Principles of Documentary" in 1932, substantiating his earlier claim that Robert Flaherty's film about village life in Samoa, *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926), was a documentary.[19] "An actuality," the film, Grierson argued, was neither art nor news.[20] If a different story about the emergence of documentary is presented in these pages, it is not offered as a correction to the historical record. I make no attempts in this book to find or confirm the beginning or origin of documentary. My concern, instead, is with the politics of that endeavor. It is with the ways in which the nomination of a beginning or origin for documentary has relegated it to the past. Deemed or defined as an instrumentalization of Progressive Era or New Deal politics, American documentary (so historians of photography and photographers have often been told) has become a way of working that needs to be, should be, undone or overcome. American documentary is propaganda. It is liberal politics. It is voyeuristic. It speaks for the state, not for the public confronted through, with, or by the photographs. It is neither objective nor pure. It can't be. Statements like these, which take hold of writing about American documentary in the 1980s, in the wake of the emergence of postmodernism and histories of art critical of anything claiming autonomy, have come to be established as history.[21] This is so despite the fact that they actively refuse to historicize documentary. They plot a beginning for documentary so that those writing of its emergence could confirm or announce its end. Said differently, the standard accounts of the emergence of American documentary refuse to acknowledge the politics of writing history, which, I argue in this book, is the work of Evans's "no politics" and documentary. "Our readings of past culture are subject to the covert demands of the historical present" is how the photographer and historian of photography Allan Sekula put it in the late 1970s, adding: "Mystified

interpretation universalizes the act of reading, lifting it above history."[22] History and politics are given, and documentary is readied to be undone and, not insignificantly, remade.

Sekula's statement opens the 1978 manifesto he penned against this refusal to historicize: his call for the "reinvention" of documentary.[23] Still a touchstone for debates about American documentary and the proliferation of documentary, in general, as a key cultural form in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this text has been conveniently and continuously misread.[24] It was hardly, as many have insisted, written to celebrate the emergence of a (or his) radical documentary in the 1970s—of a documentary defined by its negative critical relationship to the work of the 1930s.[25] In fact, offering a Marxist critique of the ways in which the history of modernism were being written to establish this arc and modernism's end, including or especially the one offered by postmodernism, Sekula censures the determinist writing of its and documentary's history. His concern is not with the past, nor is it with the present. It is with the "afterlives" of cultural forms. That concept, which he borrows from the cultural critic and essayist Walter Benjamin, shapes the reinvention of documentary and the work of the historical materialist.[26] "The historical materialist," as Benjamin explained in one of the many critiques of historicism that he penned in the 1930s, "explodes the epoch out of its reified 'historical continuity,' and thereby lifts life out of this epoch, and the work out of the life work."[27] Accordingly, documentary, Sekula argues, could only be reinvented when those histories relegating it to the past, demoting its politics, are, to use the other word that frames the manifesto, "dismantled." The reinvention of documentary, in other words, is not wholly negative work. It is not a critique of either documentary or modernism as such. Dialectical work, it produces new histories. To be more exact: it insists on writing history differently.

This is the work I aim to do here. It was also, I argue, Evans's work. Thus, as stories about the emergence of documentary unfold on these pages, including those acknowledging an investment in the stories about claims for autonomy and purity framing the origins of photography, they partake in the double work of attending to the ways in which histories of documentary have been and could be written, while insisting that this is also how Evans approached the work of documentary. In refusing to do another's "careful work," Evans did not do his own work. Nor did he refuse to work. He actively did the work that others had already done. This work does not invalidate documentary's claim to purity. It recognizes

that documentary's work is the reinvention of that claim and, in turn, the purchase it has on declarations of autonomy. It gives documentary a history—though, as I will stress in these pages, not simply by writing or telling a history of photography. The history to be written here, in and through Evans's documentary, is also a history of work. Evans's refusal to act or work politically was nothing less than a sly take on the new social relations organizing work in America. While the Depression put people out of work, the new regimes of Taylorism refused many of those still working, including photographers, the possibility of being able to claim a right to it. With the division of the head from the hand, with control over work taken away from those doing it, work could no longer be accounted for as either autonomous or owned.[28] This fundamental change to the labor process is not the beginning of documentary. However, to start here, as I will argue Evans did, is to insist on writing history differently. It is to refuse to start with "the crime," the crisis, or the end.

