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The Literary Legacy of The Federal Writers' Project

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THE LITERARY LEGACY OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS’ PROJECT

by

Sara Rutkowski

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Literary Legacy of the Federal Writers’ Project

by

Sara Rutkowski

Advisor: Professor Morris Dickstein

Established by President Roosevelt in 1935 as part of the New Deal, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) put thousands of unemployed professionals to work documenting American life during the Depression. Federal writers—many of whom would become famous, including Ralph Ellison, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Dorothy West—collected reams of oral histories and folklore, and produced hundreds of guides to cities and states across the country. Yet, despite both the Project’s extraordinary volume of writing and its unprecedented support for writers, few critics have examined it from a literary perspective. Instead, the FWP has been almost exclusively in the possession of historians who have rightly perceived its unique place in Depression-era history. This dissertation attempts to fill this critical void by investigating the FWP’s contributions to American writing—African American writing, in particular—in the postwar era and beyond. Drawing on archival documents, critical histories, and the work of select FWP writers, I explore how this relief program helped to pioneer a new documentary form that fused literary techniques with anthropological practices in an effort to showcase the unique voices of marginalized Americans. No longer sociological specimens or symbolic agents for reform, these subjects became empowered “selves,” in part because of the FWP’s efforts to create a grassroots literary methodology that privileged self-expression and the first-person perspective. Scholars have traditionally framed the FWP as a Depression-era initiative whose relevance died alongside the political and social currents that helped produce it. However, I contend that by aiming their documentary lenses so precisely on individuals and their unique voices, FWP writers ultimately eschewed the social realism of 1930s culture in favor of themes surrounding personal identity and the psychological dimensions of social engagement.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One  
The Documentary-Literary Voice of the FWP.................................................. 15

Chapter Two  
Writing Black Selves....................................................................................... 37

Chapter Three  
Ralph Ellison: Capturing the Idiom............................................................... 87

Chapter Four  
Nelson Algren: Naturalism on Its Head......................................................... 123

Conclusion  
Forging a Critical Path.................................................................................... 166

Works Cited......................................................................................................... 179
INTRODUCTION

The contribution of the Program to American literature can only be measured in years to come when future readers and researchers will have the picturization of American life obtained and delivered first hand by the thousands of workers who were given useful employment in an enterprise attempted in the face of the emergencies of appalling proportions. Likewise private industry has been stimulated and aided by the Writers' Program since the publishing industry, with millions invested, has been provided, during the 1930's and '40's, with hundreds of books which otherwise would have remained unwritten. The cooperation of communities, sponsors, and thousands of anonymous workers has produced social benefits as well as a lasting heritage in American literature.

--- Internal Memo, 1942 (FWP, “Objectives”)

From its inception in 1935, the WPA’s Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was expected to influence the course of American literature. Scores of administrative reports and correspondence, like the one excerpted above, as well as press clippings, speeches, and scholarly essays all attest to the widespread speculation that this unprecedented experiment in state intervention in the arts would imprint itself on literary innovations in the years to come. Though the quality of that influence was never specified, the fact of it was rarely doubted; it was readily assumed that the task the Writers’ Project had engineered for itself—to peer into every corner of the country and essentially write America's biography during a time of profound crisis—could only serve to transform American writing. “It is not too much to expect that important literature will result indirectly from the ideas and information which thousands of writers at work for the government are coming into contact with every day,” wrote the FWP’s director Henry Alsberg in an internal letter (qtd. in Hirsch Portrait 32). Similarly, arguing that the Project’s documentary focus would inspire new writing, the critic Lewis Mumford wrote “[T]his apprenticeship, this seeing of the American scene, this listening to the American voice may mean more for literature than any
sudden forcing of stories” (qtd. in Mangione 247). In his 1942 survey of American literature, *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin concluded, somewhat disparagingly, that the Project’s documentary output was “all too often only a sub-literature, perhaps only a preparation for literature.” Though he also conceded it offered “record of what most deeply interested the contemporary imagination” (489).

As much during its own time as now, the very idea of the FWP—a relief program to supply thousands of inexperienced writers with government paychecks in exchange for reports of American life—was audacious, what W.H. Auden termed “one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted by any state” (qtd. in Mangione 51). Under the Project’s protection, writers would be considered equally victimized by the economic conditions as other workers, and, as Mumford energetically proclaimed, would be “for the first time treated as an integral part of American life” (306).

In practice, the Project was no less venturesome. It established a bureaucratic network that spanned 48 states and that trained and managed a workforce with otherwise mostly unserviceable skills in a devastated economy. Unlike the other WPA arts projects collectively named Federal One—the Federal Art, Theater, and Music Projects—which were smaller yet often more publicized, the FWP reached into nearly every pocket of society, employing some six thousand out-of-work professionals and producing hundreds of published guidebooks, collections of folklore, and oral histories during its eight year life. The FWP’s reach was expansive, yet even in the New Deal spirit of social investment, the Project garnered charges of boondoggling and government overreach. Among staunch conservatives, it was worse: a channel for communist propaganda. When Congress began to investigate organizations with suspected communist ties in the mid-1940s, the FWP was put on trial by the House Committee on Un-
American Activities led by Congressman Martin Dies of Texas. But during its brief life, the Writers’ Project also commanded a measure of public respect, not least for its ability to celebrate American culture at a time when so many Americans felt bewildered by their collective sense of misfortune. Called upon to transcribe and report on the real America, federal writers sought countless fresh perspectives and abundant raw material that, beyond fulfilling their assignments, would stimulate new literary interpretations of the nation and help usher in the social change promised by the New Deal.

Such conviction can be appreciated now with the knowledge that the Project hired many of the nation’s soon-to-be most famous writers, including Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, John Cheever, Arna Bontemps, Saul Bellow, Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, Claude McKay, Conrad Aiken, Margaret Walker, Dorothy West, May Swenson, Tillie Olsen, Kenneth Patchen, Richard Yerby… and the list goes on. The list is so extensive that it comes as more of a surprise when a writer from that era did not work for the FWP.

Since the Project officially folded in 1943 when the war effort rechanneled government resources, its influence on American writing has never been disputed. But nor has it really ever been verified. Over the last few decades, a handful of scholars have examined how specific documents that individual writers produced for the FWP are echoed in their later fictional work. Carla Cappetti charts similarities between Nelson Algren’s FWP interview with a prostitute and his novel Never Come Morning, and Rosemary Hathaway explores how Richard Wright’s depiction of Chicago’s south side in Native Son follows many of the details he included in an ethnographic essay he wrote for the Project. But mostly, critics have made claims about the FWP’s significance to American writing without attempting to articulate the quality or scope of its literary achievement. In his recent chronicle of the program, Soul of the People: The WPA
Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America (2009), David Taylor argues that while the Project shares “a link to remarkable contributions to American fiction,” defining or measuring that link is a “tricky matter” (221). Instead, Taylor concentrates his engaging study on the experiences of many FWP writers, weaving together letters, interviews, speeches, and biographies to create a collective portrait of the program's vibrant and unprecedented venture.

Taylor is right; teasing out the Project’s ties to later writing is complicated. The notion of influence is itself slippery; fallacious connections can easily be drawn between the past and the present, between what writers experienced during their tenure with the Project and what they later wrote. Though thousands were employed by the FWP, only a relative few became famous, and those that did wrote under a constellation of influences, their brief stint with the Project often being a very minor one. Of course, the Writers’ Project itself was influenced by a range of cultural and economic factors, by the politics of the Depression and the aesthetics and concerns of both proletarian and modernist writers, by the high-minded promise of democratic pluralism and the ground-level wrangling of a government bureaucracy. Moreover, the extraordinary number and variety of FWP materials were not all guided by the same principles and methodologies; they range widely in quality and depth, and have been subject to varying levels of analysis. To put it simply, the FWP cannot be pinned down or easily summed up any more than the diverse group of writers who participated in it.

But it is curious that the FWP has not been examined in terms of its relationship to literary developments, especially given its leaders’ expressed interest in cultivating new literature, not to mention subsequent critics’ assertions that the FWP had succeeded in doing so. Instead, the subject of the FWP has been almost exclusively the possession of historians and cultural critics who have rightly perceived in its unique place in New Deal history a wealth of
instructive and absorbing material. A number of impressive historical accounts of the program have been written, including Jerre Mangione’s *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (1972), Monty Penkower’s *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (1977), and Jerrold Hirsch’s *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project* (2006).

Much attention has also been directed to the Project’s extraordinary primary source materials—the volumes of oral histories, slave narratives, state guides, ethnographic essays, and folklore collection. These historical documents provide a singular and extensive view of the diversity of experience, culture, and tradition, of American life during the 1930s, and together comprise an immediate and vivid portrait of a nation in flux. One of the largest and well-known undertakings of the FWP is its *American Guide Series*, a set of narrative guidebooks that depict the culture, people, history and points of interest in every state and many cities, towns, and rural areas across the country. Lesser known but equally extensive is the Project’s folklore collection, which includes oral testimonies from Americans of all walks of life—industrial workers, tenant farmers, housewives, and immigrants. In 1939, the FWP published a sample of these personal narratives in *These Are Our Lives*, followed much later by additional personal narratives in *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* (1978). The most significant oral testimonies that the Project collected were those from former slaves, the last living generation of Americans born into slavery. A selection of these interviews were published in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* in 1945. Not until 1972 was the entire collection of former slave narratives published under the title *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, and edited by George Rawick, a historian who had worked for the Project. The FWP’s Social and Ethnic Studies unit also spearheaded research into a range of minority groups and regional cultures, but
did not produce any publications during or after its lifetime—a fact that Mangione laments
“robbed our heritage of what undoubtedly would have been a series of profoundly enlightening
studies conducted at an ideal time—while most of the nation’s twentieth-century immigrants
were still alive—by a nationwide agency with fact-gathering facilities that could not be
duplicated by any private group or foundation” (284).¹

A huge number of FWP manuscripts from either nascent or unfinished endeavors remains
unpublished, tucked away in archives at the Library of Congress or in other holdings around the
country. They include interviews and ethnographic essays, rough sketches of neighborhoods and
regions, collections of children’s games and rhymes, recipes, songs, fables, and tall tales. Over
the past decade, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, where the majority of FWP
archives are held, has been developing an invaluable online resource as part of its “American
Memory” project, which includes searchable life histories compiled and transcribed by the
Folklore Project of the FWP and a total of 2,900 documents representing the work of more than
300 writers from 24 states (www.loc.gov).

