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William Eggleston's Guide To The Suburban South

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WILLIAM EGGLESTON’S GUIDE TO THE SUBURBAN SOUTH

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

AMANDA K. MALLOY
ABSTRACT

In 1976, Memphis, Tennessee, photographer, William Eggleston, had his first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. This exhibition was the first dedicated to a single photographer working in color. While Eggleston’s use of color was groundbreaking, his depictions of contemporary southern life were similarly exceptional. Working against previous photographic representations of the South, Eggleston presented a region succumbing to national homogenization through land development, commercialization, and suburbanization. Eggleston’s monograph resulting from his debut exhibition at MoMA, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, tells the story of this changing region, from the outdoor spaces that were once agriculturally rooted, to the private, intimate spaces of the rural South. He juxtaposes these types of images with photographs depicting development and abuse on once agrarian soil. By doing this, *William Eggleston’s Guide* encouraged viewers in 1976, and still today, to reevaluate our interactions with the environments around us.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Annette Trefzer for her support, influence, and time. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Kathryn McKee, who has helped me on this journey from the very beginning, and Dr. Kris Belden-Adams, who was crucial to helping me form my ideas into coherent research and writing.

I would also like to thank Maude Schuyler Clay, who offered her time to tell me family stories about Eggleston, and who opened her home to show me beautiful photographs. I would also like to thank Dr. William Ferris, who shared his influential thoughts, writing, and kind encouragement with me.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Southern Studies students, and the faculty and staff who have made this experience so wonderful.
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INTRODUCTION

Most people come to discuss my work and end up talking about whiskey and guns.

-William Eggleston

Eggleston’s handling of a gun or a camera or stereo speakers is something to see. ‘When you give him a piece of equipment he feels it all over,’ says the photographer Lee Friedlander. ‘He’s like a blind man’ Coming downstairs from his nap at one point, he breaks open a shotgun for my inspection. In a few seconds he has disassembled the firing mechanism and handed me each tiny part. ‘I like the technology of guns,’ he says. ‘The precision.’

-Richard B. Woodward

In 1976, Memphis, Tennessee, photographer William Eggleston had his first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The event was no less of a first for the museum. The exhibition, curated by the Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski, was the first dedicated to a single photographer working exclusively in color. Eggleston, who had taken many of his images while working under both a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Endowment for the Arts Photographer’s Fellowship between 1974 and 1976, invited the New York art scene into a world many had likely seen little of: the intimate rural and urban environments of the post-World War II South.

William Eggleston was born July 27, 1939 in Memphis. He spent most of his childhood years in the Mississippi Delta, and grew up in his grandparent’s home in Sumner, Mississippi. His parents were not around during much of Eggleston’s early childhood years. His father fought in World War II, and his mother was away working. After the war ended, Eggleston’s parents returned to Sumner, Mississippi, to build the cotton farm and house that would become Eggleston’s family home, Mayfair. William Eggleston’s family had a legacy of farming which
meant that Eggleston grew up in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta. Eggleston’s
grandfather would carry a camera with him around the farm to document the workers in the
cotton fields, as well as friends and relatives around the family home. William, the only boy out
of his two siblings who all grew up in Sumner with their grandparents, looked up to his
grandfather. Likewise, his grandfather was particularly fond of his only male grandchild.
Eggleston’s grandfather taught him how to take pictures and develop them, and turned one of the
guest bathrooms in their large two story home into a darkroom where Eggleston could process
his own images. Being a part of the “gentleman planter” elite meant keeping up worldly and
cultural interests, which Eggleston did by spending hours playing the piano and painting
(activities he enjoys even today). Although he was raised in a geographically isolated area over a
hundred miles from the city of Memphis, Eggleston grew up learning about, and loving, fine art
and music.

William Eggleston received a Canon Rangefinder at the age of 18, although he did not
find it technically ideal: “I took some pictures of my dog, but they weren’t very good and I was
completely disenchanted with the idea of taking pictures” (Weski, 177). Though he never
received a degree, Eggleston attended three universities: Vanderbilt University, Delta State
University, and the University of Mississippi. Eggleston explains: “I started taking pictures in
1958. A friend of mine in college [at the University of Mississippi] got me interested. It turned
out to be real interesting. I liked it better than college” (Ferris, 192). This friend from college
directed Eggleston to the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who founded the photo-
journalism magazine, Magnum in 1947. Cartier-Bresson also produced the widely influential
book of photography, The Decisive Moment (1952). Eggleston describes his initial reaction to
Cartier-Bresson’s work: “His were the first pictures I’d seen which weren’t just straight-on
pictures like everybody else’s. He had angles like Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec— one picture after another. I think I understood [Walker] Evans, but my real discovery was Cartier-Bresson” (Holborn, 3). Eggleston began photographing again, working with a Leica camera, which would forever be his instrument of choice.

Eggleston met his wife Rosa at a young age, as Richard B. Woodward explains:

Bill met Rosa, the daughter of a family with thousands of acres in the Delta, when he was seventeen and she was thirteen. As a teenager, she spent weekends at his parents’ house in Sumner [Mississippi]. According to friends, they remain bound by ties of family, land, progeny, and local history. (Woodward, 240)

The two eventually married, although the year of their wedding is unknown, and settled down in Memphis, Tennessee, eventually expanding their family with two boys and a girl. Eggleston never allowed his family to keep him from his work, which sometimes called for long, spur of the moment road trips with friends, which were often fueled by prescription drugs and always documented with Eggleston’s camera. Later, Eggleston’s son Winston would serve as Eggleston’s assistant, driving his father around Memphis and the greater South so that his father could photograph as he pleased. Eggleston’s other son, William, builds high-end speakers. Daughter Andra designs textiles, some of which are inspired by her father’s paintings and photography.

The roving, flâneur style of photography was Eggleston’s preferred method, and he is reported to have never taken more than one photograph of a single subject. In the afterword to The Democratic Forest, William Eggleston’s book of photographs published in 1989, he gives the reader a glimpse into his creative process:

I was in Oxford, Mississippi for a few days and I was driving out to Holly Springs on a back road, stopping here and there. It was the time of year when the landscape wasn’t yet green. I left the car and walked into the dead leaves off the road. It was one of those occasions when there was no picture there. It seemed like nothing, but of course there was something for someone out there. I started
forcing myself to take pictures of the earth, where it had been eroded thirty or forty feet from the road. There were a few weeds. I began to realize that soon I was taking some pretty good pictures, so I went further into the woods and up a little hill, and got well into an entire roll of film. (171)

Eggleston goes on to explain that later, while having dinner with friends in Oxford, someone asked him what he had been photographing lately. Eggleston explained that he had been “photographing democratically,” meaning that he was photographing everything with equal value and attention. In William Eggleston’s world, the Lincoln Memorial is treated with the same regard and consideration as a child’s toy in the back yard. Even people are depicted with the same aesthetic value as inanimate objects.

While Eggleston’s early photographs were in black-and-white, he began to experiment with color in 1965, claiming that he “couldn’t imagine doing anything more than making a perfect fake Cartier-Bresson” while working in monochrome (Weski, 177). In 1967, Eggleston began using color negative film and discovered that a dye-transfer printing method, primarily used for printing magazine and newspaper advertisements, offered the most vivid and richly pigmented versions of his photographs. Eggleston turned to this method exclusively in printing his images. He explains his process:

I am interested in taking a large number of images and working in color. It is very expensive. [...] With color slides, you have to go to a dye transfer print to get a good print, and that is not easy. I shoot slides and consider them as an intermediate step. I like prints. [...] I have a lab do the dye transfers. It takes a lot of time. Otherwise, it would take all my time just to print. (Ferris, 194)

In 1967, Eggleston travelled to New York City, where he met influential artists working in various artistic media, including photography. He found kindred spirits in Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Diane Arbus, and claimed, “We never criticized each other’s work, although we took extremely different kinds of pictures, we would just look at each other’s work. I guess we all learnt and borrowed from each other—only with the best of intentions of course”
(Jaeger, 27-28). During this visit, Eggleston shared his photographs with John Szarkowski, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. Szarkowski was a proponent of the “personal documentary style,” a form of photography in which Winogrand, Friedlander, and Arbus worked. These photographers worked in opposition to the styles of their predecessors like Ansel Adams and other “master photographers” who aimed for technical perfection and “high art” sensibilities. The younger photographers took images of commonplace objects within the post-World War II consumerist American landscape. These artists captured candid and sometimes blurry images without over-thinking technicalities. As Garry Winogrand once said, “I don’t have anything to say. [...] I photograph to find out what something will look like when photographed” (Weski, 185).

Szarkowski was inspired by Eggleston’s photographs and offered him a solo exhibition at MoMA, an unusual offer for an unknown photographer from Memphis. The exhibit ran from May 25 to August 1, 1976, the press release calling Eggleston “one of the most accomplished photographers now working in color” (MoMA, 1). Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with John Szarkowski. One of the most notable critical reviews responding to the opening came from Hilton Kramer of The New York Times. “Perfect?” writes Kramer, “Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly.” Kramer spent much of the review focusing on Eggleston’s use of color. At the time of the exhibition, color photography was not often seen in photographs hanging on museum walls, but was relegated to photo-journalism and advertising. “High Art” photography was produced almost exclusively in black-and-white.

In his review, Hilton Kramer explained, “As color is now one of the ‘hot’ problems in this medium long dominated by black and white images, it would be news indeed if Mr. Eggleston’s pictures were the masterpieces they are claimed to be. In my opinion, they are not”
Kramer defined Eggleston’s use of color as being either, “obviously pretty,” “obviously austere,” or, “postcard bright” (1) Yet, Szarkowski praised Eggleston for incorporating color as a seamlessly bound aspect of the composition, stating:

In the past decade a number of photographers have begun to work in color in a more confident, more natural, and yet more ambitious spirit, working not as though color were a separate issue, a problem to be solved in isolation, [...] but rather as though the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing. (Szarkowski, 9)

Clearly, Kramer did not agree.

While color photography, being the “hot problem” that it was, was the obvious candidate for Kramer’s entirely negative review, and the focus of the majority of his critical attention, Eggleston’s subject matter did not escape scrutiny:

That bathroom shower is an index to the kind of subject Mr. Eggleston favors. He likes trucks, cars, tricycles[,] unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes, too, and he especially likes his family and friends, who may, for all I know, be wonderful people, but who appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest. (Kramer, 1)

One can only wonder if Kramer’s dislike for Eggleston’s images would be equally strong if Eggleston were photographing outside of the South, or, as I will discuss later, if Eggleston presented Kramer with the version of the South he was used to seeing in photographs and other types of media. The South has long been considered an exceptional region of romance and violent history. Rarely has the South been depicted as a “commonplace world of little visual interest.”

Hilton Kramer reviewed a second exhibition of photography in the same day’s column as Eggleston’s review. The second review was for Clarence John Laughlin’s exhibition at the International Center of Photography. Kramer seems to breathe a sigh of relief in Laughlin’s review, stating, “What a relief it is to turn from these pictorial banalities [Eggleston’s
photographs] to the work of a genuine imagination” (1). Kramer continues his praise of Laughlin’s work, stating, “Working within the traditional limits of the black-and-white print, he achieves an extraordinary visual poetry. [...] Mr. Laughlin has long been a resident of New Orleans, and some of the enchantment of that magical city has found its way into his pictures. [...] He is an original, a romantic of the generation” (1). Kramer was enthusiastic about Laughlin’s romantic depictions of New Orleans cemeteries, the decaying architecture of Louisiana plantations, and Laughlin’s other enchanting visual aspects of the American South.

Clarence John Laughlin often incorporated women into his photographs, dressing them in long black veils and drapes and posing them within ornate southern architecture, creating ghostly tableaus. By placing these women as specters within the opulent southern landscape, Laughlin’s photographs draw upon the fables of southern history, recalling gothic myths of a tragic past. Using women as props within visually stunning, archaic architecture places Laughlin’s images comfortably within the “High Art” vernacular. His subjects stand as clear symbols recalling the majesty of the Old South’s wealth and plantations, while reminding the viewer that that South only continues to exist in a world of ghosts and ruins.

By keeping his images within the range of gray, Laughlin creates moody and expressive images. Kramer also notes that Laughlin uses film alteration, superimposing multiple negatives to create one image, generating what Laughlin calls “visual poems.” Kramer states, “It says something about the force of Mr. Laughlin’s imagination that even his architectural photographs often look as if their subjects have been invented in the darkroom” (1). At the center of Eggleston and Laughlin’s reviews is Laughlin’s photograph titled, “The Shadows Fall,” circa 1952¹. The skeletal columns of a plantation home in ruins are tightly cropped in the frame with shadows of a large tree’s branches draping the decaying stone. The use of monochromatic

¹ The full page review can be seen at the end of this chapter.
shadows and the eerie, abandoned and deteriorated landscape makes this image “appropriate” for display on a museum wall. The photograph’s tones and gray scale move like an expressionist painting. The building-as-relic metaphor stands firmly as an artistic icon of the past, where buildings act as symbols of the Old South.

Eggleston’s photographs, by contrast complicate traditional notions of what can be considered “High Art.” The issue of color poses just one problem, although it is a significant one. In painting and sculpture, color has long been the component that can deliver the most emotion, vibrancy, and expression to an image or object. However, in the case of photography, color places an image closer to amateur photography or “snapshot chic,” as Hilton Kramer put it. Looking at the photograph on the cover of Eggleston’s monograph from the 1976 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, titled, *William Eggleston’s Guide* (1976), a child’s tricycle is placed directly at the center of the frame, shot from a bug’s-eye-view perspective. The tricycle sits on the sidewalk of a residential street, rusted and well used. If one were to reduce this image to grayscale, the compositional form of the photograph would become more apparent. The viewer would more easily recognize the shapes and lines of the image. But according to Kramer, “[t]he use of color, alleged to lend a special distinction to these pictures is, to my eye at least, similarly commonplace.”

Of course, the objects themselves, as discussed earlier, are no less problematic to the “high art” label, and similarly complicate what the Southern landscape “should” look like. A tricycle on a suburban sidewalk is not typically the type of object to be found on the wall of MoMA, at least at the time of Eggleston’s exhibition. Nor does this type of object hint at greater truths about the South, or perpetuate gothic myths of southern history. Eggleston’s collection shows the South as he saw it in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As I will argue throughout this
thesis, Eggleston presented these objects in interesting and innovative ways that introduced the New York City art world to the contemporary South. Eggleston’s South is not the South of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, or even that of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Eggleston’s South is one of suburban tract houses and commercial development.

