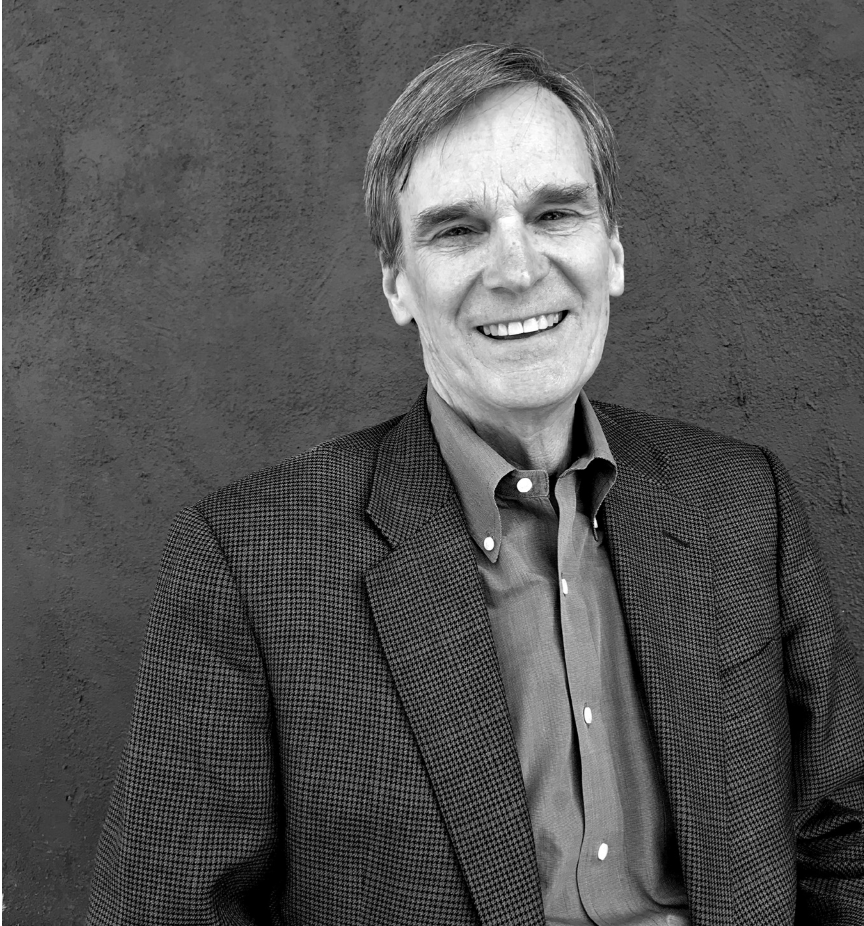

Author Berkley Hudson (Courtesy of University of North Carolina Press)

The Jim Crow South in Pictures, but Not Many Words

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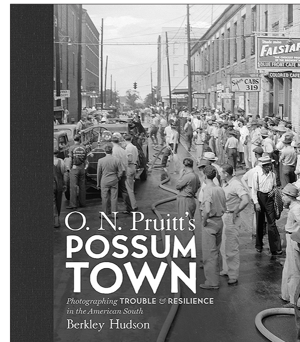
O. N. Pruitt's Possum Town: Photographing Trouble and Resilience in the American South by Berkley Hudson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. Photographs. Selected Bibliography. List of Photographs and Illustrations. Index. Hardcover, 272 pages. USD$49.95.

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag said, "Photographs furnish evidence."[1] The evidence in Berkley Hudson's *O. N. Pruitt's Possum Town: Photographing Trouble and Resilience in the American South* is forty years' worth of a small town's early twentieth-century life, captured by its "picture man,"[2] Otis Noel Pruitt. The town in question is Columbus, Mississippi, and the images range from the mundane to the extraordinary, from the tame to the shocking, all taken in the segregated South and documenting the lives and deaths of Columbus residents, both black and white. Hudson, a native of Columbus, began curating this collection as a decades-long labor of love. He hoped it would accurately represent life as it *really was* in this small Mississippi town just west of the Alabama border. That Hudson achieved that goal is attested by the editors of the Documentary Arts and Culture Series of Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, to which *O. N. Pruitt's Possum Town* is a 2022 addition. They describe the photographs and Hudson's accompanying narratives as "stand[ing] as a visual record and expression of wider truths about the cultural history of the American South."[3]