¹ Some scholars have over the past couple decades begun to assemble selections for
publication. One of the most intriguing of the unfinished projects is the Social-Ethnic Studies,
designed to compose a portrait of the nation’s ethnic groups from the 18th century to present day.
Like the folklore documents, these archival materials present a sundry mix of oral histories,
living lore, and descriptive data. Two anthologies from this collection have to date been
published: one that showcases selections from the New Jersey Ethnic Survey (Cohen, 1990) and
the other the life histories of Francophone Americans in New England (Doty, 1985).
Few dispute the instrumental role the FWP played in helping to inaugurate the field of oral history. Its work collecting personal testimonies helped to pioneer a new breed of grassroots historiography that would flourish in the late sixties and early seventies, as historians moved away from writing the nation’s history from the perspective of its most powerful figures. Studs Terkel, who worked for the Illinois Writer’s Project collecting oral testimonies and writing radio scripts, essentially became a one-man FWP for several decades after the Depression. His collections *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970) and *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1974) culled material from both the FWP's folklore archives and methods, the “bottom up” history of who Terkel calls “the anonymous many.”

The Project’s role in shaping a new historiography is now well established and its extraordinary range of archival documents continue to offer historians and cultural critics a seemingly endless trail of inquiry. However, the question remains: Why does the FWP still largely elude *literary* analysis? And why is it so difficult to qualify the FWP’s connection to American literature?

The answer may lie both in the equivocal, often conflicting nature of the Project and in the larger literary-historical terms that have come to define the 1930s.

While the FWP was designed above all to provide relief employment to “all needy persons within the writing field,” its secondary objective, as described in archival memoranda, was to “give concrete form and value to the work of these writers” (FWP, “Objectives”). But the ambiguity inherent in this notion of “form and value” has from the beginning created some confusion about the nature and purpose of the writing that emerged from the Project. The FWP claimed that its goal was to allow writers to “produce books of creative value, novels, poetry and
other works in their leisure time” (FWP “Objectives”). It even published an anthology of creative work by federal writers, entitled *American Stuff* (1937) in which appeared Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” as well as poetry by Kenneth Rexroth, Claude McKay, and Sterling Brown. In his foreword, Alsberg wrote that the book countered any public perception that FWP writers “are incapable of producing anything but guides” in which the “creative element is present only incidentally” (v). Even so, the production of the *Guidebook Series* was clearly, at least initially, the Project’s main purpose—in its own words, its “immediate aim.” The form and value of these guides have always been more calculable than the federal writers’ off-time creative work; unlike the latter, the guidebooks and interviews are artifacts directly attributable to the FWP. They were generally viewed as educational, historically and culturally significant, morale-boosting, and economically beneficial. On the other hand, the literary work that the Project potentially encouraged has long seemed too diffuse and difficult to identify. The FWP thus poses a conundrum for literary critics: its tangible body of work is not literary enough and the literary work it may have inspired is not tangible enough.

But though historians have dominated FWP scholarship, whether chronicling the politics and culture of the Project or unearthing and analyzing its abundance of historical data, their interest in what has been called “one of the most massive oral history projects ever undertaken” was surprisingly belated (Hirsch “Before Columbia” 3). Jerrold Hirsch argues that the program failed to attract historians until the 1970s in part because most scholars were troubled by the subjective nature of oral testimonies that could not be corroborated with traditional historical approaches. Forced to contend with the paradox of having writers record significant living history in a manner they deemed methodologically suspect, historians questioned the extent to
which the material could be judged as accurate or useful. As the field of oral history evolved and grew more progressive, Hirsch argues, historians began to value the material for, rather than in spite of, the questions it raises around the social construction of memory. He writes, “How validity is determined is now treated as a more complex question and highly contested issue than it was when validity was linked to an allegedly impartial historian's noble quest for objectivity” (“Before Columbia” 6).

Nevertheless, the methods of the FWP, to be discussed at length in the next chapter, continue to pose a problem for historical analysis because they tended to favor the feel of the material—the quality of the voices and idiosyncrasies of the subjects—over verifiable data. Such a literary approach to writing history is what still beleaguer some historians trying to defend the Project's significance. Yet, the historical nature of the material is also what continues to keep literary critics at bay.

Another likely reason the FWP has attracted so little literary scholarship is because it existed within—and indeed, because of—1930s Depression-era culture, and therefore has generally been folded into the established literary historical framework of that era. In conventional terms, Depression literature is associated with the proletarian genre, with social realism, and with a brief resurgence of literary naturalism, which waned shortly after the war when writers turned their attention to more psychological and metaphysical dimensions of American life. Among the formalist critics of the 1950s, the socially-engaged work of the FWP appeared anachronistic, even an unpleasant reminder of the Depression. Though many of the writers from the FWP went on to become prominent postwar writers—including Ellison, Algren, Bellow, and Cheever—the Project is generally viewed as disconnected from the concerns and aesthetics that dominated the late 1940s and the 1950s, when the previous modernist heroes like
Hemingway and Fitzgerald were seen as rhetorically more companionable to the cultural vocabulary. Many critics today are still more likely to see the work of John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and Jack Conroy—all notable social realists—as more emblematic of the Project's influence than the self-seeking explorations of Ellison or Bellow. The 1930s documentary style, coupled with left-wing populism, continues to prevail in our conception of the FWP and consequently the Project has become hermetically sealed within the boundaries of Depression discourse.

To be fair, critics such as Michael Denning and others have made significant headway in upending the entrenched periodization of 1930s literature and reinterpreting its formal and philosophical elements. In *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th Century*, Denning convincingly demonstrates the continuity between the modernist and the documentary aesthetics in that both produced fragmented, often highly symbolic representations of modernity. The 1930s counterculture, he claims, was in part a direct outcome of the subversive aesthetics of the 1920s that wrestled with the relationship between modern art and the ideologies of mainstream culture. The Depression engendered its own literary experimentation that would have lasting effects on American literature; proletarian writers who gave expression to their marginalized realities were contributing to a new public consciousness. Denning writes,

> Proletarian literature enfranchised a generation of writers of ethnic, working-class origins: it allowed them to represent—to speak for and to depict—their families, their neighborhoods, their aspirations, and their nightmares. Even if most of the novels and screenplays are only half-remembered, their cumulative effect transformed American culture, making their ghetto childhoods, their drifter and hobo, their vernacular prose, their gangsters and prostitutes, even their occasional union organizer, part of the mythology of the United States, part of the national-popular imagination. (229)

But the same credit that Denning claims for the proletarian literary movement could also be given to the Writers' Project, which pioneered new methods that trained and empowered
writers to give voice to both ordinary Americans and societal outsiders. Yet Denning only examines the FWP tangentially, positioning it not as driver but as a diluter of literary innovations. He suggests that while FWP helped many writers gain traction in their careers, it also serve to squelch their radicalism with its alignment to the accommodationist New Deal culture that in effect “carried their proletarian aesthetics into the guidebooks and folklore collections” (227). Writing from the Left, Denning dismisses the FWP for its lack of political engagement—the very opposite reason that the Right dismissed it. Such contradictory responses underscore the tenuous relationship the Project has with the thirties literary-historical category to which it is assigned. Though Denning is correct that the FWP officially maintained its distance from radical politics, even suppressing the political activities of some of its writers, it never abandoned the key element that Denning praises in the proletarian movement: namely, the construction of grassroots history. In this regard, the FWP was pioneering, going well beyond what the earlier proletarian writers had envisioned for giving voice to America's voiceless.

A more implicit factor that may contribute to the FWP's failure to impact literary discourse involves the general discomfort among both literary critics and writers with the relationship between the arts and government, the individual artist and the authority of the state. The massive cultural engineering that the Roosevelt administration performed through Federal One may continue to garner fascination—particularly among art historians who have exhaustively studied the WPA murals—but the idea that it mediated the creativity and vision of artists working outside of their relief duties still seems unconvincing to many. The theoretical distance between art and government remains sacrosanct in American cultural discourse, even to scholars who readily engage how political ideology inscribes itself on art production. As a bureaucratic arm, the FWP is viewed at worst as a propagandist force for the New Deal and at
best as a facilitator for writers and the writing profession, but rarely as an agent in the creative process, the notion of which offends the “bottom-up” paradigm that Denning and others have constructed to make sense of 1930s literary innovation. But, as I will argue here, the FWP was the purveyor of principles and methodologies that were ultimately tied both to the political urgencies of the Roosevelt administration and to the aesthetic and formal changes that the art of story-telling was undergoing in American life. Conceived as a massive collective effort to mitigate economic strain while creating a portrait of a nation in flux, the Project pioneered a documentary form that contributed to the move toward a more personal, more immediate, reflective, and self-disclosing narrative voice that would characterize much postwar American writing.