In order to understand Hilton Kramer’s (and many other art critics’) aversions to Eggleston’s photographic interpretations of the American South, it will be helpful to understand the history of southern photography. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will give a general overview of the history of photography, both in and outside of the American South. In regards to photographic representations of the South, I will be focusing particularly on David Madden’s assertion in his 1998 article “The Cruel Radiance of What Is,” that southern photographic history can be defined by three historical periods: the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the civil right era. I will also place southern photography within a national history of photography, lending context to the art scene to which Eggleston was introducing his photography in the 1976 Modern Museum of Art exhibition. I will then provide context to historical interpretations and critical thoughts about the American South from both within and outside of its borders, in order to understand how Eggleston’s interpretation of the South challenged northern viewers.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss how the desire for affordable housing that would serve as the center of the utopian “American Dream” grew rapidly. With it came the need for objects to fill such houses, and fulfill this lifestyle of convenience. National commercialism took hold, and the South, which once was considered a culturally and economically exceptional region, was not immune to such national trends. This trend of suburbanization was motivated by racial discrimination, and led to ecological devastation through development, and to the loss of regional and community identity. Eggleston explained his relationship to the contemporary
southern landscape, stating: “I had to face the fact that what I had to do was go out in foreign landscapes. What was new back then was shopping centers, and I took pictures of them” (Weski, 179). In Chapter 2, I will characterize Eggleston’s manner of capturing such “foreign landscapes.” Through his photographs, William Eggleston helps to define the rural, urban, and rapidly expanding suburban Souths, and highlights characteristics of each.

Throughout my thesis, I will focus on Eggleston’s first bound collection of photographs, which was the monograph resulting from his premiere exhibition, William Eggleston’s Guide (1976). The monograph was the first to be produced by MoMA with exclusively color photographs. This collection of images weaves in and out of the private spaces of the Mississippi Delta region where Eggleston grew up, the urbanized spaces of his adult hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, and to the strange and developing suburban sprawl within and outside of Memphis. While the collection subtly scrutinizes the changing South, it takes a decidedly dystopian turn in the final pages. These photographs give the viewer the impression of being enclosed, with a violently charged undercurrent, reminiscent of the southern gothic literary worlds of Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner. As I argue in the third and final chapter “Suburban Gothic” is a more appropriate description of Eggleston’s more caustic images, which highlight his critical interpretation of the domestically inhibiting suburb.

Eggleston once said of his photographs, “I think of them as parts of a novel I’m doing” (Hopps, 1). A novelist’s approach is apparent in Eggleston’s Guide. Eggleston’s story shares his experiences in the contemporary South. What Eggleston sees in the South of the mid 20th Century is not what outsiders may expect. It was certainly not what Hilton Kramer expected: a regionally exclusive, mythical, and rural South. Eggleston’s Guide is not the expected narrative of the region, but as Eggleston explained in an article with Aperture magazine in 1989: “You
know what the chickens on the front porch look like; you don’t have to see another picture of them. Although good pictures can still be made of them. But those kinds of pictures don’t show much of how the South is today--which is increasingly the same as the rest of the country, with suburbs and shopping malls and all the rest of it” (Hagan, 2). The South of today serves as the setting of The Guide.

The first image of William Eggleston’s Guide invites viewers into Eggleston’s version of the American South. The forty-eight color photographs that make up the monograph, addressed individually, depict the interior private spaces of the areas surrounding Memphis, Tennessee, as well as the outdoor agricultural areas and urban landscapes of the South. A continuous narrative carries the work in three sections. The first tells the story of the traditional South, which is the rural South in which Eggleston grew up. The second section begins to complicate this traditional South and explores the rapidly expanding suburban South of the 1950s and 60s. The final section brings the viewer into a claustrophobic and dark world, removed from definitive regional orientation. William Eggleston’s Guide works against previous photographic and popular representations of the South before Eggleston’s work that either categorized the region by its agrarian roots, or labeled it as a problematic area of economic and developmental backwardness. By showing the New York City art scene a post-World War II South of rapid national homogenization and development, William Eggleston’s Guide documents the suburbanized South of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
Fig. 1: Reviews for exhibitions of work by William Eggleston and Clarence John Laughlin, written by Hilton Kramer for the New York Times, May 28, 1976
CHAPTER 1: A SELECTIVE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY, AND A GUIDE TO THE ICONIC SOUTH

Originality and truth and direct simplicity and honesty are what I look for in a photograph. I approach things as a moralist because honesty and truth are moral values. But beauty is something else. It is a word that should be used damned carefully.

-Walker Evans

In the work of Farm Security Administration photographers, widely circulated in the 1930s and 1940s and rediscovered in the 1960s, the South was clear and crisp, black and white, geographically open before the camera and yet lost in time, its signs of modernity knocking incongruously against worn machines, buildings, and people.

-Grace Elizabeth Hale

The rules of photography have been challenged since they were established. Photo-manipulation, collage, and unconventional framing and editing are merely a handful of ways photographers have distorted reality in their images (Rosenblum, 517). In order to understand Eggleston’s place within the history of photography, the first several pages of this chapter will offer a brief summary of the development of color and form in “High Art” photography. This will serve to demonstrate how Eggleston’s compositional style works within and out of established periods of art history. Then, I will offer a concise history of photography specific to America’s southeastern region to show how the content and subject matter of Eggleston’s images challenge preconceptions of what the South did and should look like from a photo-historical standpoint, particularly those preconceptions held by the New York City art scene in the mid-1970s.
Development of Color and “High Art” Photography

Color has long been a problem for photographers as well as those who were involved in the invention and development of the camera. When photography was beginning to become popular, the public was eager for color images. In theory, they considered color photographs to be more true-to-nature than those produced in black-and-white. The creation of color photography in the 19th century was initially difficult. Most portrait photographers hand-painted color onto photographic images creating a sometimes gaudy, embellished effect which was often untrue to natural pigmentation. Levi L. Hill, Gabriel Lipmann, John Joley, the Lumiere Brothers, and other scientists and inventors spent the latter part of the 19th century pursuing color photography, and while many made strides toward the goal, the Lumiere brothers introduced the public market to color autochrome film in 1907 (Newhall, 272). This opened the floodgates for color imagery in the commercial photography world, especially after the introduction of the portable and relatively inexpensive 35mm Kodachrome in 1937. The accessibility of the Kodachrome encouraged amateur photography.

The art world was reluctant to incorporate color photography into its milieu. This was due in part to the fact that because color photography was slow to develop, and early attempts were unnaturally pigmented, artists became used to working in monochrome which became the standard vernacular for what defined “artistic photography.” Early attempts at artistic color photographs neglected to incorporate color as an aspect of composition. John Szarkowski notes in his introduction to William Eggleston’s Guide:

For the photographer who demanded formal rigor from his pictures, color was an enormous complication of a problem already cruelly difficult. And not merely a complication, for the new medium meant that the syntax the photographer had learned-the pattern of his educated intuitions-was perhaps worse than useless, for
it led him toward the discovery of black-and-white photographs. […] Most color photography, in short, has been either formless or pretty. (Szarkowski, 8-9)

Yet, photographers like Arthur Siegal, Harry Callahan, and Charles Prate were experimenting with artistic color photography as early as 1949. Furthermore, artists such as Stephen Shore, William Christenberry, and Joel Meyerowitz where using color in straight photography around the same time as Eggleston (Rosenblum, 604-605).

After World War II, while most of Europe was busy with reconstruction, the United States had a chance to develop in artistic photography. One result of this period of photographic experimentation gathered a following in the mid-1940s, a style of photography which depicted “private realities.” These photographs emphasized the personal and emotional connections one had with the world and nature. Often drawing inspiration from abstract expressionism in painting and sculpture, these photographs used wide format lenses and innovative angles to create “fresh, personal ways of looking at the commonplace” (Rosenblum, 518). This style of photography implied that there were grand truths within the world and nature, that only the camera could reveal.

Opposition to this style of photography began to emerge in different forms. The first was a foray into photo-manipulation and directed photography. The second was straight photography, or photography that is mostly unmanipulated. One significant subgroup of straight photography is Street Photography, made popular with the creation of a portable 35mm camera and the rapidly changing, consumer driven America. This trend was defined by its focus on specific moments, rather than on technical perfection. Photographers walked the streets of cities with portable cameras, capturing any image that caught their eyes. This resulted in candid, sometimes even slightly out of focus images. Photographs of American popular culture and of dissatisfaction with urban life became common themes in Street Photography in the mid-1930s.
German photographer John Gutmann was among the first to portray witty and sardonic depictions of American life. The genre carried on with the work of Walker Evans, Louis Faurer, and Lisette Model (Rosenblum, 520).

Robert Frank, like Gutmann, was not an American artist. The Swiss born photographer began traveling and taking photographs across the United States in 1955 while funded by a Guggenheim Foundation grant. Frank’s photographs have a distinctive compositional style and irony to them, clear antecedents to Eggleston’s aesthetic. As Rosenblum points out, Frank depicts images that point out the flaws of the “American Dream.” *Trolley, New Orleans* (1955) is tightly cropped on a trolley car with open windows showing passengers separated by race. The viewer may not initially realize that the trolley car is racially segregated, but Franks’ photograph captures the passive, everyday truth of racism in the South.

**A Brief History of Photography in the South**

In order to understand why Eggleston’s photography was so critically disliked by the New York City art world, I will now look specifically at the development of photography in the southeastern United States, starting before the Civil War, and therefore far before these previously mentioned advances in color and artistic photography were made. In *Ordering the Facade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women’s Writing*\(^2\), Katherine Henninger explains that the earliest known photographic process to come to the United States, the daguerreotype, was developed in France in 1839, but was brought to the American South in 1841 by Frederick A.P. Barnard and William H. Harrington, who eventually opened a daguerreotype gallery (33). Henninger points out that, as with most early photography around the world, early southern daguerreotypes were taken commercially, for the personal use of wealthy white southern patrons.

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\(^2\) Henninger’s first chapter offers a longer and more thorough introduction to southern photography.
Because southern photography was, in its initial stages, used for taking portraits of wealthy white patrons, it was an art for the privileged. Photography was also used for documentary purposes, but, as I will discuss in the next few pages, it was often used to perpetuate power dynamics, either by southerners to exploit their own people, or by northern photographers to earn a profit, particularly during points in history when the South was in crisis, as it was during the Civil War. Katherine Henninger argues that these early forms of photographic exploitation created a tenuous relationship between southerners and photography. Photography for the purposes of documenting the southern states has most notably focused on three important historical events. Referring to David Madden’s 1984 article in the *Southern Quarterly*, “The Cruel Radiance of What Is,” Katherine Henninger states:

Madden locates the beginning of this southern ambivalence toward photography in the Civil War which was chronicled by an estimated 1,500 photographers, most of them northerners, sometimes acting in an official war capacity. [...] In a war of representations, then, photography may represent objectification and defeat. Madden extends this dynamic to what he sees as the other two touchstone periods in southern photographic history, the Depression and the civil rights era. (28-29)

As Henninger explains, issues of southern representation began during the Civil War. The scarcity of photographic supplies in the South meant that northern photographers produced most of the photographs during the war, which were sold to collectors in the North at high prices.

Southerners also used photography to maintain racial hierarchies. Photographic documentation was an important part of lynching as well as anthropological evidence of “the color line” (Henninger, 37). In the 1930s, photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Margaret Bourke-White straddled the lines of artistic photography and documentation when commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to photograph areas in need of federal relief. The FSA, which began as the Resettlement Administration in 1935, was a division of the New Deal led by Roy Stryker with the goal of “introducing America to Americans.” The focus of
much of the resulting photography was agricultural workers in the West and Southeast during the Depression, though FSA and RA photography spanned the country (Henninger, 29).

While one could hardly make the argument that the Farm Security Administration photographers intentionally exploited their subjects, Henninger implies that photography of poor southerners made by mostly northern, white, middle-class photographers, could be considered exploitative. FSA photographers were essentially being asked to introduce an America they barely knew, to other Americans. While the resulting photographs are powerful documentary images, their beauty and artistic influence romanticize the poor and struggling southerners they depict. FSA photographs were intended to provide documentary evidence of a region in crisis, yet many of the photographs were published in periodicals like *Time* magazine, or shown framed and hung as art on gallery walls in the 1950s. These depictions of rural agricultural workers, particularly in the South, established the nation’s views of a problematic and pitiful region, unable to incorporate itself into the rest of the modern industrialized nation.

One Farm Security Administration photographer, whose images became some of the most iconic from the Depression era, was Walker Evans. In 1936, Evans and James Agee, a writer for *Fortune* magazine, were sent by the publication to write an article with accompanying photographs on sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama. Although the article was never published, the project resulted in a book which was published in 1941, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The project still faces some academic scrutiny, as Henninger argues: “for a southern audience, there is sensitivity about being represented as ‘white trash’ in a book that, in these tenants understanding, ‘would never be seen in the South’” (31). Evans reinforced this sentiment in a 1974 interview with *Yale Alumni Magazine*, stating: “There wasn’t a cent of money around. And these people were in terrible shape, but typically, because everybody else
was. And I suppose, without meaning to, that what I was doing was photographing human poverty. I just couldn’t help it. We were all in it. Everybody was desperate” (Yale, 1).

Some of the images from Evans’s and Agee’s expedition to the rural South resulted in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938. The exhibit and subsequent monograph, both titled, *Walker Evans: American Photographs*, were the first devoted to a single photographer. At that time, photography was not yet fully accepted within the “High Art” definition. Evans’s images in *American Photographs* span the country. His photographs of the rural South comprise a large portion of the collection and helped to confirm long-standing notions about the South, as it was seen or imagined by northern viewers. As David Madden states in regards to photographs from the Farm Security Administration: “photographs of those periods fill archives. Even people who have seen few or none somehow know they are there” (Madden, 9). Although in some ways, Evans helped to perpetuate regional stereotypes of the South as an agrarian region inhabited by charming, yet simple, agricultural workers, his images did begin to complicate long standing northern ideas about what the South looked like. In *American Photographs*, Evans hints at the looming dominance of mill towns on land once used for agricultural purposes.