Columbus, a town best known as the birthplace of playwright Tennessee Williams,[4] was nicknamed Possum Town after the man who ran a trading post on the site and who, according to legend, looked like a possum.[5] As for Pruitt, he was not only a commercial photographer, taking wedding photos and family portraits, but also a photojournalist when the occasion called for it. Hudson, the son of local business owners, said his task was "to bring to public light these visual stories of trouble and resilience"[6] that Pruitt captured on film. Hudson had more than 88,000 surviving negatives to select from,[7] leaving him with an even greater task of uncovering/recovering stories behind the images. In this, his efforts find only partial success because

Pruitt, who took some remarkably good pictures, kept remarkably bad records. Thus, the bulk of the book's photographs possess little contextual information, their history lost. From portraiture to fox hunts to town disasters like fires and floods to at least one horrific lynching, Pruitt shot it all, capturing what James Agee called the "normal predicaments of human divinity."[8] But, as in the case of the lynching photograph discussed later, they also left a visual record that Sontag would say "incriminates"[9] Columbus for its part in Jim Crow violence and social injustice.

In considering a book like this, it is worth returning to Agee, who called *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "the effort . . . to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense."[10] Agee and Walker Evans worked separately in that effort. And, for most literary journalism scholars, Agee's prose became the object of their analysis, with Evans's photographs seemingly an interesting, visual addendum. Regardless, the book challenged readers and critics to accept this amalgamation of the written and visual. A 1941 *Time* magazine review called it "the most distinguished failure of the season," recognizing that it was "an experiment in communication: 'an attempt to reproduce and analyze the actual.' Its medium: 32 photographs by Walker Evans and a 471-page commentary by James Agee. Subject: the life of three Alabama cotton tenant families, with whom the authors spent several weeks (as "spies") in the summer of '36."[11] Likewise, Hudson's book can be considered his and Pruitt's "experiment in communication" and, given that literary journalism scholars are becoming more expansive about what they see as worthy of study, it merits review. (Graphic nonfiction works, like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, for example, are recognized as legitimate examples of literary journalism, as are song lyrics and poetry. Certainly, visual media must be considered, too.)

"Photographs are portals to the imagination, and vessels of elusive truths," Hanno Hardt observed.[12] Thus, a photograph can be, on its face, one thing while belying deeper, hidden meanings. In photographs, we often see what we want to see and bring our own truths to interpretations of images. That is how I approached Hudson's book, relying less on his narratives about the photographs and more on the photographs themselves to imagine stories about their subjects. Pruitt's photographs of the everyday, the mundane, had me thinking most about the stories behind the faces, wondering what happened to these people. On pages 119 and 120, for instance, two basketball teams pose. In one, six young women from Columbus's Hunt High School's basketball team stand smiling for the camera. They are black. On the following page, ten others from Macon High School, about 30 miles south of Columbus, do the same. They are white. I assume that the young women from Hunt High School lived different, harder lives than the young women from Macon High School. This was Jim Crow South, after all. Whether I am right I will never know because the only information about that photograph is that it was taken "circa 1950s."[13] No other captions or notes are provided. What is clear is that my own knowledge of that time fed directly into my interpretation of what I thought of the lives those Hunt High School athletes had. What were they thinking? What happened to them?

Another photo presents the casually posed image of a young, black man sitting

on a barrel and holding a broom.[14] He is professionally lit, and the camera captures a face that exudes sweet gentleness. Hudson provides backstory here, revealing that the young man's name was Oscar West, known as "Humpy," and he worked as the "cleanup boy" for a local car dealership. Hudson learns West's story from a ninety-plus-year-old member of the family that owned the dealership. She describes West as an "honest, good soul," which is what the photograph conveys. Hudson's source connected him to one of West's children, a son who had never seen the photograph and had no knowledge of why Pruitt took it. As the man "looked at his father," Hudson wrote, "he cried."[15]

For his photojournalism, Pruitt was in demand. In July 1935, he received a call from the sheriff, notifying him of the lynching of two black men. At the scene outside of town, Pruitt saw the bodies of Bert Moore and Dooley Morton hanging from a tree. The two had been "accused of harassing a white woman."[16] This photograph,[17] this record of incrimination, assumed another gruesome life on a postcard. The preeminent African-American newspaper the *Chicago Defende*r also published it, noting, "as long as our white citizens insist upon . . . taking such pictures as these to sell as souvenirs of their barbarity, it is our duty to present them to you."[18] Hudson explains how, years later, a black woman approached him, wanting a copy of it, telling the author that she heard about the lynching and how her husband, then a five-year-old child, remembered seeing the hanging bodies. After speaking with Hudson, the woman refused his offer to give her a print of the photograph. Research failed to find any surviving relatives of either Moore or Morton.