This study examines the FWP’s documentary mode and how federal writers incorporated the Project’s formal and philosophical methods into their creative writing. In discerning significant and often unexpected connections between the FWP and later works of fiction, I challenge the received wisdom that has characterized thirties documentary as politically charged and social realist, and therefore largely antithetical to the concerns around identity, subjectivity, and psychology that prospered in postwar literature. Conversely, I examine how select writers incorporated the FWP’s material and historical, anthropological, and aesthetic lens into their work, thereby revealing continuity between two allegedly opposing periods of American writing.

Applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony—or “many voices”—to the literary developments that the FWP hoped to foster, Chapter One explores the Project’s documentary methods and aims, especially as they were articulated by Benjamin Botkin, the FWP’s national folklore editor. In Bakhtinian terms, Botkin was committed to showing how a wide variety of individual voices can tell the story of America and thus help re-conceptualize a pluralist,
dynamic, and democratic national identity. I then offer a summary argument for how the FWP’s documentary lens helped to inspire the move toward what Malcolm Cowley labeled *personalism* in postwar writing. Chapter Two focuses on how the FWP’s documentary mode found its most powerful expression in a new body of African American writing. I explore three areas: first, the FWP’s efforts to re-write African American history through its collection of folklore, former slave narratives, and “studies” of black culture. Negro Affairs editor Sterling Brown, a noted poet, shaped this work with a literary vision and approach. Second, I examine how the dominance of Zora Neale Hurston’s anthropological and Richard Wright’s proletarian focuses in popular conceptions of the FWP have helped restrict and distort the Project’s legacy in black writing. Here I also look at recent efforts among critics to rethink the social realist and “protest” category that much black literature has been assigned to. Finally, I survey how the FWP’s methods converge in the fictional writing of two notable black writers who worked for the Project, Dorothy West and Margaret Walker. In recent years, both West’s *The Living Is Easy* (1948) and Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) have been claimed by feminist scholars as groundbreaking efforts to explore black women’s identity. But these texts also merit a rereading within the context of the Writers’ Project, whose methods and material I argue helped shape them. By focusing on West and Walker, I do not mean to suggest that they epitomize the influence of the FWP, but rather that they offer two engaging and divergent examples of how the Project continued to express itself in a new body of fiction that grappled with African American identity—examples that can help open a critical space in which to examine other black writers whose work complicates the established literary-historical boundaries of black fiction.

Building on this discussion, I devote Chapter Three to Ralph Ellison, whose extensive work collecting *Negro Lore* for the New York chapter of the FWP and his subsequent ascendancy
as a major postwar writer whom most critics have long pitted against his social realist peers from the thirties prime him as a model for studying the sometimes surprising connections between the Writers’ Project and the new postwar literary sensibility. I examine how Ellison integrated both the form and material of the personal narratives and children’s rhymes he collected into his short stories and his seminal novel, *Invisible Man*. Similarly, Chapter Four considers the work of Nelson Algren, whose unique blend of naturalism and existentialism by itself upends the traditional literary-historical periodization that pits the Depression and postwar eras against each other. Algren’s fusion of the two expressive modes in his fiction, I argue, is borne out of his engagement with the FWP’s own hybrid documentary approach.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I explore how the FWP offers a valuable lens not only for rethinking literary-historical categories, but also for rereading writers who have been critically exhausted—like Saul Bellow, whose focus on the first-person voice echoes the FWP’s approach—and unearthing previously neglected writers—like Frank Yerby, whose historical romances reflect the Project’s preoccupation with writing “bottom-up” history. I also propose areas for further inquiry, including examining the literary cultures engendered by regional offices and exploring the FWP’s imprint on specific genres, such as poetry, historical fiction, and creative non-fiction. The bulk of this study is limited to fictional writers who worked for the New York and Chicago offices of the FWP. It offers a foundational perspective from which to invite further re-readings of a wide range of post-Depression work through its correlations with the FWP.
CHAPTER ONE

The Documentary-Literary Voice of the FWP

Mikhail Bakhtin, the celebrated Russian literary critic and philosopher, describes the potential for modern literature to act as a site of social meaning, a field on which disparate voices can be synchronously aired. What he believed to be exemplified in the deeply psychological novels of Fydor Dostoevsky, Bakhtin’s notion of “polyphony” offers the potential for literary expression to uncover a plurality of consciousness—and thus a “polyphonic truth”—where no one powerful voice is constructing reality, but rather where reality is conceived through an array of experiences and subjectivities. Bakhtin contends that the author of fiction must essentially recede and allow the voices of the characters to speak for themselves, and in doing so, he can create a “dialogical” text in which speakers freely engage with and respond to one another. He writes, “Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness” (Speech Genres 89). In the literature that Bakhtin valued, the reader is invited to become part of the ongoing and communal dialogue that the text presents. This dialogical principle contrasts with what Bakhtin perceived as the monological treatment of traditional texts where the author constructs an objective reality through one dominant voice.

Bakhtinian analysis, which highlights the role of literature as actively engaging the social and historical forces that produce it, offers a foundation from which to appreciate both the documentary form and the literary aspirations of the Federal Writers’ Project. In Bakhtinian terms, the textual landscape collectively drawn by the federal writers in the 1930s was intentionally polyphonic. Everywhere in the Project’s American Guidebook Series, its compilations of oral testimonies, and its myriad collections of folklore, we hear a polyphony of
American voices that together emanate their own truths and express a collective reality. The FWP set out to produce literature directly from speech; spoken language became the raw material out of which this new documentary form was constructed. The thousands of informants who represented subcultures and regions across America were engaged in a conversation, both with the federal writers and with the larger social worlds to which they were responding. In transcribing these voices, the writers became not simply filters but the voices themselves. Similar to Bakhtin, the Project’s folklore editor Benjamin Botkin, argued that the writer must be on the inside “so that when he writes about them he becomes not merely an interpreter but a voice—their voice, which is now his own” (“The Folk and the Individual” 132). Orality, or the act of articulation, was the centerpiece of the Project’s efforts to negotiate a new cultural identity. Each assignment and each interview was intended to be construed not as an isolated component—not as a final word—but on a field with and in relation to every other personal narrative, guidebook entry, and selection of living lore. Thus, in its publications and social-ethnic studies, Yiddish folk songs share space with stories of tenant farmers and the tall tales factory workers, children’s rhymes mingle with former slave testimony. The FWP’s body of literature—putting aside for the moment the literature it helped to inspire—was itself what Bakhtin referred to as a carnival, an arena of “free and familiar contact,” where assumptions are overturned and unusual alliances are formed, where oddities are celebrated and traditional hierarchies are transposed by a general equality of value, each voice assuming no higher claim of authority than the next (Rabelais 10). The democracy that the carnival represents is embodied in the FWP’s documentary form, which as William Stott points out, is essentially democratic in its refusal to privilege any fact or source, all of which equally hold the potential for new discovery (117). Like Mark Twain, whose concerted enlistment of various dialects and registers has invited Bakhtinian analysis, the FWP
traced a direct line between speech and literature, suggesting the essential sameness between these expressive forms. The FWP’s advancement of “history from the bottom up” (Rodgers and Hirsch 9) therefore conformed not only to the vision that animated the Popular Front of a democratic society united by its diversity, but also to Bakhtin’s view that literature is a channel for oral culture and social dialogue and as such, is potentially the most important expression of modern democracy.

If the FWP’s documentary form bore the imprint of a philosophical repositioning of literature in social life, it was also marked by the immediate politics and personalities of the Roosevelt administration. In Documentary Expression and Thirties America, William Stott argues that politics and social policy during the Depression were shaped in part by President Roosevelt’s impulse to personalize the economic crisis through anecdotal evidence of its effects—the story of a single hungry family, for example. Stott maintains that for Roosevelt, personal experiences could illuminate the nation's crisis more than any theories or statistics; his famous “fireside chats” and his speeches are peppered with testimonies from ordinary Americans support Stott's assessment that in Roosevelt's worldview “people appear to have counted more than ideas” (97). The intellectual Left of the early 1930s, for which Marxist determinism explained the current state of affairs, naturally chafed against the president’s reliance on personal stories rather than ideology. “To most intellectuals of the thirties, everything personal was suspect” (99), Stott writes. “Roosevelt moved cheerfully against this current of the time” (100).

In many ways, the FWP’s documentary form was another reification of Roosevelt's desire to comprehend American society through its individual voices. In an attempt to re-conceptualize a pluralist collective identity, the Project stridently avoided a scientific or scholarly appraisal of American life, opting instead for literary renderings and first-person accounts of individual
experiences. These slices of life and selections of regional folklore would not only offer Americans a record of its culture, but would also ideally help foster mutual appreciation and thus expand previously narrow concepts of who qualified as American. Whether naïve or visionary, the architects of the FWP believed that exposure to Americans from typically marginalized backgrounds would help to correct widely-held misconceptions about them and integrate them into mainstream culture. The Project therefore aired as never before the perspectives of communities of blacks, of immigrants and of the poor. Personalizing their larger social realities by showcasing their individual voices became a critical element to the FWP’s documentary form.