By taking Evans's Cuba portfolio as a means for modeling documentary work, I am not suggesting that we need to begin the study of Evans's work and documentary over again with his first major commission or with his work from the 1930s. In fact, I make no effort in this book to provide a chronological study of Evans's work or of documentary. Throughout the book, I move back and forth between the various projects Evans produced between the 1930s and the 1960s, as well as those he began in the 1930s and finished or remade in the 1960s. By refusing a chronological approach to Evans's career and his commissions, I counter the standard histories of the rise and fall of documentary between the two World Wars, as well as the structure of most monographic studies of Evans's work. That is, instead of privileging either beginnings and endings or early and late work, I investigate Evans's commitment to remake his work, to make the same work over and over again. For instance, in the 1960s, Evans was still compiling words and photographs into portfolios, working through the page and with the press. He was also, as I argue in this book's final pages, actively remaking the work he made in the 1930s in response to the so-called reemergence of documentary after the Second World War. With the Cold War in full swing, the Great Depression and its photographic record returned to public purview as an end, as a moment of triumph, and a new beginning. By attending to continuities, as opposed to breaks and ruptures, what emerges in these pages is not a history *of* documentary. It is an investigation of the ways in which Evans's refusal to do the work he was asked and

paid to do historicized documentary as a mode of work in which refusing politics was the only way to work politically. It is also an argument about why this refusal should frame histories of the invention or origins of documentary in the 1930s. There is no need, in short, to go back to the beginning, no need to write histories of documentary from the beginning. However, there is a need to recognize that stories about the beginning of photography, its "no politics," shape the emergence of documentary.

In this regard, throughout the book, I contend with the conclusion Martha Rosler offers in one of the now-seminal essays on American documentary that emerged in response to the celebration of its reemergence in the 1960s: documentary only exists in the future. It is, to use her words, "not yet." As Rosler puts it in the essay's closing line: "But the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary."[29] With this statement, Rosler is not suggesting that documentary never existed or that it had yet to be achieved. Eschewing such positivist and historicist thinking, she is suggesting that it is not past.[30] She is acknowledging that it was invented and codified after it was historicized as politics. "Documentary photography has come to represent the social consciousness of liberal sensibility" is another way Rosler frames her thesis.[31] Accordingly, the so-called purveyor of documentary is not the Resettlement Administration or its photographers. It is the architects of neoliberalism, those eagerly or ardently calling for the "end of history."[32] Following Rosler's call to write history differently, to write for a future, one of the charges folded into this study of Evans's work is that standard histories of American documentary continue to assess, critique, champion, and judge documentary from the perspective of the neoliberal present and of its failures. They continue, that is, to tally good and bad politics.

The other charge is that Evans's refusal to instrumentalize his work may just be one of the reasons why his work is so central to what has become known, following Sekula, as the reinvention of documentary.[33] It is not, as many have suggested, because the legendary photographer of the Great Depression provides evidence of documentary's fallacies and limits, of the kind of work that needed to be undone and overcome for the emergence of a truly political documentary.[34] This conclusion evidences a failure to take seriously the specificity of Sekula's charge—namely, to think and work historically. The call to reinvent, after all, directly acknowledges the centrality of the myth framing the invention of photography,

its "no politics," to Evans's work and documentary. This myth, like all myths, as Roland Barthes argued with the semiology of photography in mind, need not be debunked.[35] It needs to be mined for its political work. That Sekula did this mining, with his own essays and photo works in the 1970s and 1980s, must, I insist, be central to the study of documentary. It must be accounted for by the ways in which its history is reinvented or written. Said differently, it is necessary to write history with an eye to an afterlife, not from the beginning to the end. In the latter histories, documentary remains out of time. It remains a historical form as opposed to a form with a history.[36]