What Evans accomplished subtly, and most effectively, was to show the creeping influence of industrialization and commerce in a once culturally distinct region. In “Main Street of County Seat, Alabama,” pedestrians walk along the sidewalk of Main Street, passing between store fronts of local businesses and rows of parked cars. Signs read: “Drugstore,” “Barber Shop,” “McCollum’s Grocery,” and “Loftis Cafe.” There are also painted on the sides of buildings, or on signs hanging in front of them, three signs for Coca-Cola, and one for Dr. Pepper. Nationally recognizable advertisements commoditize southern spaces. Evans photographs break the spell of

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3 Shown at the end of this chapter.
southern exceptionalism, indicating to northern viewers that even Alabama is susceptible to national commercialization.

Evans’s use of photography to adjust northern stereotypes about the South is a theme also found in the photographs of William Eggleston. Parallels have been drawn between the two photographer’s work in academic criticism, and Eggleston cites Evans as an influence on his early interest in photography (Holborn, 3). Both had a penchant for photographing signs and advertising to add depth, line, and dramatic angles to a photograph’s composition, while commenting on the changing consumerist landscape of the United States. As Grace Elizabeth Hale notes in her 2013 article, “Eggleston’s South: ‘Always in Color,’” “Eggleston manages to make this typical Evans subject [of a sign in the rural South] his own by erasing flatness and adding color” (3). But beyond the added depth of Eggleston’s images, Hale makes note of other differentiations between the two artists’ work:

Against straightness and flatness, Eggleston worked the angles and added dimensionality and depth. Against crisp lines and black and white clarity, he offered bleeding colors. Against faith in the legibility of photographic representation, he presented private moments and intimate spaces, vignettes in stories lacking a script. Against images often devoid of emotional display—the evenhandedness of both liberal earnestness and art in the age of academic criticism—he offered eroticism, bodily pleasures, desire, and decadence. (6)

**Land Development in the South**

Historically, the story of the 20th Century South in literature and visual representations, starts with the land. The 1930s agrarian manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, written by twelve southern writers and literary critics, highlights the South’s relationship to agriculture. The work hailed an agrarian lifestyle for its spiritual fulfillment, and frames agrarian life as the South’s defense against northern industrialization (Davidson). Yet, as C. Vann Woodward states in *The Burden of Southern History* the battle against the “Bulldozer Revolution” of industrialism for the
sake of regional identity has been all but lost: “[t]his revolution has already leveled many of the old monuments of regional distinctiveness and may end eventually by erasing the very consciousness of a distinctive tradition along with the will to sustain it” (Woodward, 4).

Though the South has largely conceded to commercial growth and development (or, perhaps, embraced it welcomed), a sense of loss and nostalgia pervades the work of William Eggleston. As mentioned in the introduction, Eggleston spent his childhood years growing up on his grandparents’ cotton farm, and later at his family home, Mayfair. Eggleston’s close friend and colleague Mark Holborn states in an article for Vanity Fair, “‘[h]e’s of a generation living on the crack of history. [...] The plantation families Bill knew as a child have moved, their houses mortgaged. He knows his children will never live as he does. [...] There’s a lot of despair in Bill. He’s living with a lot of pain’” (Woodward, 240). This nostalgia or loss of an agricultural upbringing that Holborn perceived is evident in William Eggleston’s Guide, but it is juxtaposed with images of commercial development, materialism, and suburban sprawl that reach an almost horrific pitch.

In his 2011 article, “Mapping the Democratic Forest: The Postsouthern Spaces of William Eggleston,” Ben Child explores how Eggleston’s photographs, particularly those found in his 1989 collection, The Democratic Forest, work within the “visual manifestation of the ‘postsouthern’ theorized by literary scholars such as Lewis Simpson, Michael Kreyling, and Martyn Bone. [...] [T]he postsouthern approach seeks to deconstruct ideas about the exclusivity of southern spaces and identities” (Child, 39). According to Child, The Democratic Forest works as a narrative which begins in the rural pastures of Mayfair, Eggleston’s ancestral home in the Mississippi Delta. As the narrative of The Democratic Forest progresses, “postindustrial commerce becomes increasingly clear,” symbolizing the transition, as Child explains, from the
agrarian Old South, to the modernized, industrialized, and urbanized New South (Child, 40). *William Eggleston’s Guide* provides a similar depiction of the contemporary southern landscape, in which the agrarian South is a trashed and rusted wasteland of neglect. As we will begin to see in the next chapter, Eggleston’s suburban and urban South is developing rapidly, demolishing forgotten and neglected farmland along the way.

While Eggleston’s collection, *William Eggleston’s Guide* (1976), often uses the human figure to symbolically express the tension between the agrarian and industrialized Souths, *The Democratic Forest* focuses almost exclusively on everyday objects and landscapes. This forces the viewer to re-familiarize themselves with common objects like potted plants and refuse. In doing so, Eggleston focuses on content that is nationally recognizable, rather than on spaces and things that distinguish the South as a unique region. Child explains: “by highlighting the visual effects of mass culture and commerce on the contemporary South, Eggleston’s work demystifies and dismantles romantic, stylized accounts of the region, as well as more general ideals of southernness” (41). This begins with *William Eggleston’s Guide*, in which nostalgic depictions of the rural South are dismantled by commercial development.

In order to define Eggleston’s two “Southerns,” Child draws heavily from the literature of the southern agrarians, looking particularly at *I’ll Take My Stand*. Child points out that Eggleston addresses these agrarian ideals through nostalgia, “but when nostalgia is one’s primary point of entry into a historical narrative, that narrative likely will keep more secrets than it shares. At the risk of sounding a bit too clever, then, we might posit that Eggleston is using an image of an image to deconstruct an image” (Child, 44). In *The Guide*, we will see this strategy of a picture-in-a-picture, quite literally, in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (27), which includes a painting by Mississippi self-taught artist Theora Hamblett. Hamblett’s paintings recall her childhood days
in rural Paris, Mississippi, but the painting is placed within a contemporary southern context. Eggleston effectively disrupts these nostalgic rural agrarian ideals by showing how “depictions of machinery, technology, and postindustrial development leave little doubt as to the victor,” (44) as Child suggests.

The South cannot, however, be reduced to the dichotomies of Old or New, rural or industrial. Child uses Eggleston’s work to articulate this. By navigating these binaries, and by highlighting universal objects like postindustrial waste and advertisements, Eggleston “dissolves concepts of southern exclusivity; we see that, in the face of the commanding force of global capital, the exclusively regional narrative is no longer the dominant one” (Child, 46). Referring back to the postsouthern, Child argues that Eggleston’s use of globalizing symbols like billboards and trash “presents a site that is both anyplace and no place all at once “ (Child, 50). Child focuses much of his article on the distinctions between urban and rural, and how industrial farming dismantles the agrarians’ ideals, as well as characteristics of a rural South.

I believe that Child’s argument would be strengthened by a discussion of suburban development in the South, which this thesis engages. While the suburban South does not fit well into a discussion of agrarian or industrial depictions, it takes industrial farming one step further. The development of suburban southern neighborhoods, and the grocery stores, gas stations, and the strip malls required to sustain them, literally turn southern land into a commodity. The suburban South may not be as present in The Democratic Forest as it is in some of Eggleston’s other collections, but the rise of the post-World War II suburban South is a primary subject of The Guide. The term ‘suburban’ indicates the specific commuter neighborhoods on the periphery of urban areas. However, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, I use the term ‘suburban’ a bit more
broadly to interpret the South of William Eggleston’s Guide in which commercialization and land development have spread throughout urban and rural residential areas.

In the book, The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction, Martyn Bone states:

If ‘the South’ no longer survives as a material, sociospatial reality, or even as part of the Agrarian political-poetical imagination, this does not mean that postsouthern geographies exhibit no sense of place. Nor does it mean that the practice of everyday life is futile. [...] We witness characters undertaking the active and hopeful (if necessarily contingent) reconstruction of a spatialized ontology, a revised sense of place that allows them to live with their respective postsouthern worlds. (Bone, 52)

While Eggleston certainly is critical of the South, and seeks to highlight its hypocrisies, the viewer also finds that Eggleston’s work can speak to nostalgia, beauty, and the traditional rural South he grew up in and knows. He is at once critical of a South that is slowly destroying the land of his childhood, but he also finds beauty in the small unique patches of land, and the private interior spaces that retain glimpses into the past. By navigating between these two worlds, Eggleston maps out the “foreign landscapes” of the contemporary South. Documenting these explorations allows Eggleston to use his photographs to engage in his own reconstruction of place.

The first image of William Eggleston’s Guide, titled Memphis⁴ (pg. 17), literally welcomes the viewer into the collection, and to Eggleston’s South. The photograph is framed tightly on a sun-lit white door, with a basket of blue and yellow flowers hanging from the door’s knocker. Though the image does not include the rest of the house, the scalloped shadow of the overhanging awning, as well as the flowers and the little metal mailbox on the left side of the frame give the image a generally cheerful mood. However, the closed door implies a sense of

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⁴ Because Eggleston’s photographs are titled by the location in which they were shot, many images have the same title. Therefore, page numbers are used here for delineating images.
mystery. The viewer has no way of knowing what lies behind the door, or even what the rest of the house looks like. No human presence greets us into William Eggleston’s South; the door remains shut to our presence. The shadows cast along the door recall those in Clarence John Laughlin’s *The Shadow’s Fall*, and further the sense of mystery through the implication of a presence unseen. By offering the viewer this juxtaposition of images: on the one hand, the white painted door with the little yellow and blue flowers which exude a synthetic cheerfulness, with a closed door in shadow, Eggleston’s South leaves the viewer wondering if they are welcome, and whether his South holds secrets the viewer cannot anticipate.

A few pages later, the collection’s location has changed to *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 21). A clean, well decorated living room invites the viewer in to have a seat and work on the unfinished puzzle laid out on the fold-out table at the center of the room. Within the frame there is no direct human presence, yet a khaki-knee peeks into the lower right corner of the frame, along with what appears to be the arm of someone seated in the chair in the left side of the photograph. This image uses familiar objects to create traces of human presence and activity to invite the viewer into the scene. The puzzle and comfortable furnishings bring to mind popular images of small town life. Parlor games and conversations in the living room offer a sitcom setting of the rural South, where people have the means to pass the time in leisure. But there is a strangeness to this image that is reminiscent of the closed door in the initial photograph of the collection. Rather than finding a human presence to welcome the viewer into the setting, the puzzle sits alone, creating an isolating effect. The human presence is visible only on the very edges of the frame in brief slivers that could be easily missed. Eggleston surely could have

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5 Sumner, Mississippi, Eggleston’s childhood home, is located in Tallahatchie County. It is therefore entirely possible, and perhaps likely that images taken in homes and surrounding locations, of which there are many in this collection could belong to friends and family of Eggleston. Some of the later images depict human beings, and while I have not been able to identify all of the subjects, it is also likely that they are often his friends and relatives.
cropped out this human presence, leaving the puzzle to speak for itself. Yet he consciously chooses to tease the viewer with the hint of human interaction, therefore making the viewer feel even more alone. Eggleston’s point of view is like that of a fly on the wall, stripping the viewer of their own human interaction with the scene. In 1993 Eggleston claimed:

I think I had often wondered what other things see—if they saw like we see. And I’ve tried to make a lot of different photographs as if a human did not take them. Not that a machine took them, but that maybe something took them that was not merely confined to walking on the earth. And I can’t fly, but I can make experiments. (Weski, 188)

Throughout the collection, it is not often human interaction that welcomes the viewer into the images, but the objects with which humans interact.

Returning to Memphis (pg. 23), on the next page, a blue pick-up truck is parked in front of a chicken-wire fence that is lined along the top with light purple wisteria vines. Behind the truck are two houses, another pick-up truck, and a white car. One searches the windows of the houses in the background or near the cars for human presence, but finds none. In this photograph, Eggleston uses natural objects (wisteria) and rural visual codes (the pick-up truck) to suggest the rural South into this image. If the location is true to its title (Memphis), it was taken in an urban environment. But the vivid, eye-catching purple of the wisteria reminds the viewer that Memphis may be a city, but it is still a southern city in which the natural flora of the South is overgrown.

Not until the next photograph, in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi (pg. 25), does a human face appear. On the side of a paved rural road, before dried up brown, grassy fields and leafless trees, three young boys stand just in front of the camera. The two boys on the right side of the frame turn away from the lens, leaving the viewer only the profile of one, and the back of the other boy’s head. The third boy stands almost at the center of the frame facing the camera, his
body encircled by the large, red, blooming bush behind him. His arms are folded, and glasses cover his squinting eyes, yet, he looks comfortable and happy in front of the lens. As in *Memphis* (pg. 23), Eggleston incorporates natural objects into this image. One of the two boys on the right side of the frame points off into the distance, which suggests an engagement with the landscape as the boys physically and visually explore the outdoor environment. However, one can follow the faint lines of the telephone wires and the telephone poles on the right side of the frame, which suggest technology and connection to a non-natural world. This is also a photograph about childhood, and of boyhood adventures. The three boys appear happy and engaged: one with the camera, and the others with the landscape and each other. Eggleston, taking this photograph, is essentially the photographer capturing his own image when he was a young boy, growing up in the same area. The boys perhaps serve as nostalgic representations of Eggleston’s youth.

Also in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 27), a man sits in an elegant arm chair, legs crossed, drinking a cup of coffee. Behind him are many framed paintings, one of which is by the Oxford, Mississippi, artist Theora Hamblett. Hamblett was born January 15, 1896, in the rural town of Paris, Mississippi (about 60 miles East of Eggleston’s childhood hometown of Sumner). She worked on-and-off as a schoolteacher from 1915 to 1936, and moved to nearby Oxford, Mississippi, (where Eggleston briefly attended the University of Mississippi, and frequently visited later in life) in 1939. While in Oxford, Theora worked as a seamstress and opened her home as a boarding house. She began painting in the early 1950s, after a life-long interest in art. Although she attended a few art classes, she was largely self-taught. The entry in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*’s, “Folk Art” edition states that Hamblett’s early paintings “depict memories of her childhood, and she painted scenes of southern country life for the next two decades, culminating in a series of paintings about children’s games. Hamblett’s most
unusual works are the over 300 religious paintings representing biblical subjects and Hamblett’s own dreams and visions” (Torrey, 296-97).