In its aesthetic and formal strategies, this documentary form would both draw on and deviate from the social realism and political dogmatism that tends to be most associated with 1930s documentary—the efforts among artists and social scientists on the Left to expose and critique the social structures that maintain the conditions of the lower classes. While the FWP echoed leftist concerns in its attempt to showcase the plight of ordinary Americans, it did so, at least theoretically, not by enforcing their representation, but by insisting instead that these Americans speak for themselves and, in effect, write their own histories.

The methodological foundation for this approach was never particularly firm, but its precariousness was ultimately a critical factor for what made it both unique and influential. The fact alone that writers were charged with conducting fieldwork that was more commonly performed by trained social scientists suggests that the outcome would be experimental and original. Jerre Mangione describes the strategy this way:

The knack of asking the right questions at the right time, of intuitively providing leads that would encourage the informant to talk freely, more than compensated for the Project writers’ lack of folklore training. As a result of the wide leeway they were given, fresh techniques were developed which were highly effective. (272)
According to Mangione, writers who had the most difficulty with their assignments were news reporters who “lacked the sense of historical perspective” (149). Novelists and poets, he maintains, were the most successful: “Their ability to recognize significant and arresting information and present it in logical sequence, together with their sensitivity for language, stood them in good stead as did their sense of rapport with the American past” (149).

The FWP is today most known for the sweeping *American Guide Series*, its signature and most ambitious project aimed at chronicling each American state, its cities, roadways, history, and lived reality. All told, the Project produced some 378 guides that range widely in quality and scope, and whose merits spring from both the varying levels of editorial direction and the relative strength of their individual writers. The ultimate goal of *The Series* was also variable. Theoretically, the guidebooks boasted an obvious economic benefit in that they could help spur domestic tourism (though it became apparent that road travel during the Depression was generally not for pleasure). Katharine Kellock, the national tours director for the Project, insisted that each state guide include driving tours that offered practical information alongside the descriptive narratives. And because these guides were published by private publishing houses, they ostensibly helped support the private sector, and thus escaped the standard accusation that the New Deal stole business away from American companies (Bold).

But more generally the guides were designed to create a sense of shared national identity, to educate the public and generate interest in the nation's extraordinary cultural and topographic diversity. Each guidebook covered, among other categories, the history, people, commerce, and art of a region, and each featured tours that followed the major highways and descriptions of the state’s major cities and towns with practical visitors’ information alongside colorful anecdotes and historical tales. Writers were assigned to address specific areas, and once drafts were
compiled, state directors would send the work to the central office where it would undergo extensive editing. From the perspective of Washington, the guides could serve to mobilize support for the New Deal’s vision of unity and cultural progress. “Never before did a nation seem so hungry for news of itself,” Alfred Kazin remarked about Depression culture, and indeed the guidebooks offered what he called “a literature of collective self-consciousness” (486).

Yet, the Project’s broad reach and many-tentacle bureaucracy also meant that the unique political and cultural realities of each state would impact the substance of its guidebooks. Though they reportedly assembled only facts, the guides were unquestionably interpretive in both their ordering of these facts and the priority they gave to certain social groups over others. Some southern guides, for example, express an exclusively white perspective, relegating the state's sizable black culture to brief, often condescending descriptive passages. On the other hand, many of the northern guides lack any mention of the states’ religious groups or even a mention of religious practice. In her terrific book The WPA Guides: Mapping America (1999), Christine Bold charts these divergences and the different ways that racism and ideological biases interpolated the Project’s larger efforts to broker a national identity—a critical aspect of the FWP that is nevertheless outside the purview of this current study.

The published guides were widely available and their appeal and usefulness as guidebooks were self-evident to most Americans. Yet according to many critics, they suffered from their lack of apparent structure and the manner in which they oscillated between providing practical tourist information and offering long meditations on the cultural history of a region. The historian Daniel Fox, for example, expressed his discomfort with the FWP’s “implication that the tour technique is an adequate presentation of history,” noting that federal writers tended to have “more success penetrating contemporary life than writing about the historical past” (5). This
discordance owed itself in part to internal Project disputes over what the guides should emphasize; the historian Bernard DeVoto complained that “Washington never quite made up its mind what kind of books it wanted” (qtd. in Mangione 356). But it also sprang from a certain eclecticism that underlay the Project’s design. As a wholly unprecedented venture into creative engineering, the FWP cobbled together an assortment of styles and inspirations, a sometimes jarring mix of hard history and chatty prose, and the result often begged the question of exactly who these guides were meant for. Editorial standards varied widely from state to state and many writers were allowed considerable freedom for both choosing and collecting their material. Despite the top-down structure of the guidebooks’ production—and the racial line that was drawn sharply through the information in many of the guides—their substance largely reflected a democratic vision of inclusion, allowing for a wide range of peculiar, even off-beat content that fell outside traditional historical writing.

The amorphousness of the FWP’s documentary form also arose by virtue of the writers’ own varied interests and close proximity to their subjects. The collection of material was accomplished in a social manner through an open process of conversation and daily interaction. Instead of being holed up in offices or libraries, the writers were dispatched as fieldworkers to freely mingle with local informants (many of whom they likely already knew), and feel empowered as temporary historians charged with documenting the familiar textures of their home states.

The consequences of this approach were immediately discernible. Writing about the Guide Series in the New Republic in 1939, Robert Cantwell proclaimed: “The America that is beginning to emerge from the books of the Writers’ Project is a land to be taken seriously:
nothing quite like it has ever appeared in our literature.” It was an America, he argues, devoid of the mythologized and triumphant figures of traditional American history. He writes,

[These guides] have no such rigorous standard to determine inclusion: people are mentioned whether they succeeded or failed, whether their inventions worked or not, whether they won or lost their duels, made money inside or outside the law: the only test seems to be that some living evidence of their presence, if only a legend or the name of a street, still persists in their own towns. (324)

Countering triumphalism, self-advertisement, and boastful nationalism, the guidebooks painted what Cantwell called “a slightly alarming picture” of the nation, though he emphatically praised what he saw as a pioneering attempt to capture the truth and grit of American life: “It is a grand, melancholy, formless, democratic anthology of frustration and idiosyncrasy, a majestic roll call of national failure, a terrible and yet engaging corrective to the success stories that dominate our literature” (325).

The same could be said of the FWP’s folklore collection, a vast miscellanea of oral histories, stories, and folk ephemera that the Project collected between 1936 and 1939. Apart from the former-slave narratives, whose historical significance was manifest, these documents, deemed living lore and managed by the Project’s folklore unit, fulfilled no defined objective other than the Project’s rather vague intent to study America “from the human angle,” as Alsberg explained (qtd. in Mangione 277). Headed first by distinguished folklorist and musicologist John Lomax who was followed by folklorist and poet Benjamin Botkin in 1938, the Project’s folklore unit dispatched writers to collect first-hand accounts of daily life and folklore, such as songs and recipes, from Americans across the cultural spectrum, including tenant farmers, industrial workers, housewives, and members of various regional and ethnic groups. Though Lomax initiated many of the unit’s major assignments, including the collection of former slave narratives, it was Botkin who published portions of its findings and who expressed a “broader
and even more contemporary” view of folklore that emphasized shared bonds between living cultures (Mangione 269). A poet who taught English at the University of Oklahoma and who had edited four volumes of regional folklore entitled *Folk-Say*, Botkin brought to the field of folklore a literary sensibility and perhaps the most articulated vision how the FWP’s folklore work could help create a new breed of American literature. Alongside the Project’s Negro Affairs editor Sterling Brown, also a celebrated poet, and Social-Ethnic Studies editor Morton Royse, Botkin shunned the traditional view of folklore studies as a means to preserving the past, and embraced a broader, dynamic view of the field as a study in contemporary life. He writes:

> The folk movement must come from the below upward rather than of above downward. Otherwise it may be dismissed as a patronizing gesture, a nostalgic wish, an elegiac complaint, a sporadic and abortive revival – on the part of paternalistic aristocrats going slumming, dilettantish provincials going native, defeated sectionalists going back to the soil, and anybody and everybody who cares to go collecting. (qtd. in Mangione 270)

*Living lore*, Botkin maintained, captures the practices and beliefs of ordinary Americans from different, regions, cultural and economic backgrounds, and examining these patterns of life could provide insight into how Americans absorb and respond to modernity. He set out to document the diversity and cacophony of an increasingly urban society in which he saw the material of a new, more fluid national identity. According to Botkin, folklore does not comprise relics of a rural and pre-modern American identity, but rather is itself “a study in acculturation—the process by which the folk group adapts itself to its environment and to change, assimilating new experience and generating fresh forms” (qtd. in Hirsch “Folklore in the Making”). Jerrold Hirsch explains that Botkin developed “a pluralistic view of American culture in which race, ethnic identification, and nationality were no longer interchangeable terms; it was a view that rejected the genteel identification of the national character with Anglo-Saxon Americanism”
Mangione, too, maintains that Botkin helped to rescue “folklore from the academically embalmed atmosphere in which it had long been contained and bringing it to a large audience that was hungry for the kind of Americana which reflected the nation's varied personality” (277).

Central to Botkin’s philosophy was the belief that the creative writer should be in charge of collecting folklore—not simply because there were not enough folklorists available to undertake the FWP’s mission, but because the writer was better equipped to tell the stories that folklore naturally contain. Writers tend to pay attention to the folk side of folklore, which Botkin argued had been neglected by traditionalists, and in doing so they could humanize the lore, making it more relevant, engaging, and even transformative for the general public who, he believed, could learn from different folk cultures within a broader cultural mosaic. Indeed, the job of assembling individuals’ stories and cultural practices was by its very nature literary, offering writers useable material and select vantage points of American life. As Mangione writes, “More than any other official Project undertaking, the search for lore gave the writers engaged in it a sense of literary creativity and the satisfaction of being directly involved with the current scene” (273).