To recognize documentary as a form with a history is also to recognize the relationship between that form and the subject of Evans's work: America. For four decades, Evans worked on and through the problem of how to make America recognizable, cohere into representation, such that his mentor, Lincoln Kirstein, insisted, with regard to the two portfolios making up *American Photographs* (1938), "The physiognomy of a nation is laid on your table."[37] For Evans, Kirstein understood, America was both figure and ground. It was the subject of his work and it gave his work its structure. Is it possible, I ask, to assess, critique, or engage with the America Evans produced without assessing, critiquing, or engaging with the portfolio he published in *The Crime of Cuba*? Is there an America to be named or grasped or held in Evans's work without attending to the ways in which he refused to name or grasp or hold Cuba? To be clear, these questions are not meant to suggest that an expanded geography of American documentary is needed, one that accounts for the fact that much of it was produced beyond the borders of the continental United States—in Cuba, Tahiti, and Mexico, for example.[38] Rather, they are meant to question this geopolitics as well as the politics of documentary it has produced. As the figures and fixtures of modernism repeat and reappear across the pages of Evans's portfolios, they suggest that the neoliberal present of which Rosler writes organized a politics for documentary at odds with the very geographies of Americanization (figs. 10 and 11). After all, Havana, as Evans noted in his diary, was already or necessarily America—American. It was a "frontier town." "The outer edge of a wave," as the most famous theoretician of that geography, Frederick Jackson Turner, described it in 1893, the American frontier is conveniently fluid, borderless.[39] It ebbs and flows, circumscribing while also refusing to circumscribe America as a place within which, from which, there is an outside. Like the myth

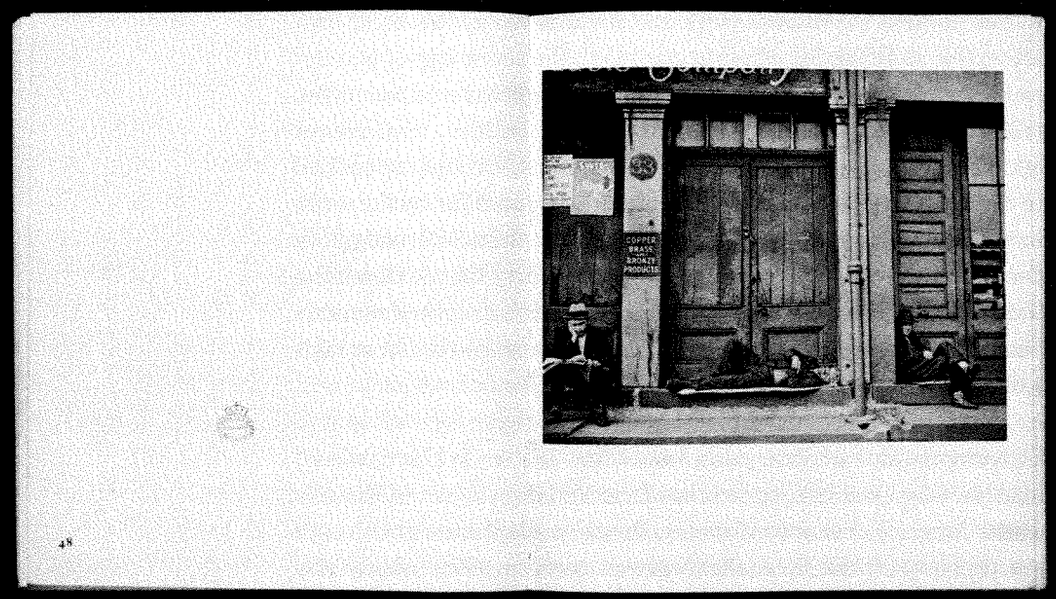

Fig. 10. From Walker Evans, *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938). Listed in the index as: South Street, New York, 1932. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