Hamblett was a devout Protestant. The church services she attended as a child around Paris, Mississippi, encouraged their members to openly communicate with God which would result, as they believed, in trance-like states in which the participants would receive visions. These visions were the subjects of many of Hamblett’s paintings. The painting in Eggleston’s photograph on page 27 shows a green landscape meeting a blue sky with a tall tree covered in bright orange leaves in the foreground. Hamblett’s paintings of trees are perhaps her most popular pieces, and are easily identified because of their unique style. Each leaf is painted individually, reminiscent of (and perhaps inspired by) embroidery stitches in fabric. Rather than mixing paint colors, Hamblett would layer one color on top of another, creating her desired hue. Painted next to the tree is a white animal, perhaps a dog or a horse, with a person wearing a red dress standing next to it. Torrey writes, “[Hamblett’s] work provides a record of a vanishing regional history, and the complex associations of her religious paintings raise Hamblett from the status of an amateur to that of a significant artist of popular southern traditions” (Torrey, 296-97).

Hamblett’s painting holds a prominent position in Eggleston’s photograph. All of the other paintings hung on the wall behind the man drinking coffee are dim and difficult to see. The viewer’s eye is forced to move between Hamblett’s painting and the man seated next to it. Maude Schuyler Clay, Eggleston’s first cousin, also a respected photographer, identified the man in the image:

That’s Bob Bailey, he’s still living, he’s from Sumner. He’s a good friend of Bill’s. He was sort of the self-prescribed historian of Sumner, Mississippi. His grandfather was a Sumner, and that’s what they named the town for. He was, as he would say, a legal drug salesman, he worked for Dupont. He just knew
everybody in the state of Mississippi, traveling around to doctors, selling various pharmaceuticals. He’s been retired for at least 20 years (Clay).

These subjects, Hamblett’s painting, which is rooted in southern folk artistic traditions and inspired by rural childhood activities, and Bob Bailey, the “historian of Sumner,” combine to create an image that embodies the rural South.

The theme comes full circle on page 33, where we find Bailey once again. Clay places this image in Woodlawn Cemetery, in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* which also happens to be the title of the photograph. Bailey moves among the gravestones on a sunny day. The shadow of Eggleston’s head is visible in the lower corner of the photograph. In true southern form, the image reminds the viewer of the South’s history, noting those who have passed, and showing the man who most likely knows everything about the stories of their lives. By showing the town historian in this setting, the photograph relates the viewer to the distant past of the South, establishing it as a historically significant region.

Once Eggleston has established a comfortable South in *William Eggleston’s Guide*, he then begins to complicate traditional notions of southerners’ ties to land. Because the South was slow to develop industrially, and because humans were relied on as agricultural workers through slavery and sharecropping for so long, southerners often are portrayed as having an unusually strong relationship with the land, which has traditionally been considered the center of the southern rural community. In *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 53), a building stands at the center of a leveled dirt parking lot. The building has a sign over the front door that reads: “KING COTTON BEVERAGE CO INC,” and below it, two smaller signs read: “PACKAGE LIQUORS” and “ABC PERMIT NO 0200.” In the distance is a line of trees, a water tower, a telephone line, and several dilapidated buildings. The liquor store at the center of the frame looks new, and the bare earth around it makes it stand out awkwardly against the rural background.
The raw dirt looks like a rash on the land, and the fact that the landscape has been cleared for the construction of a liquor store only emphasizes the harsh juxtaposition of the new building standing on freshly exposed dirt.

Also in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi (pg. 71), a new home stands in the middle of a dirt lot. Grass grows only near the camera’s lens, which is placed several yards away from the home. A human figure near the house works on the surrounding farmland in the background with a long-handled tool, likely a hoe or shovel. This picture creates a visual contradiction between the person working the land by hand in the background of this new home, and the leveled dirt in front of the structure. It is as if you can see the progression of change in this rural location occur before your eyes. Because Eggleston places his camera a good distance from the home, the viewer can clearly see the delineation between bare dirt and lush crop. While the cleared land could be in the process of preparation for agricultural use, the image implies that this land is waiting for further development and construction, and, as with the previous image, the raw dirt stands awkwardly near the new looking home. Susan Sontag states, “[n]ature in America has always been suspect, on the defensive, cannibalized by progress. In America, every specimen becomes a relic” (Sontag, 65). Eggleston’s work captures this “progress” as well as its relics.

America has a long history of using land as a commodity, and while traditional images of the South characterize southern land romantically, the fact is that it has almost always been used for financial gain. While industrialization challenged the southern reliance on agriculture, federal highway programs and commercial real estate forced the commodification of southern land to occur at a rapid pace. Where working the land was once considered the foundation of the southern community, land for the South and the rest of America became essentially a means of

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6 More on the profit of land use in the South, and its influence on the southern imagination, can be found in The Postsouthern Sense of Place by Martyn Bone.
making money: “[t]he culture of land use planning became very corrupt in many places, with both elected officials and paid staff in local governments receiving handouts from speculators, builders, and bankers in exchange for tens of millions in subsidies” (Hayden, 169).

In *Black Bayou Plantation, near Glendora, Mississippi* (pg. 57), just beyond a dirt road lies a field of what is likely cotton growing under a sunny blue sky. A fuel tank sits at the center of the frame, completely covered in red rust like a sun on the middle of the horizon. Two buildings lie at either side of the photograph, and although you cannot see them fully, they look weathered. Like the tank, they show in their wear the passage of time. The agricultural landscape here is timeless and vast, and serves a purpose through agricultural cultivation. This photograph draws the mind to nostalgic images of what Eggleston’s childhood may have been like, growing up on his grandparents’ cotton farm. The land sprawls, and the green crop looks lush and abundant. Black Bayou Plantation looks, in this image, probably not very different from how it appeared ten, twenty, or even fifty years ago.

The next image of the same location tells a very different story. *Black Bayou Plantation, near Glendora, Mississippi* (pg. 59), shows a different area of the same plantation depicted on page 57. The photograph shows a dirt lot with a field behind it and part of a wooden building in the right edge of the frame. Yet, rather than the beautiful and fertile land depicted in the earlier image, this land is strewn all throughout with white plastic bottles about the size and shape of common bleach bottles, as well as cardboard boxes. This is not the respected and prosperous land of the South, this is trashed land. This area of Black Bayou Plantation has not been well cared for, and has been used for dumping post-industrial waste, and perhaps even chemicals used
on the crop. Trash is a common theme in Eggleston’s images and highlights human’s interaction with land as a relationship of disrespect and little concern.\(^7\)

Eggleston concludes his study of modern day plantation land in *Near extinct Wannalaw Plantation, Mississippi* (pg. 61). The title alone designates this place as “extinct.” The image depicts a dirt road leading to a dilapidated wooden cottage, perhaps a structure that once was one of the plantation’s sharecropping cabins. Objects on the front porch and the white car off in the field imply that the land is still inhabited by people, yet the area looks abandoned. A medium sized black and tan dog that does not appear to be aggressive, and looks well fed and friendly, is the only inhabitant of the area. By placing these three images in successive order, from the sunny and fertile *Black Bayou Plantation, near Glendora, Mississippi*, on page 57, to the trashed land in the image of the same location and title on page 59, to the abandoned and deteriorated *Near extinct Wannalaw Plantation, Mississippi*, Eggleston portrays an evolution of the land from majestic to decaying. Rather than highlight this land as majestically standing the test of time,\(^8\) these images show that southerners’ relationships to land can be one of change, neglect, and even abuse.

As this chapter has suggested, Eggleston’s interpretations of the rural South depict the land as abandoned and neglected. The next chapter will begin to explore how the rural South’s land is being rapidly encroached upon by commercial development for the construction of suburban neighborhoods. While these neighborhoods seemingly offer the amenities of a utopian domestic life, they are destructive to regional identity, and create exclusionary enclaves which perpetuate segregation based on race and class. Eggleston’s images turn a critical eye to the

\(^7\) Images of trash and refuse can be found in many of Eggleston’s collections. If you look closely, litter permeates many of the outdoor shots in *William Eggelston’s Guide*, but an example of trash as the subject matter can be seen on page 85.

\(^8\) As we saw in the work of Clarence John Laughlin
suburb in the middle section of *William Eggleston’s Guide*, and depicts it not as a sunny and neighborly haven of domesticity, but a mysterious, dark, and even dangerous place. The further William Eggleston takes us past the front door on the first page of *The Guide*, the more complicated and bizarre Eggleston’s South becomes.
Fig. 2: Main Street of County Seat, Alabama (1936), by Walker Evans
CHAPTER 2: THE SUBURBANIZED SOUTH

I’ve seen many pictures that are about the Southerness of the South— the sense that it’s a separate culture, with its own history, its own ethos. And I’d rather not be associated with those kinds of images.

-William Eggleston

Since World War II, economic expansion and the aspiration to live the “American Dream,” or, the right to success in career, society, and the home, has made the suburb the ideal place to fulfill the lifestyle of leisure Americans believe they deserve by virtue of their nationality. Suburban spaces have specific characteristics, which will be discussed later in this chapter, but the chief tenants of those characteristics are that suburbs are residential and therefore require a means to commute to the workplace. Suburbs also require vast amounts of land and resources for their construction (which usually occurs as economically and shoddily as possible), and a certain amount of upkeep with the use of commodified goods marketed on a mass scale. Suburban areas are exclusionary, but the homes within them are mass produced. While the term ‘suburb’ still holds value, I use it loosely in this thesis given that these definitions can be increasingly applied to the development of the entire South, and the United States as a whole, where cheap living and fast food are easily attainable almost anywhere, one of the key themes explored in William Eggleston’s Guide.

Eggleston’s suburban spaces challenge the notion of American suburbia as an edenic safe space of familial and neighborly interaction. Suburban areas are, by definition, either technically within, or on the periphery of urban spaces that are typically more vulnerable to conflict and
chaos. However, developed suburban communities exist today in more rural areas as well, and development continues to grow both in and out of Southern cities. The insular nature of suburbs, which are centered on family life, make them places caught between rural and urban. As Bernice M. Murphy points out in the book, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, “The suburb is, after all, an in-between space by definition: located beyond the heart of a town or city, yet still existing within its urban orbit. The geography of the typical suburb has also tended to be intermediate between that of the town center and of the countryside” (Murphy, 4). The subjects of William Eggleston’s suburban spaces are caught between mobility and immobility. Mobility is a key element of suburban living, and is necessary for transportation to and from the home and the workplace, which would be located outside of the strictly residential suburb. Therefore, those without access to personal transportation would find life in the suburbs difficult, if not impossible. Mobility as a key component of the suburban and developed South will return throughout this chapter’s look at Eggleston’s photography.

In the book, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*, Robert Beuka notes that:

> the suburban landscape […] stands as the material counterpart to specific drives and tendencies in American culture apparent from the postwar years onward: a massive expansion of the middle class, a heightened valorization of the nuclear family and consequent reification of gender identities, a trend—both utopian and exclusionary in nature—toward cultural homogenization, and a collapsing of the distinction between public and private realities. (2)

The suburb, therefore, is an enclosed cluster of families that forms a community. While this can in many ways offer companionship, camaraderie, and protection, these neighborhoods are also, as Beuka notes, “exclusionary in nature.” This exclusion, in the South as well as many of the country’s other suburban areas, is based on both class and race, both of which will be discussed further as this chapter progresses.
A key tenant of suburban life is mobility. In William Eggleston’s Guide symbols of mobility recur again and again, an example of which can be found in Southern Environ of Memphis (pg. 75). Although the title implies that the image was made near Memphis, Tennessee, the setting is far from “urban”. Large, open and bare plots of land separate two-story homes. Much of the land is leveled and empty but appears to be situated for further residential development, rather than agricultural use. The lack of foliage, trees, or bushes implies that the development might be fairly recent, leaving little time for voluntary natural growth. The sparse landscape has no businesses, fields for crops, or signs of urban activity, leading the viewer to assume that the location is in a suburb. Parked near a curb in front of one of the homes is a new looking, shiny car, which would be essential in such an area for commute to the workplace. This car marks the location of an area where people may choose to live as far away from their profession as they wish; they can travel to work or to leisure whenever they please. The car acts as a symbol of freedom, wealth, and mobility. This photograph also shows the viewer the land and resources required to create suburban communities. The cleared lots extend far into the landscape awaiting further home construction. Not only do the houses require natural resources like wood for their construction, the land required to build such homes encroaches on the natural landscape of the South.

Another defining characteristic of suburban life is domesticity. “Men of all classes have portrayed the suburban home as a retreat from the cares of their jobs. But since the time of the borderlands, houses have been workplaces for millions of women of all classes and all ages—paid cooks, cleaning women, and nannies, as well as unpaid housewives and mothers,” notes Delores Hayden in the book, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000 (13). If mobility is a defining element of suburban life, then quality of life would be measured by those
who do or do not have access to mobility. In a typical suburban home, during the work day, men would be traveling to their jobs, leaving women without transportation and therefore without any way of leaving the home (Murphy, 61). Popular depictions of suburban life portray it as a mind numbing prison of domestic boredom for the woman, who gets little outside stimulation or freedom beyond the walls of the household.

Bernice Murphy argues that the “American Dream” served to manipulate women into subservient domestic positions. Applying Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* to popular culture, Murphy states:

> The result of this effort, according to Friedan, is the ‘progressive dehumanization’ of the American woman, from the time that she assumes her ‘feminine sexual role’ as housewife. From this point on, she will no longer ‘live with the zest, the enjoyment, the sense of purpose that is characteristic of true human health.’ And one of the main causes of this condition, alongside the ‘feminine mystique’, is her resulting incarceration in suburbia. (92)

Delores Hayden refers to the writing of urban historian Robert Fishman, who “defined the American suburb as a place for commuters[,] [...] but he defined it even more narrowly as an exclusive and leafy residential enclave of male-headed upper-class and upper-middle-class families, a ‘bourgeois utopia,’ primarily Protestant and white” (16).