Internal guidelines for how folklore material was to be collected varied widely from state to state and depended a great deal on the personalities and priorities of regional directors. In Chicago, for example, director John T. Frederick allowed his writers collecting folklore to seek out their own subjects. Jack Conroy, who had already gained a reputation as a proletarian novelist, helped launch the industrial lore unit for which he gathered experiences and “tall tales” from factory workers in Chicago’s rust belt. Another writer, Sam Ross, spent his fieldwork hours in jazz clubs collecting material which he would later use in his novel *Windy City*, and Nelson
Algren conducted the lion's share of his interviews in local Chicago bars. Working for the Writers’ Project in Florida, Zora Neale Hurston was given considerable leeway as a trained anthropologist to continue her work collecting Negro folklore. Joining the Project in 1938, she had already published *Mules and Men* (1935), an anthology of Florida folklore from her hometown region of Eatonville. In New York, writers such as Ralph Ellison and Dorothy West were dispatched to Harlem and other black communities to write freely on the residents and Negro culture they encountered. Their efforts will be discussed at length in the following chapters.

Written instructions to writers collecting folklore and personal testimonies tended to emphasize the importance of being “natural” in order to avoid a stiff or formal interview. Writers were advised to “avoid skipping about from point to point. In drawing the informant out, also guide him skilfully [sic] along so that in progressing you exhaust each topic before leaving it…Rather than ask directly for certain types of folklore material, let the collection grow out of the interview, naturally and spontaneously” (FWP, “Manual”). Even for the ex-slave narratives, whose historical purpose was more self-evident than much of the folklore, the guidelines were open-ended. Though fieldworkers were provided a list of specific questions to pose, they were also advised against asking all of them: “If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions,” the instructions reads (FWP, “Memo”).

Moreover, in transcribing the interviews, writers were generally encouraged to minimize the insertion of their own voices in the text, thereby ensuring the free flow of the subjects’ first-person accounts. Instructions to fieldworkers maintain:

[The writer] should keep his own opinions and feelings in the background as much as possible. For instance, if he sees people living under condition which he thinks are terrible, he should be most careful not to express his opinion in any way and thus possibly affect the opinion of the person to whom he is talking. He must
try to discover the real feeling of the person consulted and must record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it. Any story in which this principle is violated will be worthless. (FWP, “Memo”)

Although these instructions also note that it is “immaterial whether the stories are written in the first, second, or third person,” most interviews were written as first-person monologues that eliminate the narrative framework or the questions of the interviewers. In his introduction to the slave narratives in *Lay My Burden Down*, Botkin cautions that the few that are written in the third person “seem completely lacking not only in flavor but also in reliability” (xi).

In a literary sense, the emphasis on producing a stream of consciousness narrative had great appeal to writers who enjoyed focusing less on filling out questionnaire forms and more on capturing the style of speech and the individuality of the characters they interviewed. The vast majority of the writers did not have the benefit of working with recording devices. Instead, most had to rely on his or her ability to transcribe or recall the information that the subjects provided. In some offices, writers were even discouraged from taking notes during their interviews and asked instead to record their conversations entirely from memory. But even while the Project allowed writers the freedom to interpret the spontaneous, self-generated world around them, it also paradoxically demanded that they be *accurate* in their transcriptions. The guidelines for collecting oral histories states: “Take down everything you hear, just as you hear it, without adding, taking away, or altering a word or syllable. Your business is to record, not to correct or improve” (FWP, “Manual”). Clearly, this would be nearly impossible to achieve without a recording device or even a notebook.

The notion of accuracy was an issue that was forever raised, but never resolved with the literary aims of the Project. One set of instructions frankly proposes that writers simultaneously ensure their work is accurate and literary: “The criteria to be observed are those of accuracy,
human interest, social importance, literary excellence. It may not be possible to combine all these in any one story. However, accuracy and literary excellence should be present in all” (FWP, *These Are Our Lives* 418). What is meant by *accuracy*, the document explains, is “what you smell, see, hear.”

> Writers cannot check on the accuracy of what is said. Get in the subject's own words what he has done, felt, and thought. If the subject's head is filled with wrong notions, foolish thoughts, and misinformation, if this kind of material comes out in conversation, record it. Let the subject's mind speak for itself. (418)

Such equivocal guidance seems to expose the fault line in the Project's mission: between presenting a factual history of the nation and producing writing that is subjective, immersing and literary. Yet, this tension was itself an important feature in the documentary form. With their rich display of folk speech and vernacular, their rambling monologues, and their extemporaneous social critiques, the interviews and narratives quite effortlessly straddle the lines between history, sociology, and fiction. Accuracy was implicitly more about feeling than fact, more about interpreting the essence of the individual and his or her perspective than about ensuring a verbatim account. This was *subjective realism*—a veritable Bakhtinian carnival—in which a largely unverifiable collection of memories and convictions, biases and assumptions of both the subjects and the writers were laid out unapologetically, as if the value of one view, regardless of its source, was no better or truer than another.

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So, how did such a textual universe created by the FWP, with its multitude of subjective voices and its quasi-literary documentary methods, find expression in the fictional work that would be produced in the Project’s wake? Or put slightly differently, where in the expansive
body of postwar literature might we find traces of this governmental program devoted to documenting America?

Despite the Project’s evident literary aspirations and the impressive number of soon-to-be major American writers that it trained, the FWP’s influence on literature is difficult to establish for all the reasons discussed in the Introduction: the fact that the Project’s oral histories and guidebooks have almost exclusively invited historical rather than literary analysis; the entrenched periodization of thirties writing as social realist, which has tended to negate the Project’s relationship to post-war fiction; and the uneasy alliance the Project forged between government and creativity, which has weakened its standing as a contributor to authentic literary invention.

But no one can deny the fact that the Project directly influenced the handful of novels that were written about the FWP. Two of them—Norman MacLeod’s You Get What You Ask For (1939) and Jack Balch’s Lamps at High Noon (1941)—both present bitter fictionalized accounts of thorny politics and backstabbing in FWP offices, and both largely portray the administration of the Project as abusive and underhanded. But it is telling that MacLeod and Balch wrote these novels before the Project was shut down and while the intensity of their experience working for it, not to mention their resentment, was still fresh. Within a decade, of course, the war had turned the nation’s attention so decisively that rehashing the internal workings of a 1930s government program would have been nearly unthinkable.

In practical terms, most critics agree that among its important literary legacies is that it helped support and empower a number of writers, particularly so-called ethnic and working class writers, who would later become major voices in postwar American literature. In his essay “Going to the Territory,” Ellison wrote: “I could not have become a writer at the time I began had
I not been able to earn my board and keep by doing research for the New York Project” (668). Indeed, the FWP can be reasonably be credited with giving writers like Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Saul Bellow, and Nelson Algren—not to mention legions of unknown writers—an opportunity to develop their craft during a period of such economic insecurity. And as discussed earlier, these writers also recycled in their fiction some of the material they gleaned from their work on the FWP. In addition to providing writers with income, the Project gave them access to individuals and contexts that they could make much creative use of in their writing.

But this study makes the case that while both the FWP’s support for marginalized writers and its wealth of quotable material are significant, the Project’s influence went beyond these factors in its commitment to showcasing the nation’s diversity through individual perspectives.

The FWP's quest for national self-discovery—to seek out and define the nation's pluralist identity by charting a vast array of experiences and histories—anticipated, I argue, the new breed of self-conscious literature that came to dominate the postwar period. By offering writers anthropological tools and a close-up lens through which to view unique pockets of American life, the Project would focus writers’ attention on both cultural and personal identity and the intersection of these two strands of who we are. In the prosperous economy and Cold War climate of 1950s and 60s, the FWP’s obsession with trying to explain America to itself would bloom into something discernibly different. The collectivist discourse of the 1930s fell away, and along with it a sense of optimism and progress engendered by the New Deal; yet, the drive among writers to probe the character and quality of Americans did not wane under these new conditions. Postwar writers who had worked for the Project, like Ellison, Algren, Bellow, Walker, and Wright, persisted to hammer away at the question: What does it mean to be American? They and many others, continued to explore the lives of victims and outsiders and the
struggles of so-called ethnic Americans whose claims for recognition became yet more insistent with the ascendancy of white middle-class values in the 1950s.

In *Leopards in the Temple*, critic Morris Dickstein describes the literary shift from the thirties to the fifties as a move “away from social problems toward metaphysical concerns about identity, morality, and man’s place in the larger scheme of the universe” (63). After the war, the vantage point of writers pivoted, Dickstein argues, from Marx to Freud—from the steely reality of the Depression to the personalized, impalpable experience of trying to know one's self. Realism, the prevailing mode in twentieth century American writing, did not die with thirties, but emerged as a new approach that largely spurned the naturalism to which realism had so long been linked—the attempts among writers from Dreiser to Dos Passos to Wright to represent the intractable societal forces that squelch human agency. In their sweeping portraits of American experience, these social realists wrestled with the political and economic currents that consumed individual lives. But as the realities of these conditions changed after the war, their work became a target of antipathy. As Dickstein writes, “Their naturalist methods, which required an immense piling up of realistic details, and a minute verisimilitude, seemed unable to encompass the complexities and absurdities, to say nothing of the social changed of the postwar world” (25). Sounding the same note, critic Thomas Hill Schaub describes the critique of naturalist aesthetics this way: “In its materialism, its assumption of determinate behavior, and its documentary methods literary naturalism relied too much for its truths upon surface detail and failed to provide an adequate portrait of the inner life” (43).