naturalizing photography's work, this myth, too, I argue in these pages, need not be debunked. It needs to be contended with for the America it invented. Accordingly, the problem with the standard histories of American documentary is not that they have been far too American, far too focused on the work produced in the United States. It is that they are not American enough. They have yet to address the fact that Americanization is a process that takes place at home.

Beals's account of the revolution smoldering in Cuba in the early 1930s solicits this geography in its opening lines. "What right," Beals asks his readers, "have we to get exercised about Hitler when we helped to maintain in Cuba, a protectorate at our very doorstep, a government which has committed far greater crimes than those which have occurred in Germany" (*Crime*, 7)? The final chapters of *The Crime of Cuba* sufficiently prove Beals's inflammatory claim. Since his election in 1924, the "Tropical Mussolini," as President Machado was known, had amended the constitution of the Cuban republic to extend his presidential term from four to six years; inaugurated a one-party electoral platform, *cooperativismo*, which ensured his uncontested run for reelection in November 1928 as the *candidato único*; suppressed all major newspapers; closed the university; outlawed labor unions

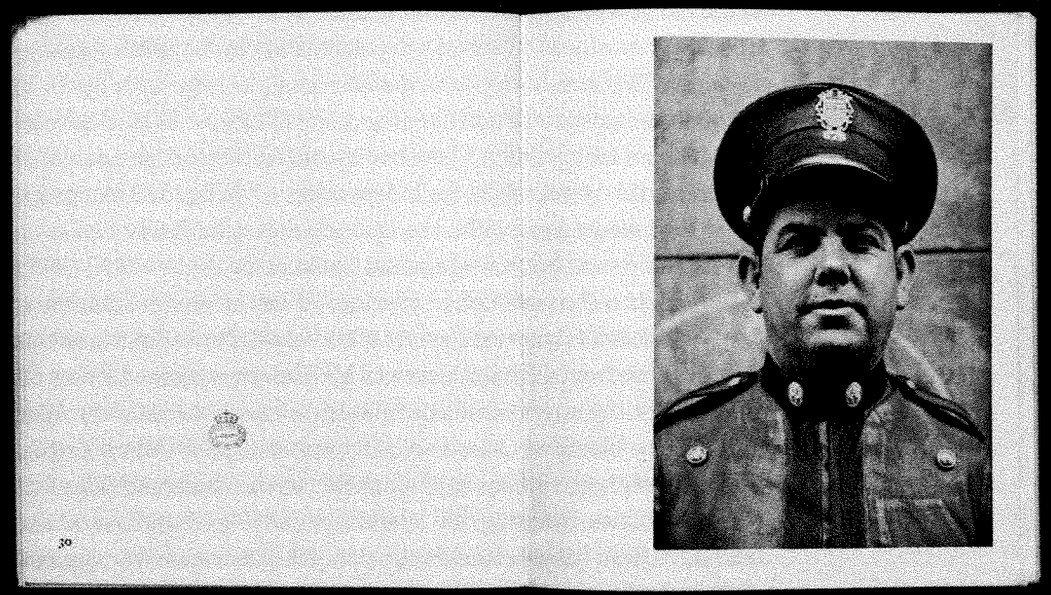

Fig. 11. From Walker Evans, *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938). Listed in the index as: Havana Policeman, 1932. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