Eggleston offers an almost perfect critique of domestic dissatisfaction in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 35). A young girl in a blue dress stands on the porch of a tiny playhouse. The house sits at the far end of a fenced-in back yard, the camera several yards away from the small house and the girl. On the right side of the frame are steps presumably leading into the home attached to the back yard. There are no other humans in the picture, only the little girl shown in solitude on the porch of her play home. She looks directly and emotionless at the camera, one arm holding open the lower half of the tiny door leading into her playhouse.
The viewer can hardly ignore the domestic implications of the image of the young girl in her play world. She is stuck on the porch of this miniature replica of a home, so far removed from the camera’s lens. She has a distance from human contact and contact with the viewer, and engages with no other children, family members or adults. She appears isolated, creating a feeling of loneliness and estrangement within this tiny domestic prison. This photograph serves as a doleful premonition of what the young girl has to look forward to as she grows up: isolation and boredom. The dead grass surrounding the playhouse only emphasizes the tragic implications of the photograph. The playhouse trains the young child for her future role in domesticity.

In *Near Minter City and Glendora, Mississippi* (pg. 55), issues of race, gender, and class coincide to create a complicated image. A young African-American woman in a bright green dress and a white headdress walks alone—with no belongings or anything to identify or protect her—down a desolate rural road, with farmland on either side of her. Further down the paved road is a house, and a dirt and gravel road separate her from the camera. She looks at Eggleston’s camera with the same blank stare as the little girl in her playhouse, again, returning to this implication of objectification and distance between the viewer, and her.

While mobility serves as a marker for wealth in the suburban landscape, this woman’s absence of transportation in this rural setting highlights her lack of mobility. Because she has no car available to her, she walks. The paved road next to her reinforces the idea of mobility, serving as a reminder to her and to the viewer that the road facilitates transportation to which she does not have access. While the little girl in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 35) was placed firmly within a suburban setting in her miniature playhouse, this young African-American woman is not shown anywhere near a house; the only home in the image is quite a distance away. This emphasizes her spot in an unmoored, open, and vulnerable position within the
landscape. Furthermore, African-Americans comprised the majority of domestic workers in the South in the early and mid-20th Century. We may see in her image a long history of servitude to the homes of others. Therefore, she embodies a transient role, not quite belonging in her own home, and not quite in the homes of others, but constantly traveling between the two. Like the little girl in Tallahatchie County, this young woman’s distance from the camera emphasizes her isolation from the photographer, who keeps the dirt road as a barrier between his camera and her. This highlights her “otherness” from Eggleston, the son of a wealthy, white, cotton-farming family. All of these factors combine to show this woman’s distance from the established, protected, mobilized and domesticated suburb, placing her in an essentially place-less, liminal location.

In a lecture held at Yale University in 1976, Eggleston claimed, “I bought my equipment. I do not do anything else but this. I have no luxuries to speak of, just these necessities” (Ferris, 196). However, in a 2002 article for Telegraph Magazine, Richard Grant explains:

[People who are not native to a particular place often feel a sense of otherness.]

[Grant, 3]

The second quote was clearly published 26 years after the first, when Eggleston was 63, yet one gets the sense that Eggleston, who was born into a wealthy planter family, never quite lived as frugally as he may have suggested earlier. William Eggleston is a collector: of vintage cameras,  

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9 This quote was taken from an article which the website for the William Eggleston Trust provided a link to (www.egglestontrust.com). The trust is run by Eggleston’s son Winston, which I make note of because this article, and the material in it, is therefore essentially given acknowledgment and is approved of by the family, because of its inclusion on the Trust’s website.
Cadillacs, his own photographs, and even women. Understanding his background and proclivities does not diminish his talent, but they do help to understand his sometimes challenging perspective. Knowing these things is also important in understanding his vantage point of the South. Coming from established privilege does not exclude one, such as Eggleston, from empathy, but it could suggest that Eggleston might not fully connect with some of his subjects. This disconnect opens him up to criticism that his own photography is a voyeuristic practice, and one that acknowledges a human objectification of the “other,” be it female, African-American, poor, or southern. It also emphasizes, as Murphy called it, the “dehumanizing aspects” of domestic life. It is not my intent to imply that Eggleston actively used his photographs to objectify women, but because he often portrays women from a distance and with no direct interaction between himself and them, his photographs of women portray a distanced perspective that does not seem to seek any kind of emotional engagement or interpretation of women as subjects.

While Eggleston was photographing, the Civil Rights Movement already had reached its peak, but the affects still reverberated throughout the region. But while many depictions of race relations in the South are dramatic and violent, actual relationships between white and black southerners usually were only exasperated by an imbedded sense of white privilege. As Jason Sokol describes in, There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975:

White southerners often lived under the spell of their own collective history--or a certain interpretation of it. Through family lore or history lessons in school, the white South nurtured its youth on the myth of the happy and faithful slave...Few could completely divorce themselves from the past, for its vestiges lived on at

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10 As Grant points out in the article quoted above, Eggleston had several mistresses throughout his life, which he is quite public about.
11 Coincidentally, the cover of Jason Sokol’s book is actually an Eggleston photograph, Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in Background (pg. 31), and offers an insightful look at everyday race relations in the South.
midcentury--on every cotton field, on every sidewalk, in every interracial interaction. (6)

Sokol poses the possibility that white southerners barely recognize their own prejudices. The South had a long and harrowed struggle with race relationships, dating back to legal slavery. The civil rights era was hardly less volatile, and the constant images produced by the media painted the South (accurately) as a land of violent oppression. Eggleston’s images do not portray race relations in the South violently. But what his photographs do portray is just as important: everyday experiences of race relations in the contemporary South. These interactions range from complete avoidance of racial confrontation through legal segregation in the suburban neighborhood, to the relationships of white southerners with their African American “help.”

In Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in background (pg. 31), two men, one white and one black, stand in front of a white car parked on a bed of dried brown leaves in front of a river bed. Eggleston’s cousin, Maude Schuyler Clay, describes the events that led to the creation of this photograph:

That’s Aiden Schuyler, Sr., and that’s Jasper Staples. The car rolled down the driveway. It was after a funeral for yet another alcoholic family member who bit the dust. I think it was Nate Votner’s funeral, and if you look real closely there’s a little man in the car, his name was Mr. Bob Flock and he came to the funeral or the wake here, and forgot to put on his emergency brake so that car rolled down the driveway, and it didn’t go down into the bayou. But, everyone went down there to see what happened to Mr. Bob Flock’s car. Luckily, Bill was there with his Leica (Clay).

This is an entertaining story, which also casually addresses the issue of alcoholism in Eggleston’s family which I will discuss later in this thesis. But the interesting story in this image is the relationship between Aiden, the white man in front of the car in the dark suit, and Jasper, the black man standing behind him. The two men stand in almost identical positions, both with their hands in their pockets, and both looking off in the direction of something outside of the
frame. Their mirrored mannerisms imply a close bond between the two. Eggleston agrees, “[i]t’s like they’ve been together for so long they’ve started (he starts to say something, breaks off, laughs, and then continues talking) standing the same way” (Hale, 5). Clay confirms this, explaining that she too not only felt close to Staples, but loved him as family, and hoped that he had loved her in the same way.

As much as Clay would like to believe in a shared connection between Staples, and even if that connection did exist, the fact is that Staples was hired to help Eggleston’s family, of which Aiden Schuyler, Jr., is an extended member. This is made clear in the photograph by Staples’s white jacket and collared shirt, the standard uniform of a domestic servant. His mannerisms also speak to this. While the two men share a similar stance, Staples maintains a subordinate position, standing behind Schuyler. Their relationship may have been relatively familial, yet Schuyler still holds a position of power over Staples. These types of interactions between hired help and family patriarch may have been friendly, yet they still uphold racial hierarchies that continue to exist in the South today. Staples’s main role in Eggleston’s family was to make their lives easier. Through his, and other domestic workers’ presence in the South, privileged white southerners did not have to drive themselves, or cook their own dinners, or raise their own children. Life for white southerners with means was often focused on leisure.

Throughout *The Guide*, Eggleston includes images that he took at a U.S. Air Force base in Huntsville, Alabama. These images not only continue this dialogue of icons of mobility and the relationship of people to the landscape, but they also portray a relationship of masculine power. In *Huntsville, Alabama* (pg. 41), flat leveled ground is protected with a chain link fence topped with barbed wire. In the middle-right side of an airplane, we find what appears to be the body of a disassembled bright orange plane, suitable for only one or two pilots. On the side of

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12 Aiden Schuyler was the brother of Eggleston’s mother, and therefore was Maude Schuyler Clay’s uncle.
the plane are large white block letters that read: “U S AIR FORCE.” A man in a dark suit stands with one hand in his pocket and the other hand gently, almost tenderly caressing the body of the plane. He directs all of his attention to the airplane. He does not engage with the camera in any way, and the distance between the camera and the man and plane implies that the man’s interaction with the plane is private, especially given that no other people are in the frame. The letters on the plane, which designates it as property of the U.S. Air Force, conveys that it is an object of power. The airplane is a vehicle for supreme forms of national mobility. But this man’s attention to the aircraft, with his hand on its body shows his appreciation, respect, and even admiration for the power the vehicle holds. The plane is itself a masculine emblem: it implies freedom, mobility, and control, inherently masculine features, which the relationship of the man in the picture reinforces.

This theme continues, again in Huntsville, Alabama, on page 69. In it, in a large parking lot is an airplane parked idle in the distance on the left side of the frame. On the right side of the frame is a large red and white warehouse, presumably used for housing aircraft, and a white building surrounded by a white-picket fence. A small sign near the fence reads: “STAY CLEAR OF PROPELLERS AT ALL TIMES.” In the previous plane the man appeared to almost be subservient to the power of the aircraft. But in this photograph, the man’s proximity to the viewer overshadows the other objects in the image, it is clear that he holds the power. He is at the center of the frame, and his head forms the focal point of the image. All of the other subjects are directed toward him. He looks just outside of the camera frame, not meeting the viewer’s gaze, with a sly smirk crossing his lips. He is in control. He is subservient to nothing.

In the introduction to William Eggleston’s Guide, John Szarkowski recalls:

When Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first saw a selection of slides from this series in 1972 he observed--surprisingly but in fact accurately--that the design of most of the
pictures seemed to radiate from a central, circular core. In time the observation was related to Eggleston, who replied, after a barely perceptible hesitation, that this was true, since the pictures were based compositionally on the Confederate flag—not the asterisk, or the common daisy, or the dove of the Holy Ghost, but the Confederate flag. (11)

Eggleston’s claim that his images are based on the composition of the Confederate flag is a controversial statement. When reading interviews or viewing documentaries about William Eggleston, the viewer feels constantly on edge, not sure which parts of what Eggleston says can be taken as fact, and which can be taken as fiction. Eggleston seems to constantly be privy to a private joke: viewers are very rarely let in on it. In Telegraph Magazine, Richard Grant notes, “Eggleston enjoys playing up to his depraved Southern gentleman image, with his uniformed chauffeurs (one of whom he used to announce as ‘Molasses’), the Nazi coat he sometimes wears, the arsenal of weapons he keeps with him, his insightful but wildly exaggerated claim that all his photographs are based compositionally on the confederate flag” (Grant, 7). Eggleston seems to anticipate what is expected from him as a member of the southern gentry, and what kind of photographs he is therefore expected to create, but plays on these ideas to create a satire. Rather than showing the southern plantation as Clarence John Laughlin does, as a majestic relic of the past, Eggleston shows the plantation’s land covered in trash and left to rust. He keeps the locations and the subjects stereotypically southern, but depicts them in unflattering ways. This proverbial wink with the camera may have been a factor in his less than appreciated introduction to the New York art scene at the Museum of Modern Art. However, in Huntsville, Alabama (pg. 69), the image does appear to be composed of radial lines directed toward the center of the frame, almost exactly mirroring the composition of the Confederate flag. Noting this resemblance enhances the sense of power and control the man in the image imparts upon the viewer.
The last image in *The Guide* that Eggleston took at the Air Force base in *Huntsville, Alabama* (pg. 109). In what appears to be a hotel room with light yellow walls and red carpeting, a man sits alone on a bed. He stares at nothing in particular, holding a glass in his hands. 

Eggleston recalls taking pictures at the base, and capturing this image:

> The motel room picture came about when I was invited by the US Navy to do an inspection tour of the Nasa Space base. I’m not sure they knew I was a photographer, but I had my camera. After a day of touring the place where they built rockets, a group of us went back to the hotel and I just walked down the corridor and I happened to know this man and I walked in and instantly took his picture and left. (Jaeger, 30)

This image portrays masculinity differently than in the last two images taken in and around the military base. Rather than showing control and power, this man appears lost and depressed. This photograph draws back the curtain of men’s roles in the South. The suburban southern men are encouraged to assume roles as leaders of the domestic and professional world, roles that require strength, productivity, and perseverance. This image contradicts that role by showing an image of a man in isolation, inactive, and perhaps one who has ceded his control to the control of alcohol. This image perhaps recalls Clay’s statement about Eggleston’s family members’ relationship to alcohol. Eggleston himself is a self-admitted alcoholic. So perhaps capturing an image so dark and lost speaks to experiences he himself has had.

The theme of mobility returns, again in *Memphis* (pg. 81), in one of Eggleston’s most iconic images. This monumental green tricycle also serves as the cover image to *William Eggleston’s Guide*. A white-and-green tricycle with large black tires and red handlebars takes up the majority of the frame of the photograph. Two suburban homes in the background place the image in a residential area. The tricycle stands alone on a sidewalk, next to a street. The image is not as threatening as the previous images discussed in this chapter, but the fact that the tricycle is
solitary, with no children in sight, and rust on the handlebars and around its tires, implies some level of neglect.

Eggleston’s camera angle accentuates the scale of the tricycle. In *Memphis* (pg. 81), for instance, if we were to reduce this photograph’s color to grayscale, the depth of the tricycle’s relationship to the houses behind it would become even more apparent, as I briefly mentioned in the Introduction. The tricycle’s shapes and lines, from the round dark circles of the tires to the curved handlebars, emphasize the geometric composition of the image. This use of depth, shape, and line to show object’s relationship to their environments are what inspire viewers and critics to relate Eggleston’s work to the work of Walker Evans. But Eggleston adds innovative angles, as well as color, both of which inspire an emotional response. In her review of Eggleston’s 2013 exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, Grace Hale compares the works of Evans and Eggleston:

> Clothes and the intimate spaces inside homes where people live and sleep and dress are all Evans’s subjects, but the materials the objects in Eggleston’s image are made of --concrete walls and synthetic cloth-- push the viewer into the 1970s. Color helps. [...] Yet unlike Evans and photographer and filmmaker John Cohen, who worked in Appalachia in the 1960s, Eggleston shoots at an angle, incorporating corners--walls hitting the ceiling at the top and the corner of a baby bed at the bottom--into the right edge of his image, [...] producing a sense of interior space and depth. (Hale 4)

Evans’s photographs offer few angles and little depth within the picture frame. Mark Holborn states: “With careful respect for Evans, Eggleston began to regard this frontal purity of style as if it was a formula he wanted to break. ‘If there was anything about Walker Evans’s work that I disliked’, [Eggleston] said, ‘it was his determination always to use that same, square, frontal view. I never cared much for any photographs with such frontal fields’” (3).