By contrast, the postwar writers were preoccupied with the inner life. They had a vastly different culture from thirties writers to contend with, one in which the pressure to conform and succeed was more urgent than any need for collective engagement, in which the moral
abomination of fascism and war cast profound doubt over the faith in modern progress and raised
questions about human nature, while dizzying economic and technological changes proved the
triumph of capitalism and effectively stunned its opposition. Political action was put aside; the
thriving economy coupled with the moral fatigue from the monumental crises of Depression and
war prompted Americans to retreat into their private lives in search of inspiration and fulfillment.
In response to this new cultural reality came a new kind of literature: writing that was more
insular, exploring the individual's internal drive to find meaning replaced the proletarian genre
where class struggle defined life’s experiences. Postwar writers therefore sought a new realism
that turned away from political concerns and incorporated—indeed, privileged—the
psychological reality of life, so that the external fabric of society became filtered through the
individual’s mind.

But, as Dickstein points out, if subjectivity was the favored perspective of postwar
writers, then anxiety was its emotional correlate. Chafing against the enforced “normalcy” of
postwar prosperity, many writers explored the estrangement and disorientation sensed by
Americans suddenly caught in supposed domestic and consumer bliss, but left without of the
collective purpose they were offered, for better or worse, by Depression and war. Writers’
existential angst and dark reflections found expression in characters like Port and Kit Moresby,
the sophisticated, gloomy American couple in Paul Bowles' The Sheltering Sky (1949) whose
venture into the Moroccan desert turns into a quest for self-annihilation. Or in Frank and April
Wheeler in Richard Yates’ Revolutionary Road (1961) who try desperately to repress their
hysterical groping for meaning in the prim Connecticut suburbs. Or in the comic of horror of
Flannery O'Connor's cast of lunatics, like the Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953)
whose rejection of any moral order inspires his roadside execution of an entire family. None of
these characters and their metaphysical crises would have likely resonated the same way in the thirties, and nor would the thematic thrusts of their creators seem at home during a period of economic deprivation when the dynamics of the unconscious were so beside the point.

Yet, this emergent brooding self has antecedents in the subjects of the FWP, the vast collection of ordinary Americans, social misfits, and cultural outsiders whose individual voices federal writers creatively transcribed. Much of the writing of the late 1940s and the 50s that developed into a perceptible body of self-conscious literature shares the FWP’s interest in personal identity and self-expression, which writers carried over and deepened in a new cultural climate—especially the ethnic and working-class writers who came of age under the tutelage of the Project. These authors did not abandon the outside world; rather they interpreted the social conditions through the lens of the self and the first-person voice, much like the FWP’s methods that were geared toward translating society’s influences and meanings through subjective experience and personal struggle. They fight society not by means of political protest but, in Lawrence Lipton’s terms, by “disaffiliating” with society, and turning “their back on the status quo in utter rejection” (“New Nonconformism” 388). Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) and Bellow’s Dangling Man (1944) and The Adventures of Augie March (1953) all unfold through the internal musings of their narrators who struggle to define themselves within and against the oppressive prescriptions of American society. Though Algren’s fiction, with its almost claustrophobic fixation on the urban under-classes, tends to be viewed as spillover from the 1930s, much of it is animated by the inward gloom of his off-beat characters who try to better themselves under the disapproving glare of middle-class American culture.

In its thousands of oral histories and personal narratives from victims of economic alienation, the Project anticipated the widespread use of the first person narrative point of view
that came to characterize the new psychic alienation of postwar fiction. Schaub argues that the embrace of the personal perspective among so many midcentury writers sprung from a need to tell stories “which both reflected [the characters’] rupture with society and established at the same time a legitimate source of authority for describing a redefined ‘reality’” (68). He continues, “For a surprising number of writers, this strategy amounted to the invention of first person voices, often autobiographical, a point of view which embodied in one degree or another the isolation of the speaker, while at the same time issuing from the unimpeachable authority of his consciousness and perception” (68). Schaub credits the move to the first person to “simply an effect of the shift from economy to mind so visible throughout the intellectual community of the time” (68-69).

Yet, long before what Schaub calls the “swing toward the authority of subjective experience” (83) was appreciable, the FWP promoted the first-person voice—not only as an aesthetic device to record interviews, but as a more immediate and powerful way than the third-person narrative to portray individuals’ efforts to construct and interpret their own lives. The colloquial voices of ordinary Americans were central to the FWP’s documentary form, which sought to highlight the orality and idioms of American expression—not just the things people say, but the way they say them. In the vein of Mark Twain, FWP writers experimented with vernacular prose and with capturing the cadence of the individual’s voice. Their transcriptions and portraits of those they interviewed were often funny and folksy, unstructured and spontaneous monologues from people lost in their own streams of consciousness, pondering the facts of their lives and their impressions as if they had never before been asked for this information, and likely many of them had not been. Writers like Ellison credited the Project for having helped to train them in reproducing in writing the sound and feel of a real voice. Postwar
writers seemed to newly embrace the intimate conversational voice, the regional colloquialisms, and the spontaneous, haphazard riffing of real first-person speech. Schaub describes the looser, meandering speakers in postwar fiction: “The authority of the postwar voices resides less in what they have to say than in the breezy candor and comical self-demolition of their point of view” (79).

Malcolm Cowley names Algren, Ellison, and Bellow as three postwar writers who fall into what he called a “new school of fiction.”

I have thought of calling them personalists...Each of these novelists seems to believe that the author himself should be a personality instead of a recording instrument, and therefore he keeps trying to find a personal approach and a personal manner of writing (16).

Of course, Cowley does not connect these writers’ so-called personalism to their work for the FWP. But his assertion that each of their novels “starts with social conditions and ends as a defense of the separate personality” (16) aligns very closely with the FWP’s method of using the larger Depression-era as the landscape on which writers painted portraits of individual selves.

We see similar studies in self-definition elsewhere among former FWP writers. Anzia Yezierska's semi-fictional protagonist in Red Ribbon on a White Horse (1950) wages an internal battle over her dual identity as struggling immigrant and American writer and Chester Himes’ Bob Jones in If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) is tormented by his deep anger toward and his simultaneous desire to be accepted by his hostile white surroundings. Himes’ novel has been widely associated with the proletarian genre, but it too moves away from the social construct of protest fiction with its highly personal and self-aware account of the psychological effects of racism. Though not written in the first person, Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966) is nevertheless a very subjective account of a slave written in the plainspoken voice of its protagonist, based largely on the author’s grandmother. Echoing the FWP’s efforts to bring firsthand accounts of
slaves to the public’s attention, Walker was less interested in showcasing the political and social framework of slavery than she was in depicting the folk history of slavery and how it feels to be a slave. All of these novels are marked by their protagonists’ inner voices and ability to self-consciously analyze their social conditions in pursuit of an authentic self. These post-Depression writers seem to have imbibed the documentary form that channeled social criticism through the eyes of the outsider. Their narrators are immersed not in fighting the larger societal structures of oppression but in their own internal longing for self-definition.

Jerre Mangione is one of the few to recognize how the FWP actually helped turn writers away from the proletarian model of writing popular during the Depression. He writes,

[T]he Project members, without realizing it, provided a powerful antithesis to the widespread obsession with proletarian writing that dominated the literary atmosphere of the thirties—the obsession which produced an outpouring of didactic writing that told and retold what was wrong with the country and what Marxist-Leninist solutions could save it from the evils of capitalism. The Project writers, during this same period, simply told their countrymen what their country was like. (373)

But while reportage was among the key features of the Project’s documentary approach, the federal writers did more than present the nation simply as it was. In their search for folklore, autobiography, history and ethnography, they helped develop a narrative mode that captured reality through the unique voices of personal experience. More humanist than Marxist, this approach to producing social documentary from the inside—or what I term here subjective realism—emphasized the realities of ordinary and outcast Americans and their expressions of humanity. The nation’s identity therefore became compressed into the individual, and larger questions about national identity began to emanate from the essential question: “Who am I?” This new ethos of contending with history and social injustice through the inner voice would, as
we will see, migrate easily over to story-telling in the postwar era where the identity claims of cultural outsiders were among the main ingredients of literary narrative.
CHAPTER TWO

Writing Black Selves

[I]f the Negro is ever to be a factor in the world's history—if among the gaily-colored banners that deck the broad ramparts of civilization is to hang one uncompromising black, then it must be placed there by black hands, fashioned by black heads and hallowed by the travails of two hundred million black hearts beating in one glad song of jubilee.

-- W.E.B. Du Bois (“Conservation of Races”)

Perhaps the most important and enduring expression of the FWP’s efforts to rewrite American history and redefine the nation’s identity was in its attention to the realities of African Americans. As both a challenge to the pervasive racism that had guided the vast majority of writing about black history up to that period and as a means to uncover the sociological “truth” about black experience, the FWP embarked on what would become the largest collective effort ever undertaken to compile the history and the reality of “the Negro” in America. Through its American Guidebook Series, its cultural studies, its ethnographic essays, its folklore collection, and most famously, through the thousands of personal narratives it assembled from former slaves, the Project became in only a handful of years not only an extraordinary repository for African American history, but also a pioneer in methods for collecting that history. The FWP’s use of oral testimony to gather both historical and current data diverged sharply from the methods of scholars, like Ulrich Phillips, who had constructed favorable accounts of the institution of slavery using plantation records.