as well as all nonmilitary public gatherings; and organized a secret police, La Partida de la Porra, to dispose of his political prisoners. Under Machado's direction, La Porra reinstituted the Spanish colonial Ley de Fuga (Law of Flight), the practice of shooting prisoners in the back upon setting them free and then justifying the killing by charging them with attempted escape. The bloody bodies of young revolutionaries, Beals informs his readers, were piling up in the morgue and the streets of Cuba's capital.[40] The question opening Beals's book was, however, not designed to prompt this tally of Machado's crimes—to provide proof that Machado was more of a monster than Hitler circa 1933, before the American public had been made aware of the full extent of the Führer's crimes or chose to acknowledge them. Rather, it was designed to encourage the investigation of a wholly different set of criminals. The crime of which Beals writes in the four hundred pages that follow his opening query was not Machado's. It was America's. The Tropical Mussolini, Beals insists, was an American invention. Why become exercised about the development of fascism abroad, he asks, when the US government has been actively developing fascism at home?

Machado was a monster, a modern-day "Nero," but his crimes, Beals argues, were not his own (*Crime*, 239). They were the result

of the US government's systematic underdevelopment of Cuba's political system since the island's decolonization in the 1890s. Linking President William McKinley's decision to go to war with Spain in 1898 to the inauguration of the Republic of Cuba in 1902, Beals details how an independent Cuba had emerged through the denial of an almost thirty-year fight for independence.[41] When US troops arrived in Cuba in April 1898, the Cuban Liberation Army had been fighting, and winning, a war against Spain since the late 1860s. "We retarded, then aborted, Cuban freedom" is one of Beals's many pithy transcriptions of America's crime (*Crime*, 123). Beals diagrams this crime on two fronts. First, there was McKinley's supposedly neutral war against the atrocities of the Spanish colonial bureaucracy. Won with Cuban blood on Cuban soil, the war deprived Cuba's revolutionaries of their victory against their colonial master.[42] The fact that the battles ravaging the island between April and August of 1898 have been historicized as the Spanish-American War, instead of as a revolution or even as a war of independence, is evidence of the dispossession Beals described. Second, the US congressional resolution to go to war was contingent on the nonrecognition of the insurgent government. This was the case even though the resolution appeared to sanction the opposite course of action. Article IV of the US Joint Resolution (also known as the Teller Amendment) specified that the US government "thereby disclaim any disposition of intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over the said island except for the pacification thereof, and asserts its determination, when it is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the island to its people."[43] The Teller Amendment, as scholars since Beals have consistently argued, conveniently guaranteed the US government the right to dictate the terms of peace and oversee the organization of an independent government.[44] If that was not enough, the Platt Amendment, the eight-point amendment appended to the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba of 1901, expanded the Teller Amendment's terms. It banned the Cuban government from contracting any public debt with any foreign power, secured US control of a naval base in Guantánamo Bay, and authorized future US political and military intervention on the island for the "preservation of Cuban independence." As Amy Kaplan argues in her study of the linguistic and legal particularities of US "foreign" policy in Cuba, the legal loophole or the (indefinite) deferral of sovereignty that invented the Republic of Cuba still casts a dark shadow over US diplomacy in the region, if not the world.[45] It underscores the fact that the geographic designation of the Guantánamo military base as a space "in yet not within" Cuba is not an anomaly.[46] It

is deemed a necessary and logical contradiction, and it is still organizing America.