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13 Which I have done in the image at the end of this chapter.
Eggleston’s photograph of the tricycle highlights his compositional style, but it also emphasizes an element of the suburban landscape which we return to again and again, mobility. The tricycle a conduit for mobility, but of a child encouraged to be mobile for entertainment at an early age. The tricycle’s proximity to the nearby street implies an inherent sense of safety, children are free to play and roam in this neighborhood, and even leave their modes of mobility unattended in the middle of the sidewalk, no fear of predators or thieves. The tricycle’s frame, its tires, and the sidewalk underneath, also serve to frame future modes of mobility in the car in the carport of the house behind the tricycle. This tricycle is merely the first step to more luxurious, larger, and faster vehicles of mobility which are also components of the “American Dream.”

While suburban neighborhoods offer a sense of safety and affluence to some, the ordered and exclusionary suburb can have adverse effects, as Robert Beuka points out:

Mere mention of the word “suburbia,” after all, will call to mind for most Americans a familiar string of images–the grid of identical houses on identical lots, the smoking barbecue, the swimming pool–loaded signifiers that, taken together, connote both the middle-class “American dream” as it was promulgated by and celebrated in popular culture in the postwar years, and that dream’s inverse: the vision of a homogenized, soulless, plastic landscape of tepid conformity, an alienating “noplace.” (4)

This alternative underbelly of the seemingly perfect suburb has been creatively explored in popular culture and horror films for decades. It is a natural conclusion that a place so seemingly open, domestically focused, and wealthy, must be hiding something. In his photographs, William Eggleston explores the idea that not only is it possible, but inevitable that the homogenized suburb is a breeding ground for potential boredom, depression, and even violence.

Whitehaven, Mississippi, is a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, sitting near the larger Southaven, Mississippi. Whitehaven, Mississippi also is the title of Eggleston’s photograph on
A carport shows none of the house it is attached to or the neighborhood in which it lies. There are no cars in the carport, so the space is open. Lining the walls are a basketball hoop, a wheelbarrow, a couple of bicycles, a charcoal grill, and fragments of a white-picket fence. All of these are makings of an idyllic suburban family home. Yet, lying almost completely face-down in the middle of the floor of the carport is the body of a small child. We do not see the face of the child, and we are given no indication of the child’s gender. On the left side of the photograph, the bottom half of another child’s body flees the scene, and is barely caught in the frame, but no facial features are shown. A door at the far end of the carport opens to a sun-lit back yard that offers escape. Yet in the confines of the carport, one can only fear the worst. The small body prostrate on the ground, the other body moving quickly out of the image, both suggest danger despite the comforting, and familial images of the basketball hoop and white picket fence in the background. The events taking place, the body in action and the body immobilized, create tension within the image’s pristinely white domestic surroundings. The fact that the carport is empty also implies the absence of adults who are perhaps still at work.

Whitehaven, Mississippi (pg. 45) is composed primarily of variations of the colors white and beige. The bright red wheelbarrow, the red of the basketball hoop, and the sunlight reflecting off of the carport’s walls, as well as in the backyard, offer a broader spectrum of pigmentation in reds and oranges. But beige dominates giving the photograph a white-washed quality, and emphasizes the homogenizing effect of suburban living. The red provokes tension in this white space and implies a sense of danger. William Ferris offers his response to Eggleston’s use of color:

William Eggleston and his powerful dye transfer prints helped me understand that color photography was as much about the rich, drenching of the image with color as about the image itself. Eggleston helped me forget the subject and allow myself to sink into the sheer beauty of the color, like a hot bath. That feeling is [an]
intrinsically different feeling than the experience of black and white photography. (Ferris)

Color is a powerfully emotional and beautiful aspect of Eggleston’s photography, and adds significantly to the composition of his photographs as works of art. But color also works to imply context in the image, as we see in the whitewashed tonality of the image which could be interpreted as an implication of the racial composition of suburban communities.

In another image, simply titled *Memphis* (pg. 79), the viewer finds a scene which is again adorned with all the commonplace props of the typical suburban scene. The car in the left side of the frame places the setting of the photograph in a carport, or part of a front lawn. A small, green tricycle with white tassels hanging from its handlebars sits next to the car. Next to the tricycle is a low-sitting portable charcoal barbecue grill. The lid of the barbecue grill is removed, and flames leap out from the pit. The flames are reflected on the car, which emphasizes the disturbingly close proximity of the pit to the tricycle. The top of the grill is about equal to the height of the tricycle. The red flames and their reflections again use the color red to imply danger within the photograph. Even more unsettling is the presence of a person in the right side of the frame. As we have seen in earlier images, Eggleston is a master of cropping the frame. He leaves out most of the human’s body which lends an eerie quality, as if they are the orchestrator of future sinister events, the barbecue serving as the prop of a backyard séance. The colors in the image: the dusty black car, the olive green tricycle, the olive green clothing that the person is wearing, and the concrete and grass covered in shadow, help to emphasize the blaring flame at the center of the image. As in *Whitehaven, Mississippi* (pg. 45), common props of the suburban setting combine in unusual and even threatening ways to provide a dystopian look at the “American Dream.”
William Eggleston’s photographs contradict traditional ideas of the developed South and its residential suburbs as being safe and ideal places for raising families. Suburbs were popularly characterized as places where race, class, and gender roles are enforced for the “good” of the community. Eggleston does not entirely position suburbs in a negative light. In *Gulfport, Mississippi* (pg. 73) two boys, one in a red shirt carrying a briefcase, and the other shirtless in his jeans and Converse sneakers, walk down a street in a residential neighborhood. The small boy carrying the briefcase that appears to be much too large for him looks suspicious, but the other boy carries a folded up piece of paper, perhaps a paper airplane. Both children are laughing and appear happy. Walking down the sidewalk next to them without a leash is a collie dog that likewise looks happy and content gazing straight at the camera. Its mouth is open in what appears to be a smile, with its tail wagging behind it. The image is pleasant and happy.

Similarly, in *East Memphis* (pg. 77), an older boy in a red sweatshirt leans against a metal pole in the middle of a residential street. He looks directly at the camera, one eyebrow slightly raised, and his mouth opened to show a hint of a smile. No other children are around him, but his face is pleasant and he engages with the camera. This is a juxtaposition from the blank-faced young girl on the porch of the playhouse in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 35).

Eggleston’s photographs of the developed and residential areas of the South remind us that not everything is as it appears from the outside. The stories of the South are complex, and while Eggleston’s subjects often hint at darker themes, suburban life brings happiness as well. Particularly in his images of young boys exploring outdoors does Eggleston capture more relatable and engaging moments. This again draws upon the idea of nostalgia in Eggleston’s work. In Eggleston’s photographs of women and young girls, there never appears to be a breakthrough of connection or a moment of understanding between his camera’s eye and the
subject. There is always an objectifying distance. Yet, with young boys Eggleston seems to draw out from his subjects a sense of playfulness and trust that again, perhaps recalls the artist’s own childhood years as a young boy in the South. As we will find in the next chapter, however, the darkness that has so far been implied in some of Eggleston’s images, takes control of William Eggleston’s Guide’s final photographs.
Fig. 3: *Memphis, by William Eggleston, reduced to black-and-white*
CHAPTER 3: THE SUBURBAN GOTHIC

Sometimes I’ll leave the house with a fully loaded camera and end up with nothing. It’s just about being there. Anywhere. Even the most uninteresting, ugly or boring places can for an instant become magical to me.

-William Eggleston

I once heard William Eggleston say that the nominal subjects of his pictures were no more than a pretext for the making of color photographs—the Degas position. I did not believe him, although I can believe that it might be an advantage to him to think so, or to pretend to think so. To me it seems that the pictures reproduced here are about the photographer’s home, about his place, in both important meanings of that word. One might say about his identity.

-John Szarkowski

A distinct change occurs about two thirds of the way into William Eggleston’s Guide. Memphis (pg. 87) shows a tight frame held on a green shower and bathtub. There is nothing distinct about the shower, the tiles could be a little cleaner, but there are no objects in the tub or along the shower’s ledge. The rest of the bathroom is not shown, thus, the photograph leaves a peculiar and claustrophobic impression. On the next page, in Sumner Mississippi (pg. 89) a meal of ham and green beans, a salad and a baked potato with some rolls, and what could be a large glass of ice tea (or some other brown liquid over ice) is placed for only one person at a large dining table. The blue room has an ethereal quality. The lack of human presence in the space makes the solitary meal appear ghostly in the blue light. Throughout the rest of The Guide, the viewer is transported into an otherworldly South: there is no sunlight and little natural light of any kind. Windows are curtained shut, and doorways lead to black voids. People appear strange and ominous, seemingly caught in a timeless, unmoored space and place. Domestic spaces become sinister.
Bernice Murphy describes a less than friendly suburbia:

[I]n the 60 years since the mass suburbanization of the United States began, writers, film-makers and the public at large have shown themselves more than willing to engage with narratives in which the nagging suspicion that something dark lurks below suburbia’s peaceful facade is dramatically vindicated...It reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyle and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreparable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with the old patterns of existence. (2)

Murphy defines the setting of the “Suburban Dream” as a utopian, insulated space guarded from the outside world, where families thrive and children are safe. She contrasts the “Suburban Dream” with the “Suburban Nightmare” as it is depicted in popular film, television, and literature. The “Suburban Nightmare” is categorized as follows:

1. Haunted
2. The chance to fall into debt and financial entanglement
3. Neighbors with something terrible to hide
4. A place of entrapment and unhappiness
5. An obvious hunting ground for pedophiles and child murderers
6. A place haunted by the familial and communal past
7. Destroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources
8. A claustrophobic breeding ground for dysfunctionality and abuse
9. A place of mindless conformity and materialism
10. Basements, crawlspaces and back gardens
11. A place in which the most dangerous threats come from within, not from without (Murphy, 3)

William Eggleston’s Guide has so far depicted the developing South as a “destroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources” through land development and commercial real estate. It also presents more ominous domestic depictions of the South, but the last few pages of the collection transform the South from merely a land of suburban mediocrity, to a fully realized “Suburban Nightmare.”

Although Sumner, Mississippi (pg. 91) is not particularly ominous, it implies domestic discontent. In it, a teenage boy slouches in an armchair, his hands clasped over his head behind
the chair in a posture of relaxed boredom and impatience. The room in which the boy sits is green echoing the walls in the shower in *Memphis* (pg. 87), creating continuity between hallucinogenic worlds. The window curtains of *Sumner, Mississippi* (pg. 91), match the color of the room’s walls, and the space is decorated with nice furnishings, implying middle-class comfort. Next to the boy on a sofa is the lower body of a woman in a knee-length skirt, holding a drink in one hand. This places the photograph in a family setting, and again, although this image is not as bizarre as many of the others in the final photographs of *William Eggleston’s Guide*, it is dark and enclosed, creating an almost trapped atmosphere. The window curtains are drawn completely shut, but through them the viewer can see that it is dark outside. According to Clay, this is the childhood home Eggleston grew up in, his grandparent’s house in Sumner, Mississippi. Clay now lives in the home where she raised her three children, although the room is no longer mint green and much of the furnishings have changed.

In *Greenwood, Mississippi* (pg. 95), a naked man stands in the middle of a room with dark red walls. He turns toward the camera, but looks down at the floor, one hand scratching his head, the other on his hip. The bed is unmade, and the dresser has a lamp, but no lampshade. A lit cigarette hangs off of the dresser’s ledge. The walls of the room are covered in graffiti in black and silver spray paint that reads: “GOD,” “Tally Ho!,” and “mona,” in different directions. As Grace Elizabeth Hale explains: “The man is his [Eggleston’s] friend T.C., a dentist and a drug addict, who was later murdered in this house with an axe blow to the head” (5). Though Greenwood, Mississippi, is not a suburb, it is a residential area that would appear safe and domestically motivated. The image is unnerving for many reasons, least of which is the brashly naked man in the middle of the frame. The ominous red lighting of the room, the graffiti covering the walls, and the precariously placed cigarette, all add to the photograph’s disturbing
nature. But knowledge of the subject only heightens this unease. Not only was T.C. a drug addict who would be murdered in a horrific and disturbing way in his own home, but he was a close friend of Eggleston who represents the Delta born southern aristocracy. More than that, T.C. was a dentist, a family physician who dealt with members of the Greenwood, Mississippi, community on a daily basis. This photograph shows most evidently that the trappings of a “normal” southern community can hide dark secrets and tragedies that far surpass the ghosts of the southern plantations in Clarence John Laughlin’s images. Eggleston’s photographs are haunted by their own kinds of ghosts, ghosts of the southern bohemia, normal people, like dentists, who experience depression and addiction and eventually succumb to violent ends.

In this last section of the monograph, even outdoor settings are captured with a claustrophobic and containing darkness. Downtown Morton, Mississippi (pg. 93) shows the town’s downtown area at either dusk or daybreak, the natural light has faded beyond the horizon, but still barely illuminates the sky behind Morton’s downtown buildings. A streetlamp illuminates an older brick building, with a white and yellow car parked in front of it. Other cars are parked in front of the row of commercial buildings. Human presence is suggested by the parked cars, but not by humans themselves. The viewer is left to wonder what events have brought the people of Morton, to the town center, and why their presence is lacking in the frame. The sky behind the building is lit with fading pinks and purples, but the edges of the photograph’s frame are dark and fade to black. The image could almost be a still from a film noir set in the South. The darkness of the streets and the buildings implies a sense of danger; the viewer has no way of knowing what is lurking in the windows of the parked cars or the dark buildings.
In *Near Morton, Mississippi* (pg. 97), Eggleston takes viewers from Morton’s downtown district to a remote outdoor location. Again, the lighting of the sky gives the feeling of dawn or dusk, with light pink clouds and no direct sunlight. The photograph shows an isolated dirt road. The tread of tires are imprinted in the dirt, although no vehicles are seen within the image. Dark foliage lines the path that is lined with telephone wires. Barely visible over the horizon line are the tops of the roofs of houses. Again, the edges and corners of the image are dark, creating a sinister and enclosed atmosphere. The viewer’s eye is trapped by enveloping darkness in this space. The foliage may hide danger unseen by the viewer. Eggleston places the camera at ground level to leave just a hint of the safety of civilization beyond the hill, but only so much as to make the viewer completely isolated.