Moreover, in mobilizing and supporting hundreds of black writers to document the role that African Americans play in the nation’s cultural and economic life, the Writers’ Project gave unprecedented voice to modern black experience. However, the airing of this voice was not
simply a byproduct of the relief effort—the outcome of having hired many black victims of the Depression—but rather it sprang from an articulated commitment among the FWP’s national administrators to promote racial equality. Building on the changing discourse around race incurred through large migrations of southern blacks to the North after 1910, and through the achievements of the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s, the FWP set out to upend the white Anglo-Saxon authority over American identity and help foster a new pluralist, inclusive national identity to which African American experience was integral. Contemporary historians now widely recognize what the FWP accomplished as trailblazing for the nearly non-existent field of black history. In *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff credits the FWP for producing a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant white discourse of American culture. Charting the FWP’s pursuit of black history and the many obstacles it faced from regional offices and critics, Sklaroff maintains that the Project became an effective tool for shifting public perception of civil rights and providing “a foundation for the government’s policies toward African Americans in the postwar period” (2).

But far less recognized than the political and social consequences of the FWP’s efforts is the role that the Project played in shaping the literary voices that would emerge and even come to define postwar writing. Indeed, the list of black writers the Project hired appears today like the bulk of a syllabus for college course in African American literature: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, Robert Hayden, Roi Ottley, Frank Yerby, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, and William Attaway, among others. Many of these writers would credit the FWP for helping them launch their writing careers. In his sweeping historical account of the FWP, *The Dream and the Deal*, Jerre Mangione writes,

> Perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of the Project were its black employees. As a result of pressures brought on the New Deal administration by a self-appointed
“black cabinet” of Negro leaders… the WPA was structured to provide hundreds of American Negroes with their first opportunity to exercise skills they already had or to acquire new skills. What was an economic disaster for the country became a liberating experience for many of them. This was especially true in the WPA arts program where, as Ralph Ellison noted, “writers and would-be writers, newspaper people, dancers, actors—they all got their chance.” (255)

Yet, despite its evident significance for black writers, the FWP is typically examined by scholars solely as an incubator for African American history, but not for literature. As I discussed in the introduction, critical assumptions about the FWP that pivot on its entrenchment in thirties political culture and its advancement of social realism have served to nullify its contribution to work by all writers—black and white—that falls outside of these influences and historical boundaries. But with specific regard to black writers, the FWP has more often been associated with the dominant “protest” genre of black writing in the thirties, and therefore critics tend to neglect its potential impact on other modes of black writing that are often are more easily tied to the civil rights, black arts, and the women’s movements of the 1950s and 60s.

Equally crucial, though perhaps more difficult to grasp, is how the FWP may have helped to inspire and shape the black literary voices that would emerge after the Depression. I will explore the Project’s mission of racial equality, particularly as it was carried out by folklore editor Benjamin Botkin and Negro Affairs editor Sterling Brown, as well as its techniques of gathering folklore and first-person narratives of daily life. As with other units in the FWP, writers collecting Negro lore were not trained historians or social scientists. Blending folklore and historical research with literary observation and a collage of subjective perspectives, they pursued new avenues of expression that, in many ways, moved away from the so-called protest novel as it came to be defined by Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940). It is not that the idea of protesting racial inequality was abandoned in the new body of writing; but it often figured in a new form, replacing leftist polemics and 1930s social realism with the intimate discourse of
personal reflection and the individual’s pursuit of identity against racial discrimination—the
dissent that is built into assertions of selfhood. Here, I maintain that the FWP offered black
writers documentary strategies through which they could explore their histories and their cultural
and individual identities within a vision of American pluralism and in opposition to the
prescriptions and homogenizing forces of American society.

A Mission of Racial Equality

Among the key ways that the FWP conveyed its commitment to racial advancement was
through its hiring of Sterling Brown as Negro Affairs editor in 1936. Brown was by then a
celebrated poet and scholar, a notable figure during the Harlem Renaissance and then an English
professor at Howard University who had published the influential Outline for the Study of the
Poetry of Americans Negroses (1931). Exuding a certain cultural gravitas that elevated his new
role at the FWP, he enjoyed wide respect and support from his colleagues in the national office,
including director Henry Alsberg and folklore director Alan Lomax, who would be followed by
the folklorist Benjamin Botkin in that role. The national office gave Brown wide latitude in his
efforts to encourage the hiring of black writers in regional offices and correct racial stereotypes
and misleading depictions of blacks presented in the guidebook and folklore materials.

Brown’s reception was significantly cooler among regional directors in the South who
were unwilling either to hire black employees or gather material that would challenge the white
supremacist views that prevailed in their states. As Sklaroff writes, “That a black man occupied
a central role in the federal reconstruction of history was perhaps one of the most radical features
of the program, and it left many southerners seething” (96). According to Brown’s biographer
Joanne Gabbin, a good deal of his tenure at the FWP was marked by skirmishes and “a battle of
letters” between him and offices in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina (75).
Brown criticized the distortions and biases he saw in drafts of guidebooks which often portrayed blacks and black communities as quaint, eccentric and primitive. Likewise, he decried the egregious racism in the introductions to many of the former slave narratives, which painted the slave as “affectionate” toward his master and as “economically and spiritually better off” under slavery (Gabbin 75). With the backing of the national office, Brown won many of these fights, while his other battles with the especially impervious directors yielded only minor edits to biased manuscripts.

But Brown’s role was not limited to correcting stereotypes and editing text. On a much broader scale he was invested in changing the larger narrative within and direction of black history—which in the mid-thirties was still a nascent field of study dominated largely by white scholars, like Ulrich Phillips, who had long upheld the premise of white racial superiority and a speciously serene picture of the experience of blacks under slavery. Though major black scholars, like W.E.B Du Bois and Carter Woodson, had methodically worked to overturn racist interpretations of slavery and Reconstruction, their audience was relatively small and their position was easily drowned out by the dominant white forces in academic writing. But with its publications, the FWP catered not to the academic elite but to the American masses, and in doing so, presented itself with a unique opportunity to wage a battle on the racial stereotypes and prejudices that average white Americans held. Brown, Lomax, and Botkin all advocated for a new approach to chronicling black life, one that would largely abandon objective constructions of history and instead highlight subjectivity and the first-person perspective, privileging oral testimony, folklore, and lived experiences over scholarly commentaries. According to Jerrold Hirsch, these FWP administrators objected in particular to what had become the prevalent “contributions approach” to black history—the tendency to portray blacks as separate from or
mere donors to mainstream American culture. In response, they advocated a “participation approach” that conceived of blacks as active and essential participants in our national culture (*Portrait* 177). In a letter to the national editorial chief, Gorham Munson, Brown writes,

> The Negro in America has been greatly written about, but most frequently as a separate entity, as a problem, not as a participant. Largely neglected in broad historical consideration, or receiving specialized attention from social scientists, the Negro has too seldom been revealed as an integral part of American life. (qtd. in Sklaroff 135)

As keen observers of a society in transition, Brown and Botkin focused on the symbiotic relationship between cultural groups and the collective creation of a national identity. Hirsch explains that the “underlying assumptions were that black participation in American life resulted in a constant reworking of traditional African American lore, incorporation of white lore into black patterns, and the creation of new materials that could take root in old traditions” (*Portrait* 128).

Such an approach was pioneering. The FWP inverted the assumptive construction of American identity by placing the outsider and his or her perspective on the inside of the portrayal. In addition to challenging the accepted wisdom of black history that had relegated blacks to the peripheries, the FWP was attempting to challenge the typical narratives of *all* American history that continued to assume the central and intractable influence of white Anglo-Saxon culture.

As with virtually all of the FWP’s fieldwork, the methods for collecting material about the lives of African Americans married literary techniques with the social sciences, creating a new documentary form that was by its nature interdisciplinary. Writers drew on many expressive forms to tell a story—not only the grand story of Reconstruction or the Great Migration, but the story of individuals and communities, the close-up snapshots of ordinary life.
and its daily struggles, the rituals and practices—the Negro lore—that collectively became both the source of the story and the story itself. Writers combined exhaustive historical and ethnographic research with the stuff of literature, finding the most value in first-person retellings of life, in speech patterns and the qualities of voices, in small-scale aspirations that could emanate universal meanings.