This contradiction, as Beals acknowledges, was, quite literally, homegrown or, at least, that was the nation's founding myth. Since the inauguration of the United States in accordance with Thomas Jefferson's coupling of landownership with liberty—through his claim that the United States, unlike "old Europe," was an "empire of liberty"—Cuba had been conceived of as "our" America.[47] Jefferson organized this geography in 1809 when he was asked to define the limits of his purchase of the Territory of Louisiana from France. "I would immediately erect a column on the southernmost limit of Cuba," he insisted, and "inscribe on it a *ne plus ultra* as to us in that direction."[48] Despite the fact that it was the western, not the southern, limit of the territory that was being contested (and conveniently left undefined for many years), Jefferson, at least figuratively, deemed Cuba, which was still a Spanish colony, the limit of US territory. That Cuba is, or at least represents, the American republic's founding principle, its sovereign contradiction, may just help explain the longevity of the revolution of 1959, which some have argued began in 1933, as well as the US government's inability to normalize diplomatic relations with the republic.[49] Cuba, after all, was not simply deemed already or naturally US territory. Its status as both outside and inside America was deemed central to that nation's success as an "empire of liberty." As one senator remarked more than a half century after Jefferson's purchase: "From the day we acquired Louisiana the attention of our able statesmen was fixed on Cuba. What the possession of the Mouth of the Mississippi was to the West that of Cuba was to the nation."[50] This geography gave the crime of which Beals wrote its history. To quote one of the many Cuban historians whom Beals relied on to write his book and give it its title: "'And that is the crime of Cuba, my friend. For all the blood and sacrifice of our people, of your people, we merely changed masters. . . . We are exiles in our own land. . . . That is the crime of Cuba.'" (*Crime*, 34).

If I give ample space to this history, it is not because I think it was of interest to Evans. Evans is the person or character around which this book turns, but my concern lies neither with aligning him with Beals nor assigning him a politics.[51] Throughout this book, I take Evans's disavowal of politics seriously and thus not as an expression or, as it were, a negation of *his* politics. "No politics whatever" was a statement about the possibility of claiming a politics, of making a commitment, photographically and in America, in the 1930s or at the moment when claiming a politics

or being claimed by a politics—on the right and the left—was becoming either necessary or a matter of survival.[52] Disavowing the disavowal or assuming that it is personal ignores this history. More importantly, with regard to the history of photography that I write in this book, it refuses to attend to the historical relationship between photography and politics—or its negation. "America is really the natural home of photography if photography is thought of without operators [*sic*]" is how Evans had voiced this disavowal in 1931, two years before he left for Cuba and refused to do Beals's work.[53] This statement, made in the context of his attempt to write a history of photography, or what he called photography's "reappearance" in the 1920s, frames much of my analysis of Evans's work. As it repeats in these pages, it serves to anchor Evans's refusal to be counted as a subject at work in America historically as much as it serves to anchor his American photographs in a history of photography that accounts for its negation of a claim to work and politics. Thus, if Beals's history of "the crime of Cuba" is invaluable to the study of American documentary, it is not because it provides captions for Evans's Cuba photographs or gives them or Evans a politics. It is because its history of expropriation compels us to displace both Evans and Cuba from the "scene of the crime." The crimes of which Beals wrote, and that Evans refused to picture, have long and varied histories. There is always another place from which to begin, to start again.

Thus, to return to the provocation with which I began this introduction: if American documentary still lacks a history, it is not simply because the standard histories have been written from its supposed end. It is not just because the fate of documentary has been unduly instrumentalized in the writing of its history. It is because historians of American documentary continue to insist that the Great Depression is the crime around which the history of America's photographic modernism must turn. Why start here? Why keep the story of crisis intact? The Depression is seen in many of the photographs reproduced in this book, but the Depression-era documentaries discussed here offer other and multiple origins for the atrocities laid out on their pages. Being able to see and to read these histories requires getting beyond the photograph as much as it requires getting beyond the belief in the failure of documentary to represent peoples or nations. In Evans's books and pages, with his photographs, numbers, and words, representation proliferates. Documentary is not photography. This, too, is just the way the history has been written. Attending to multiple means of communication, documentary necessarily, even

purposefully, confounds singularity—the "this" of the photograph. Historicized thus, it becomes evident that documentary did not end and begin again. It did not fail and then succeed. Nor did the political project that has come to define America, not even at the current moment, when it seems as if America's hegemony won't quite fully "unravel."[54] If we write history differently, if we historicize, we will see that it is always and necessarily this time in America. It is time for the crimes to repeat themselves as if and because they are not new. It is time for them to be repeated on the page and through the photographer's refusal to give them a name, to name them as past.