In *Morton, Mississippi* (pg. 107), a large tree is illuminated by artificial light, perhaps a flood lamp or a car’s headlights at night. The viewer is given some hint as to what the surrounding area looks like. A red stop sign is barely visible in the distance at the center of the frame, the red alerting possible danger. A highway marker peeks into the left side of the frame. In the bottom right corner of the frame is the top of a parked car, the top of which is only barely illuminated. This is not a technically proficient image. The lighting is not skillful, and the composition is nothing particularly innovative. Yet the darkness of the landscape and the danger implicit in it is emphasized by the harshly lit tree. The tree itself elicits its own kind of danger in a region where, historically, trees have been used for lynching. Even Eggleston’s outdoor photographs become confining and ominous in this final section.

In *Memphis* (pg. 99), it is not a white painted door with light blue flowers hanging from it that welcomes the viewer, but rather the interior of a black, open oven. In this image, Eggleston has focused his lens right on the gaping oven, and lends only a glimpse of the tile of the rest of
the kitchen’s floor and walls. The oven is slightly rusted, but mostly clean and black. Returning once again to Hilton Kramer’s review of Eggleston’s work:

The use of color, alleged to lend a special distinction to these pictures is, to my eye at least, similarly commonplace. It varies from being obviously pretty (a bright blue pickup truck seen through the growth of wisteria in bloom) to being obviously austere (the gray-black-off white tones of the interior of a household oven.) Mostly it is postcard bright, in the outdoor daylight pictures, or ponderously atmospheric, in the interior shots. (1)

Kramer is quick to cite Eggleston’s use of color as his main complaint. But subject matter is another source of Kramer’s dissatisfaction. Household appliances are not the type of objects typically found on museum walls. In Eggleston’s photographs, vernacular, everyday objects evoke narratives.

At first glance, Eggleston’s photograph of the open oven does not convey an elevated, metaphorical meaning. The photograph’s lack of rich color makes it “obviously austere” as Kramer put it, and highlights its composition of intersecting lines. Kramer does not mention-either because he did not recognize it-or he did not wish to acknowledge that he recognized it, is that Eggleston’s cropping of the frame does elevate the meaning of the oven. But rather than suggesting that the oven conveys the heroics of domestic life, or that it portrays the modern-day “hearth” of the suburban home, Eggleston shows the gas oven as an invitation to a domestic suicide. By placing the camera at a straight angle with the oven’s interior, rather than photographing from a downward or upward angle, the oven welcomes the viewer inside to an untimely death.

Again in *Morton, Mississippi* (pg. 101), an older man with white hair and glasses sits on a bed. His gaze trails just past the camera’s frame, past the photographer’s lens. In his right hand is a pistol that is pointed downwards, almost resting on the brightly colored bed quilt. His finger is not on the trigger of the gun in his hand, but he holds it up, ready for use. Eggleston explains:
The old man and his gun was taken in this tiny town, where a distant relative of my wife’s lived. The man used to be the night watchman of the town and he would stroll around and keep the peace. He showed me the gun he carried on him. He was retired, but he told me various stories about incidents. Right before I took that photograph he showed me bullet wounds. The picture was taken in his house, on his bed. (Jaeger, 28)

No natural light pervades this scene, and while knowing that the man in the image is a retired “peacekeeper” gives context to the viewer, the sense of danger is still implicit. If one did not know the back-story of the man in the photograph, the image would appear particularly troublesome. The gun-toting man looks as if he is in mid-speech, his mouth is partly open and he engages the camera. Even knowing what we do about the man, the image is still threatening. The position of the man, and the way he actively holds the gun do not indicate a sense of trust between him and the viewer. Furthermore, if we are to trust Eggleston and believe that his only use for the gun is to protect the people of Morton, Mississippi, we must ask: what this man is protecting the town from? What sort of violence occurs in this tiny town that requires a gun-toting retired night watchman to roam the streets? Or, is this gun used as a device for control, as a means to show power in the hands of this old white male? This implicit violence is contrasted with the old man’s room: the patchwork quilt and lamp imply a comforting space. The pot under his bed, which we might assume to be used for relieving himself during the night, emphasizes his fragility and powerlessness.

In Sumner, Mississippi (pg. 103), an older woman with pulled back grey hair stands in a night dress and robe in the doorway of a room. Once again, the mint green of the shower (pg. 87) and living room (pg. 91) covers every inch of the walls. A nightstand sits against the wall in the left side of the frame, holding a lamp and several magazines. A tiny white trash bin sits in the corner of the room. The room has no windows or natural lighting. The woman standing in the frame of the door looks off, past the lens of the camera, and she clutches her hands at her waist.
The doorway in which she stands is completely enveloped in blackness. The blackness covers the back of her nightgown and hair, and completely consumes her legs, making her appear as if she is floating in the doorway. The woman’s distant stare and her completely unmoored, drifting presence makes her appear as if she is caught between this world and the next. She does not seem fully present in the photograph, but rather, on the edge of reality. Aging is a recurring theme that arises in the *The Guide*. Some of Eggleston’s images show the happiness of childhood, like the young boys walking down the street in *Gulfport, Mississippi* (pg. 73), or the boys in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 25). But in *Morton, Mississippi* (pg. 101), and *Sumner, Mississippi* (pg. 103), Eggleston portrays older people as either threatening or not fully in this world.

*Outskirts of Morton, Mississippi, Halloween 1971* (pg. 105), depicts three children standing hand-in-hand facing the camera. They are dressed in Halloween costumes, but they are alone on what looks like a dark rural highway with no homes in sight, and no other children. This is not an obvious place were one would expect to find trick-or-treaters. White sand covers the highway, which is strange given that Morton, Mississippi, is a landlocked town, not near any larger bodies of water, or the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The sand hides the edges of the road, blurring the boundaries between the road and the landscape. This enhances the “placeless” quality of the photograph, and though Eggleston locates the image in Morton, Mississippi, he leaves the exact location ambiguous by identifying the location as being on the “outskirts.” The children’s blank faces deny any sort of meaningful engagement with the camera. Their linked hands form a barrier, almost as if they are denying the viewer access to the road.

Childhood as a theme continues in the final page of the collection, *Near Jackson, Mississippi* (pg. 110). In a dark, dirty corner of a room, a navy blue jacket lined in white hangs
from a spot on the wall. The jacket hangs over what looks like the edge of a baby’s crib, with a white wooden frame, and a dirty looking piece of child’s clothing or a diaper hanging off of the crib’s edge. It is unclear whether the jacket is made for a child or adult, but it is hung high on the wall, suggesting that an adult must have placed it there. Nothing in the room is clean, from the crib to the smoky dark corners of the image. The red lining of the jacket’s hood continues the use of the color red to imply danger.

The last section reveals a dark and claustrophobic South, in which the frame does not enclose the photograph abruptly, but creates a smoky edge that blurs the lines between photographic reality, and the viewer’s reality. Eggleston reveals malaise throughout this section. People, both young and old, appear blank, unresponsive, and not fully present. Hazy green and blue washes of color envelope the images. In order to grasp at these final images in William Eggleston’s Guide, let us return our attention to the blue jacket hanging over the dirty crib in Near Jackson, Mississippi (pg. 110). In the article “Eggleston’s South: ‘Always in Color,’” which has been referenced earlier in this project, Grace Elizabeth Hale explores the commonalities and contradictions between the photographs of Walker Evans and William Eggleston. Regarding this particular image, she states:

[T]he red fleece lining of the coat’s hood pops out against the coat’s silvery white lining and navy exterior and the dirty, grey wall. Yet unlike Evans and photographer and filmmaker John Cohen, who worked in Appalachia in the 1960s, Eggleston shoots at an angle, incorporating corners--walls hitting the ceiling at the top and the corner of a baby bed at the bottom-into the right edge of his image. The corners of the photograph frame amplify the corners of the subject here, producing a sense of interior space and depth. In these images, Eggleston reworks subjects Evans shot from the front by shooting instead at odd angles and adding color and dimensionally. (4)

Hale offers an insightful overview to the composition of the photograph, noting the addition of depth, and odd angles, as well as Eggleston’s rich use of color. These qualities, Hale notes, are
what distinguishes Eggleston from previous photographers of the South. Hale explains that these compositional factors add an emotional aspect to Eggleston’s images that had not been encountered in the previous “documentary style” photography:

Earlier in the twentieth century, Walker Evans created a black and white, crisp and flat aesthetic that also worked as an ideology. He represented the South “straight,” stripped of artifice and even artfulness. Direct and frank and clear, he worked to strip himself and his emotions from his images. And on multiple levels, Evans’s “documentary style” worked for a liberal government and its supporters, people with faith in the transparency of the photographic image and its ability to reveal backwardness and poverty. (6)

David Madden disagrees with Hale’s interpretation of Farm Security Administration photography as being stripped of emotion. In his article “The Cruel Radiance if What Is” in which he discusses FSA photographers relationship to contemporary photographers, Madden states: “[t]oday’s southern photographers attempt to solve the problem of image overkill by divesting the South of its trappings. The emptiness in the new southern photograph is a reaction against the complexity and richness of inherited imagery. The South is too crowded with objects, with impressions, that leave too much to say, too little to reveal” (31). While Hale suggests that there is flatness and an emotionless quality to Farm Security Administration’s “straight” style of photography, Madden implies that there is an emotional richness to that previous era’s photographs which has yet to be captured by contemporary artists.

Hale makes a stronger case in this argument. Looking at Walker Evans’s Farm Security Administration photographs, the images serve most effectively as systems of visual inventory. Evans photographs the bed in the middle of the sharecropping cabin, and the textured quality of the cabin’s wood siding and brick chimney. His photograph shows us where the people of Hale County, Alabama, kept their brooms, and how they prepared their dinner tables. Evans’s images

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14 Eggleston would have fallen into the category of “contemporary photographer” given the original publication year of Madden’s article, 1984
are important in that they form a common humanity between the viewer and the subjects of the photographs. By understanding how and where they lived, what their children looked like, and where they slept each night, we are reminded of their humanity, as well as their perseverance in times of poverty. This elevates their presence in these images to national symbols of hard work and the ability to thrive. This type of framing conjures a certain emotional connection between viewer and viewed in Farm Security Administration images, but it is not Evans’s emotion. Evans seems to work hard to remove himself, or his artistic license from these images. And while Evans’s subjects do engage with the camera, they often make direct eye contact with the lens, their gazes are blank, showing little emotional interaction. Therefore he keeps their personal emotions from becoming too engaged with the viewer.

As this thesis has suggested, Eggleston’s photographs portray their share of blank faces. We see blank faces in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi (pg. 34), in Memphis (pg. 38), Near Minter City and Glendora, Mississippi (pg. 54), and Outskirts of Morton, Mississippi, Halloween 1971 (pg. 104). (This count only includes images in which the subjects make direct eye contact with the camera, and show little to no emotion. Images in which eye contact is directed just out of the camera’s frame, but showing no emotion, or images showing malaise, are not included in this count.) These blank faces create photographs in which the subjects are disengaged or unhappy in their surroundings. But, if we are to imagine these images in relation to previous representations of “documentary style” photography from the South, these emotionless subjects also create a subtle satire of the documentary style photography of the Farm Security Administration. As Eggleston himself said: “[w]ell, occasionally I enjoy creating a parody of what I think is a ‘Southern’ photograph” (Hagen, 9). We know that Eggleston is intimately familiar with the work of Walker Evans. Perhaps Eggleston uses his work to acknowledge that
Evans’s “national symbols” are removed from emotion and artfulness, mirroring that sense of detached relationship with the subjects that so many northern photographers of the South have captured.

Images in *Eggleston’s Guide* often do capture contrasting engagement with the camera, whether in the smiling faces of children walking down the sidewalk, or the old man mid-speech holding a gun. But these people are not struggling through the effects of economic crisis, or dealing with the consequences of battle on their homeland. They are normal people, working normal jobs, living in mind-numbingly boring contemporary residential South. Their problems are sometimes the result of long term, systemic racial and class based hierarchies in a region with a strong history of disenfranchisement and neglect. While the effects of those problems exist in *William Eggleston’s Guide*, they are not the sole, or even the primary subject of Eggleston’s collection. As Grace Elizabeth Hale puts it:

Eggleston’s South is not the folksy land beloved by music fans and folklorists for its ‘authentic’ way of life and rustic charm, its old buildings and old sounds and old signs. It is not the civil rights South, full of earnest and moral activism. Here, threat lurks not under a Klan hood but inside a red room where a drug-addicted dentist lives his last days. A tricycle is monumental but also ominous, and a Confederate flag can work as a compositional device. Eggleston’s South is a place where the horrors of history suggest no solution, no forward motion in anything as orderly as progress (6).

Eggleston highlights the everyday interactions and emotions of everyday southerners.

To convey emotional tension, spacial relationships are manipulated in *William Eggleston’s Guide*. In early sections, even if an image seemed structurally limiting, as in *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi* (pg. 35) where a little girl appears stuck on the porch of her playhouse, at least the viewer does not feel compositionally confined. The scene is still outdoors, during the day, where things are less likely to be hiding in the bushes. But the green shower in *Memphis* (pg. 87), with the frame so close on the shower’s interior, creates a confining
atmosphere. The shower almost looks like a prison cell for solitary confinement, because the viewer is given no hint about what lies beyond the shower’s edge. Similarly, in Sumner, Mississippi (pg. 103), the viewer is shown a multi-dimensional space. The camera’s lens is not locked in on one part of the room, but because the area depicted through the doorway at the center of the frame is so pitch black, the doorway does not register as a viable entrance or exit. The space is similarly confining because it does not even hint at what lies beyond the room, there are no windows or doors to let in sunlight. The area within the frame is dark and contained.