As appalling as the lynching photograph is, another, a photograph of a black man's final moments before his hanging outside of the county courthouse, elicited greater pathos in me. This condemned man, James Keaton, looks directly into the camera with a slight grimace or smile and a pleading look of disbelief.[19] "Under the best of circumstances, photographs constitute a conspiracy of purposes," Hardt observed, "without knowledge or understanding the social or cultural context in which they are always created, photographs may seem deceptively simple visual expressions, or else they become intricate and complicated observations of individuals with particular insights into biography and history."[20] We do not know why Keaton was to be hanged, but the photograph shows him, in the last minutes of his life, surrounded by grim-looking white men. It is a haunting image, but an incomplete one. About this, Stuart Culver observed that a photograph "comes into being as a fragment violently cut out from a larger whole and never complete in itself."[21]

So, if the book suffers, it is because the majority of photographs, like this one or the women's basketball players, appear as story fragments with no context, no narrative of the story behind the image. While the book provides a list of photographs, for the most part, they are without the "off-frame world that hovers around the edges of the picture."[22] Some readers might find this off-putting. For me, however, once I accepted this limitation, I was free to supply the "off-frame world," construct my own narratives about the photographs of the faces and places in this town.

This is a beautifully bound, coffee-table-ready book for which the University of North Carolina Press took great care in the publishing. The 194 pages of photographs

fill the majority of the book's 272 pages. There is an organizational problem, however, as the photographs appear randomly placed, in no particular order or chronology, leaving the viewer to make order out of them. Perhaps Hudson intends to let this sweeping visual record speak for itself or, perhaps, he had no choice thanks to Pruitt's exiguous records. The narrative components, when they appear, are written in clear and deliberate fashion. While it is tempting to compare these to Agee's in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, it cannot be done. Agee was writing about his own lived experiences in that book, of course, whereas Hudson can only surmise what a dead photographer was thinking or feeling as his camera's shutter snapped. In a somewhat satisfying way, the lack of accompanying narratives and seemingly random photographic placement work in the book's favor because the images are the focus. Importantly, what this visual record reveals, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* did not, is the everyday lives of Possum Town's black community, who are always a part of a Southern town's life and should have been visible in the Agee-Walker book but were mostly in the background. Here, they share the foreground, which, according to Hudson, would have been unusual for a Southern white man like Pruitt to do this because it might have been seen as going against Jim Crow's racial order in creating such normal representations of black lives.[23] His portraits gave his subjects dignity, grace, and "resilience." While no evidence from Pruitt explains his intentions, his photographs suggest that he saw grace and beauty in all his subjects, black and white.

Finally, can this book be of interest to literary journalism scholars? Perhaps not in any conventional sense, but, if the scholar can accept what Hudson, a former magazine and newspaper editor and now emeritus associate professor of journalism, intended in this "photobiography"[24] of a small-town Southern photographer, it should. Columbus, Mississippi, was not Mayberry, North Carolina, and this visual review of its life shows that it was not. Still, these pictures let the reader/viewer know that black people and white people did live together, and most people—black and white—were just trying to get by as best they could, going to the grocery store, going to the dance, going downtown. Sontag remarked that:

> photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.[25]

While this particular "photographic enterprise" shows but a small piece of the world, it is an important piece for U.S. citizens, letting them know that, even at a difficult and dangerous time for many of their fellow citizens, grace and happiness was also within their reach.

Notes

[1] Sontag, "Plato's Cave," 5.
[2] Hudson, O. *N. Pruitt's Possum Town*, 1.
[3] Dilworth, Hogan, and Rankin, "Editors' Note," xviii.
[4] Hudson, *Possum Town*, 3.
[5] Hudson, "Suqua Tomaha or Possum Town," in *Possum Town*, xvi.
[6] Hudson, *Possum Town*, 2.
[7] Hudson, 3, 5.
[8] Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, xiv.
[9] Sontag, "Plato's Cave," 5.
[10] Agee, preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, xiv.
[11] "Experiment in Communication," unsigned review of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 104.
[12] Hardt, "Constructing Photography: Fiction as Cultural Evidence," 476.
[13] Hudson, *Possum Town*, 119.
[14] Hudson, 53.
[15] Hudson, 51–52.
[16] Hudson, 154.
[17] Hudson, 161.
[18] Hudson, 155.
[19] Hudson, 160.
[20] Hardt, "Constructing Photography," 477.
[21] Culver, "How Photographs Mean: Literature and the Camera in American Studies," 191.
[22] Culver, 191.
[23] Hudson, *Possum Town*, 1.
[24] Hudson, 1.
[25] Sontag, "Plato's Cave," 3.

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