The book is presented in three parts, with a brief coda on the legacy of Evans's documentary work. Organized around the Cuba portfolio, it moves from a consideration of *The Crime of Cuba* as a book containing words and photographs, to the pages of the portfolio with Evans's photographs and words, to the news photographs (which once had words) that Evans rephotographed and incorporated into his portfolio as anonymous work. Thus, the book is structured in a way that enacts its insistence on writing history differently. There is no movement from beginning to end, from early to late work. There is also no effort to write about Evans's portfolios as individual or indivisible works. He did not conceive of them that way, and they should not be contained or scripted into place. Let loose, so to speak, allowed to move across the fold and between the parts of this book, they start to tell other stories about America and photography than the ones we have wanted to have told, including those claiming that the Depression is the frame around which American documentary works. In each part, I register this displacement of "the crime" temporally, through a consideration of Evans's refusal to be present, his insistence on being late, and his decision to remake the news, respectively. Thus, while each part of the book is framed by the Cuba portfolio, each also frames an extended analysis of claims for or against documentary's immediacy. Taken less as chapters than as equal parts of this account of the emergence of documentary, each offers its own narrative arc, its own telling of stories about how documentary has never been present. As I argue here, there is nothing at work in Evans's work, in his portfolios, but mediation. Beginning with his Cuba portfolio, the part stands in for the whole, the specific for the generic, page after page after page. Documentary laid "the physiognomy of a nation," as Kirstein put it, on the table.

Part I, "American Histories," takes as its subject collaboration,

an aspect of almost every documentary project produced in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Photographers collaborated with novelists, journalists, poets, and sociologists in the production of numerous photographic books. My concern here is not, however, with the collaboration between Evans and Beals, with the relationship between the book's named authors. Nor, for that matter, is it with the collaboration between words and photographs, the other key relationship that has defined the way the photographic books of the 1930s and 1940s have been discussed. Rather, taking seriously Evans's insistence that he was not illustrating Beals's history, I consider the collaboration in Evans's Cuba portfolio, as well as in the other portfolios he produced, including those making up *American Photographs*, to be that between the generic and the specific. Hardly supplementary to or supplemented by Beals's work, Evans's portfolio is complete, full. This fullness drives a discussion of documentary that pushes back against claims made for its fallaciousness and inadequacy, claims that have shaped its history since it came under attack by those writing histories of documentary in response to its reinvention in the 1970s. In Evans's portfolios, I argue, photographs neither misrepresent nor do they fail to represent. Rather, working too much, as both the generic and the specific, they represent the organization of social relations most in need of representation, such as, for example, between tenant farmers and landlords. I develop this argument in two steps. First, I trace the origins of Evans's Americanism to a history of photography in which no one collaborated or worked, in which, as Evans put it in 1931, there are "no operators." Having drawn out Evans's story about photography as the displacement from traditional forms of work, I consider Evans's work in light of one of the most celebrated photographic books of the era: Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. A collaboration between a writer and an photo editor, this book, which was published in 1941, made use of a selection of photographs from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) archive, including some by Evans, to provide a visual history of the migration of African Americans from the plantations of the South to the kitchenettes and factories of the North in the first decades of the twentieth century. My concern is not with the "chores" Evans's photographs are made to do in Wright's narrative of America's industrialization. It is with how this reading of photography's work has allowed us to mistake a primer on Americanization—on the realities of living in exile at home—for a Depression-era exposé on the impoverishment of black "folk." In part I, Evans's Cuba

portfolio is a model for his work as well as a model for the work that needs to be done to historicize documentary.