This final section incorporates claustrophobically tight framing, juxtaposed with smoky edges and dark, otherworldly atmospheres, giving the viewer a feeling of being both stuck, and unrooted. While the photograph of the old man with the pistol in Morton, Mississippi (pg. 101) essentially seeks to threaten the viewer into submission, backing us into the corner of the room, the red light and hazy quality of Greenwood, Mississippi (pg. 95) make viewers feel as if they are caught between a fever dream and reality. This juxtaposition works as a metaphor for the contemporary South, which is so inundated with images through advertising, and development, that it can sometimes feel overwhelming. Furthermore, regional distinction barely survives only as a form of simulacrum, where the culture of the South survives through tourism, and regionally directed advertising, where strip malls are named after the state flower, and subdivisions are named after the plantations that once stood in their place.15 These cultural juxtapositions create spaces that are both inundated with objects and advertising, yet devoid of meaningful cultural reality, both claustrophobic and rootless.

In earlier images in William Eggleston’s Guide, Eggleston’s camera examines common household objects and landscapes in new and unusual ways, like the green tricycle in Memphis

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15 For more about cultural tourism and land development as regional simulacrum, look to Scott Romine’s The Real South.
Eggleston’s camera teaches the viewer to re-evaluate the common world, to appreciate the beauty and the mystery of the everyday. As Eudora Welty explains of Eggleston’s photographs:

Our own way of seeing may have recently been in trouble. These days, not only the world that we look out upon but the human eye itself seems at times occluded, as if a cataract had thickened over it from within. We have become used to what we live with, calloused (perhaps in self-protection) to what’s happened to the world outside our door, and we now accept its worsening. But the Eggleston vision of his world is clear, and clarifying to our own. (Welty, 15)

Welty hailed Eggleston for his ability to encourage the viewer to reevaluate the aesthetic value of the objects which create the “mundane world.” Doing this will help us more easily navigate a world of ever increasing levels of visual stimuli and abundance of objects. But in this last section, rather than re-familiarizing the viewer with common objects, Eggleston de-familiarizes these subjects. The green shower becomes a prison cell, the black oven a torture chamber, a small-town dentist’s home becomes purgatory. These objects make the viewer feel uncomfortable and confined, and the images therefore darkly satirize the real life affect these objects have.

The confining, claustrophobic spaces in the final section, where everyday objects become sinister, and small town southerners keep pistols in their bedrooms and secretly foster drug addiction, almost perfectly recalls Bernice Murphy’s defining characteristics of the “Suburban Gothic,” a place where neighbors have something to hide, “a place of entrapment and unhappiness,” “a place in which the most dangerous threats come from within, not from without.” These characteristics can all be found in William Eggleston’s Guide, as well as Eggleston own life, particularly when Murphy includes suburban places “haunted by the familial and communal past.” (3)
This collection does not highlight the ghosts of a region’s past, or draw extensively upon the South’s tragic history. The South is a place still coming to terms with events that took place more than a hundred years ago, and while William Eggleston’s Guide is haunted by those events, because no collection of photographs taken in the South could fully escape them, Eggleston’s photographs are haunted by his own ghosts. The ghosts of William Eggleston’s Guide are his friends who have passed, like T.C., the dentist in Greenwood, Mississippi (pg. 95), of whom Eggleston explained, “[h]e was a dentist. We immediately became best friends. I can’t even say why. I’ll think about it, and if I come up with anything, you’ll be the first to know” (Paris Review, 2). The ghosts of William Eggleston’s Guide are also found in the landscape of his childhood, the rural landscapes of the Mississippi Delta region. The landscape of the South is rapidly changing, which Eggleston likely realized while driving around the Memphis suburbs and Mississippi highways in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He found the old monuments of the South he grew up with, the plantation lands, and ancestral homes, but he found them standing next to a McDonald’s.

The first page of William Eggleston’s Guide welcomed us with a closed door. It was a door that was both beautiful, with its washes of sunlight, and its floral adornment, but it also held mystery. The viewer approached the photograph wondering what was behind it, and to kind of home it was attached. The final image of the collection, the jacket hung above a filthy baby’s crib, brings to mind childhood, a theme Eggleston depicts both fondly, and, as in this image, terrifyingly. But he also scrutinizes childhood, showing children with unresponsive faces in claustrophobic situations, perhaps questioning what type of South they will grow up in, and what types of futures they can look forward to. This final image also brings the issue of class into question. A room this dirty probably does not have people hired to clean it, or perhaps the people
living in the home are too busy cleaning other people’s homes for a living. But the image also implies a type of threat that we see again and again throughout the collection. This threat is not that of impending war, or civil rights conflict, it is not the threat of poverty, although poverty is present, it is the threat of the next door neighbor, the threat of what lies beyond the white door with blue flowers.
Fig. 4: Image on left: Part of the Kitchen, ca 1935-1936, by Walker Evans. Image on right: Lucille Burrows, 1936, by Walker Evans
CONCLUSION

They give us those nice bright colors,
They give us the greens of summers,
Makes you think all the world’s
a sunny day.
I got a Nikon camera,
I love to photograph,
So mama, don’t take my Kodachrome away.
-Paul Simon

* Ancient and Modern * is a book compiled of Eggleston’s works from previous exhibitions and published collections such as *Election Eve, Wedgwood Blue, Seven, Troubled Waters,* and *Southern Suite.* Mark Holborn, editor of art and photography books, introduces the collection. His introduction begins by looking at the relationship Eggleston’s work has with the South:

Much of that work would suggest that [Eggleston] could be described as a southern artist, an identity he is anxious to avoid. The South is the central axis of his life, the sense of locality is a vital component of his work, but it is not defined by a Southern domain...Driving with him into the heart of the Mississippi Delta he is expansive about his roots. ‘This is Eggleston country,’ he exclaims. (Holborn 1)

But, as we have seen, “Eggleston country” is a complicated place. At times it is beautiful and rurally centered, he introduces us to the intimate indoor spaces of his friends and relatives, which can be as strange as anyone’s family. But he also takes us through the South’s landscape, showing us the rural highways and city streets from the Mississippi Delta to Memphis, Tennessee. Sometimes Eggleston intimately relates to these spaces, and sometimes they appear to him as “foreign landscapes,” but *William Eggleston’s Guide* never strays too far from Eggleston’s home.
From the very first image of *William Eggleston’s Guide* the viewer is visually informed that Eggleston’s South has secrets, some of which Eggleston will reveal to us, and some of them he will not. We learn from the beginning that one of these secrets is that the southern landscape is not the venerated and worshipped land of *Gone With the Wind*. We learned that modern day agricultural land is no longer the home place of the poor yet resilient sharecroppers that Walker Evans photographed in the 1930s. Farmland today is sometimes a lonely and forgotten place, where the only friendly face you may find is a roaming dog.

Another secret that *William Eggleston’s Guide* shares with us is that what we thought was the happy and safe suburban neighborhood so long cherished in popular culture can actually be a very dark place. Eggleston’s photographs remind us that the resources needed to create such neighborhoods require large amounts of natural resources for their construction, while consuming vast amounts of land for their placement. His photographs also remind us of the exclusionary nature of such areas, where the majority of inhabitants are white and middle to upper class, creating a mind numbing monotony of culture. Suburbs perpetuate archaic gender norms, where women are domestically centered, and men are free to move between the home and workplace. *William Eggleston’s Guide* shows us that all of these factors can become oppressive, and can retaliate in violent ways.

But the last section of *The Guide* reveals the existence of secrets, but does not tell us outright what they are. The final section has a spectral quality, creating a hazy and hallucinogenic atmosphere. Though this section’s photographs create an atmosphere of dread, we are reminded by the presence of T.C., and the fact that the location of these images are still in “Eggleston country” and even in his childhood home, that to Eggleston, these are familiar places. And even to us, the open black oven, the green shower, and the bedroom of the old man, recall
familiar settings and places, perhaps from our own childhood. Yet they seem completely unfamiliar, and even threatening.

This sudden change in tone in the final pages of the collection recall Sigmund Freud’s exploration of the uncanny, which he defines in his 1919 article of the same name. Freud initially defines the ‘uncanny’ as “all that is terrible--to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (1). The uncanny could loosely be described as anything ranging from ghosts, to demons, secrets, or superstition. But Freud goes on to seek a more substantial definition, relating to its translation in German, heimlich. Freud explains, “In general we are reminded that the word heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (4).

Eggleston repeatedly portrays familiar, largely domestically centered objects, and gives them new meaning, as if they have a life of their own. As stated in Chapter 3, many of these objects relate to childhood, like the larger than life tricycle, and of course the final image of the ominous baby crib. In a correspondence with the southern folklorist, champion of the arts, and Eggleston’s friend, Dr. William Ferris, I asked Ferris, “Do you think nostalgia plays a role in Eggleston’s work?” Dr. Ferris responded:

I do not think that nostalgia has a role in Eggleston’s work either. He captures the southern gothic, the dark underbelly of southern worlds that he photographs late at night and in the early morning hours with his camera. He pushed the viewer’s eye beyond romanticized, nostalgic worlds and embraces a South that is both beautiful and terrifying. Eggleston’s nostalgia is for the bohemian, artistic, jagged edge of the American South and the worlds in which he grew up in the Mississippi Delta and Memphis.

I understand, and respect Dr. Ferris’ point, but I cannot help but wonder if Eggleston’s uncanny darkness does not stem from a childhood nostalgia, which Ferris does allude to. Eggleston is a
self-proclaimed alcoholic, and does not shy away from this fact. Watching the film he shot and edited from hours of footage, *Stranded in Canton*, which was recently re-released in 2005 but originally filmed in 1973, we follow Eggleston and his friends in a drug and alcohol fueled fever dream through Memphis. Eggleston has lost many friends and family to substance abuse, recalling Maude Schuyler Clay’s quote about the funeral for “yet another alcoholic family member who bit the dust.” In Eggleston’s photographs, I see a longing for simpler times, and sometimes fond and pleasant depictions of childhood. But these lighthearted images are brief and fleeting—childhood and the home place most often appear distorted by Eggleston’s perhaps more cynical eye, an eye that has experienced loss, pain, and disillusionment.

In the book *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger quotes Professor of Sociology at UC Berkely, Avery Gordon, who states:

> ‘Freud’s science will try, once and for all, to rid itself of all vestiges of animism by making all the spirits or the hauntings come from the unconscious, from inside the troubled individual....Freud will try to demystify our holdover beliefs in the power of the *world at large*, hoping to convince us that everything that seems to be coming at us from the outside is really coming from this now shrunken inside.’ (1997, 47-48). In other words, these uncanny experiences are both internal and relentlessly social, reminding us that ‘what lies between society and psyche is hardly an inert empty space.’ (19)

In the world of *William Eggleston’s Guide*, the uncanny does come from within Eggleston’s psyche, and creates in the viewer a psychological response. But the idea of the familiar made unfamiliar also comes from outside sources. We know that Eggleston’s monograph explores the intricacies of the southern spaces where Eggleston lives. He moves seamlessly between his birthplace and later adult home of Memphis, Tennessee, and his childhood and familial home of Sumner, Mississippi. But for Eggleston, both of these areas increasingly become, as he describes, “foreign landscapes.”
“Eggleston country” has changed drastically from the time William Eggleston was a little boy. The landscape of his childhood no longer exists, only remnants of it echo as a ghostly reminder of all that has changed. This change has been rapid, and Eggleston’s later collections continue to explore the developing and national homogenization of the South. Eggleston depicts a personal uncanny, but his photographs also explore a southern uncanny. The once familiar and regionally specific landscapes of the South have become distorted and developed to the point of de-familiarization. Though critics at the time of his premiere exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art cite his use of color or mundane objects, as Hilton Kramer did, I believe there was another reason for the negative critiques not mentioned in public reviews. I believe William Eggleston’s photograph challenged their ideas about the South, and they did not like the secrets they revealed. Eggleston’s photographs could be considered a warning, challenging viewers to consider what is at stake for the sake of “progress.” Are we willing to give up what makes a landscape natural and unique or what makes a neighborhood diverse and challenging for the sake of inexpensive housing and a false sense of security? But I think there is hope in Eggleston’s photographs as well. I think that he has not given up on his own personal search for beauty in a landscape once so familiar to him, but that is now quite strange.

*William Eggleston’s Guide,* like his later collections, follows the story of human beings and their relationship to landscape and environment through objects, but people tell the stories as well. The people in *William Eggleston’s Guide* range from intimate friends and family members to strangers on the street. While his images often capture a sentiment or a feeling, they do not seek to raise his subjects to iconic status, and they do not speak for a nation, or even a region. Eggleston is not shy about using people in his photographs to capture a certain feeling or artistic atmosphere. But I am convinced he does this, not only to get an interesting photograph, but to
force us to think more complexly about the South. As Eggleston said, “I love all these people [he photographs and films]. There is a lot of work to be done in the South, and I have just scratched the surface. I still have unfinished business down there” (Ferris, 196).

At age 75, Eggleston’s work has placed him comfortably as one of the greatest living photographers, and has crowned him in many art historians’ mind as the “father of color photography.” His work has spanned continents as he was photographing in Berlin, London, and Africa, but his images always return home, to the American South, where he could likely continue to find fresh, interesting perspectives of the region for many lifetimes. *William Eggleston’s Guide* tells a full story. Its characters are flawed and dynamic, they are beautiful and dark, and while their futures are unknown, and though their region changes, they share the same past. While I would like to fault Hilton Kramer for preferring a certain version of the South, I cannot entirely blame him. I think that southerners prefer certain versions as well, and Eggleston’s images show his negotiation with the fact that the South of our dreams is not the only South.
WILLIAM JOSEPH EGGLESTON, JR.

William Joseph Eggleston, Jr., better known as Bill, is probably best known for his love of good music and things artistic. Someone has said of him that if he died he would first inquire which place had the best hi-fi set and make his plans accordingly. The popular belief that music and mathematics go hand in hand seems to be exemplified in Bill's case because he has usually made his best grades in school in the field of mathematics. He has been a member of the Dramatics Club since he entered Webb in his sophomore year and has contributed to that organization with his artistry and ability to create stage effects in scenery and lighting effects. He has also been a member of the Oracle Staff for the past two years.

-Eggleston’s senior high school yearbook profile.
WORKS CITED


VITA

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