Part II, "Late Portraits," moves from a consideration of *The Crime of Cuba* as a book to a consideration of the organization of the pages of the Cuba portfolio. If Evans refused to collaborate with Beals, purposely ignored that author's "careful work," he did not necessarily work alone. He worked in conversation, both real and imaginary, with a number of editors, writers, and photographers who also used the space of the page as a site for work in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Part II offers a close reading of Evans's above-noted history of photography, "The Reappearance of Photography," which was written in the form of a review of several new photography publications, including Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* (The world is beautiful; 1928), August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of Our Time*; 1929), and Carl Sandburg's *Steichen the Photographer* (1929). The review hailed or condemned these publications in turn, arguing, as did Benjamin in the same year and with many of the same publications in mind, for a fundamental transformation in how photography was being historicized. Opening with a consideration of Evans's review, part II attends, in its second half, to the fact that both Evans and Benjamin explore this transformation through an analysis of how photography fundamentally altered the genre of portraiture. Both take Sander's compendium of German citizens in *Antlitz der Zeit* as evidence of a seismic shift in thinking about photography's potential uses. Evans's review must be read as both a history lesson and a primer. It reveals how closely Evans worked through and copied the lessons of the work of other photographers. It is for this reason that I insist that Evans's work, even his Cuba portfolio, was late. Evans worked after others and on the history of photography. Lateness, in turn, is not understood in reference to a life's work. It is understood as a mode of working historically, of using your work to map out a history that has not yet (so you assume) been written. Exactly how that history emerged in and through a negotiation of the genre of portraiture, the key manifestation of photography as social relations, is the central concern of the book's second part.

Part III, "Yesterday's News," takes up temporality again through a consideration of the most discussed aspect of the Cuba portfolio: Evans's inclusion of three news photographs of the young victims of the *machadato*. Many have insisted that Evans's decision to use these photographs shores up his status as Beals's accomplice. Others have argued that it confirms his much-discussed

and much-celebrated contempt for the press. By considering the manner in which Evans worked with news photographs, specifically his decision to file them in another portfolio, a very different interpretation emerges. It is one that refuses to read Evans's work as an expression of either his politics or his ethics. Sutured into his portfolio, the photographs, I argue, function as they did in the news. They read as simultaneously mundane and spectacular. Sensationalist or tabloid journalism is at the center of the book's third part, an obsession of Evans's that only fully emerges if we examine the approach he took to working through the news throughout his long career and at *Fortune*. Beginning with a discussion of tabloid journalism in the United States and its organization of time, part III then attends to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 1941 documentary Evans produced with Agee after spending several weeks living and working with three Alabama tenant farming families. The duo's engagement with journalism, I argue, has been sensationalized. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has been canonized as a book about the ills of poverty and its politicized representation in the news when its subject is the expropriation of property. Evans did not condemn journalism. He worked as a journalist. He worked on and through the conflation of public and private space, of the home or the homestead, in and through the media.

The book closes with a brief coda, which considers the legacy of Evans's modernism. This is the only place to end a book about the writing of history. It must end with an account of the ways in which Evans has been written—and wrote himself—into art's history. My concern, though, is not with the work of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and William Christenberry, to name only a few of Evans's most famous legatees. Rather, I turn to Sekula's photo works and his reinvention of documentary. I look closely at one work by Sekula in which he explicitly acknowledges his debt to Evans: *Aerospace Folktales* (1973). I close the book by asking why the work of a photographer who claimed "No politics whatever" figures so largely in the work of a photographer who passionately affirmed the need to work politically? The answer turns on my insistence that Evans's work provided a model of working historically for photographers responding to the invention of documentary in the 1960s as iconic and authored. In short, in the book's final pages, I shore up my claim that writing longer histories of documentary is necessary and that this is what Evans had always been doing as his work. This aspect of Evans's work becomes wholly legible when we consider how he began reworking, remaking, in the 1960s, the work he began in the 1930s. When, in other words, he brilliantly, carefully, and cunningly made and mined his own legacy. This mining is also the kind of work I see myself doing with this book. I write in order to start over again from a place—a time—in which there is neither the luxury nor the tragedy of an end.