When Brown arrived at the Project, the work collecting narratives from former slaves was well underway, with fieldworkers in eighteen states (Gabbin 70). In 1936, there was an estimated 100,000 former slaves still alive—the last living generation who were still children during Emancipation (Mangione 263). The collection was first directed by folklore editor John Lomax, who devised questions to “get the Negro thinking and talking about the days of slavery” (Mangione 263). When Brown succeeded Lomax, he focused fieldworkers’ attention specifically on recording dialect. Indeed, Brown had long been deeply invested in the reproduction of black speech. As a “vernacular poet,” he sought to deliver the language of the folk, recreating, as Henry Louis Gates notes, “a new and distinctly black poetic diction and not merely the vapid and pathetic claim for one” (Figures in Black 227). He and Botkin shared the goal of bringing a literary approach to an anthropological venture and revitalizing the American language through the recovery of folklore and the voice of the folk. John Edgar Tidwell argues that Brown was in effect countering James Weldon Johnson's “dictum that the poetic and philosophical range of Black speech and dialect is limited to pathos and humor.” On the contrary, Brown believed in “the aesthetic potential” of black speech and its power to express truth about black experience” (Tidwell 104). As he remarked in a 1942 speech, “I was first attracted by certain qualities that I thought the speech of the people had, and I wanted to get for my own writing a flavor, a color, a pungency of speech. Then later, I came to something more important—I wanted to get an
But Brown would oscillate somewhat in his approach to accurately recording such speech, and his instructions to fieldworkers underscore the hybridity of the Project’s documentary form. Arguing against the use of exact phonetic transcription, Brown notes that “truth to idiom is more important, I believe, than truth to pronunciation.” He supported his position by invoking notable writers Erskine Caldwell, Ruth Sucklow, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom he claimed “get at truth to the manner of speaking without excessive misspellings” (FWP, Slave Narratives). But while Brown advised writers to use literary techniques, emphasizing “turns of phrase that have flavor and vividness,” he also cautioned them against taking too much artistic license with the material:

I should like to recommend that the stories be told in the language of the ex-slave, without excessive editorializing and ‘artistic’ introductions on the part of the interviewer. The contrast between the directness of the ex-slave and the roundabout and at times pompous comments of the interviewer is frequently glaring. (FWP, Slave Narratives)

Brown was reacting to the slave narratives that had been submitted by white fieldworkers who had been unable to hide—or simply did not want to hide—their racial biases. But his missive also highlights the inherent tension between literature and history within these documents and their assemblage.

Such tension owes itself to why many historians of slavery still struggle with the usefulness and accuracy of the FWP’s slave narratives. While recognizing their profound historical significance and the new approach to black history they pioneered, these scholars also rightly question the circumstances and the cultural factors that affected their collection. The fact that many—though certainly not all—of the interviews were conducted by white fieldworkers
may well have affected not only how the narratives were recorded and rhetorically framed, but also the actual information offered by the former slaves. The subjects may have been inclined, for example, to provide a more favorable account of their experience under slavery in order to give these government workers what they assumed they wanted to hear. Moreover, the advanced age of the former slaves, coupled with the harsh reality of the Depression, may well have caused them to speak somewhat rosily about their childhood memories, thus giving a skewed impression of slave conditions. The historian Paul Escott cautions other scholars to understand that “these reports are not a direct presentation of the slave’s views. They are not even a direct transcription of the interview itself” (42).

It is worth noting that Botkin had voiced similar concerns. In his introduction to the Indiana Narratives, published by the FWP in 1941, Botkin writes,

> For the first and the last time, a large number of surviving slaves (many of whom have since died) have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way. In spite of obvious limitations—bias and fallibility of both informants and interviewers, the use of leading questions, unskilled techniques, and insufficient controls and checks—this saga must remain the most authentic and colorful source of our knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands of slaves. (171)

Other historians have lingered more over the literary aspects of the narratives and how they may infringe on or affect their historical merit. Lori Ann Garner, for example, argues that FWP writers treated their interviews “as aesthetic objects as much or more than as anthropological documents,” and therefore their artfully composed narratives should be approached the same way. Comparing the slave narratives to the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Garner contends that both provide an “artistic construction of speech, a form of performance in itself” (222).

On the other hand, Lynda Hill maintains that given the very literariness of the narratives, their worth might lie not in the empirical evidence they provide about slavery as much as the
world they construct in the context of the 1930s and the FWP’s efforts to recover the past. She concludes,

What is significant is not whether the reports are exact representations of what happened but that in the 1930s they are part of an effort to reclaim history—not simply to revise it but also to define America anew. The former slaves enter into a dialogue and become the elders of a community that in the 1930s needs to see itself as benign and full of promise. Deeming the narratives folkloric or literary actually places them more firmly within an historical and even social scientific frame, affirming that the larger world—the present—aspires to be ideologically far removed from the world recounted in the narratives. (71)

As the field has evolved, historians such as Hill have become more interested in making use of a wider variety of documents and genres. Contemporary scholars are becoming more comfortable with the ambiguities and competing factors in professed literary work and are nimbly employing these in their historical analyses.

The irony is that while historians have come to terms with the literariness of the FWP’s collection, the literary community has largely neglected it. Literary critics are notably absent from any discussions about the literary nature of the FWP, much less about how the program’s material and documentary techniques may have served to influence some writers.

Much interest does exist among literary scholars in the slave narrative as a literary form—a form to which Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates tied all African American writing. Slave narratives, they write, “are for the literary critic, the very generic foundation which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped” (Davis and Gates xxxiii). Yet the FWP’s slave narratives stand apart from the generic slave narrative form—contextually, substantively, and temporally. Titled “slave narratives,” they are frequently conflated with the original genre, but in actuality, were ‘created’ through entirely different means and with a unique purpose within the FWP’s larger efforts to unearth lived realities through the subjective perspective. The tendency of literary critics to locate the FWP’s
work on black history only within the tradition of the slave narrative has led to missed opportunities to examine how these 1930s writers who collected and constructed these oral histories were forging a new body of literary work that would itself become a source for other fictional and non-fictional forms. The FWP’s slave narratives, along with its other investigations into *Negro lore*, have specific literary value in the context of Depression and postwar writing, value that is separate from the larger tradition out of which the slave narrative form emerged.

Indeed, for Brown and Botkin these documents offered far more than factual details pertaining to the slave’s experience. They were above all “folk history” and as such, were deeply connected to literature—the oral literature of a people, which in its written transcription by the Project’s team of writers could inspire new forms of literary expression. In his preface to *Lay My Burden Down* (1945), the first published anthology of a selection of the project’s slave narratives, Botkin notes that these testimonies “have the forthrightness, tang and tone of people talking, the immediacy and concreteness of the participant and the eyewitness, and the salty irony and mother wit which, like the gift of memory, are kept alive by the bookless” (qtd. in Mangione 265).

Toward the end of the FWP’s life and in its immediate aftermath, the Project produced or inspired a number “studies” of African American history that were aimed at wide audiences. *The Negro in Virginia* (1940), a guide edited by Roscoe Lewis, the editor of the FWP’s Negro Studies Project in Virginia, included the work of fifteen black writers and researchers who drew on more than 300 former slave narratives and extensive archival research to rewrite the history of the state’s black population from their first arrival from Africa in 1619 to the 1920s. Published in 1940, the book has been upheld as one of the single best products of the FWP. About it, Brown wrote:
The significance of *The Negro in Virginia* is that it is an instance of a governmental cultural agency’s sponsorship of a serious history of a minority groups. It has been praised as one of the finest productions of the Federal Writers’ Project. It is the first state history of the Negro ever published. Not the work of a professional historian, its approach through anecdote, interview, and documents makes for good social history. (qtd. in Gabbin 78)

Brown also initiated a number of separate studies of black populations throughout the country, several of which never made it to publication by the time the Project officially folded in 1943. Among the most ambitious was a planned book entitled “The Portrait of the Negro as American” which was, according to Brown, to be “a composite portrait of the Negro American, set squarely against the background of America… an essay in social history and biography, not an exercise in race glorification” (Gabbin 79).

Scholars seem to agree that Brown’s own most important written contribution to the Writer’s Project was the essay he wrote for the guidebook *Washington: City and Capital.* Entitled “The Negro in Washington,” the essay probes the contradictory pulls of a city that claimed to be the bedrock of democracy while relegating its black population to miserable living conditions. In clear, graceful prose, Brown methodically outlines the “grave consequences” of the persisting “color-line” in the nation’s capital. He writes,

> In this border city, Southern in so many respects, there is a denial of democracy, at times hypocritical and at times flagrant. Social compulsion forces many who would naturally be on the side of civic fairness into hopelessness and indifference. Washington has made steps in the direction of justice, but many steps remain to be taken for the sake of the underprivileged and for the sake of a greater Washington. (46)

Within the FWP, the essay was heralded as incisive critique of *de-facto* racial segregation that had implications far beyond Washington. But the essay also drew sharp criticism from Congress. A Republican Congressman from Wisconsin called it “insidious propaganda” that
showed the “influence of communistically inspired agitators” to control the Washington guide (Gabbin 81). Along with other products of the FWP, it became a flashpoint for the attacks the Project would endure in the forties as the nation turned away from the socially-conscious spirit of the Depression.

Even as the Project’s work and philosophy began to go out of fashion, a number of former federal writers attempted to build on its mission to tell the story of black America. Claude McKay's *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940), is the earliest example. In the same vein as the FWP studies, McKay vividly depicts the daily reality of Harlem in a direct style that seems to shake off both the symbolic lyricism of his Harlem Renaissance poetry and the political charge of his novels, *Home to Harlem* and *Banana Bottom*. One reviewer even complained that the book presented little that the public did not already know about cultural developments in Harlem and that it failed to offer a “philosophical accounting for these developments.” It reads, the reviewer notes disparagingly, “too much like one of those W.P.A. guide books, though the style is more interesting” (Woodson 120-121). This is somewhat ironic given that McKay, who had been embroiled in political battles within the ranks of the New York FWP, called his work for the Project “utterly demoralizing, acting like a brake against spontaneous expression” (Cooper 339). Nevertheless, his documentary approach in which he highlights the individual voices of Harlem residents and allows the speakers to tell their own stories shares a close affinity with the FWP. Implicit in it is a quiet demand for recognition, a tapping insistence that this other reality has a meaningful instructive and unifying role in the larger culture.

A similar aesthetic governs Roi Ottley’s *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America*, published in 1943. Ottley, who had served as supervisor of the Negro unit in the FWP’s New York office, drew extensively on FWP manuscripts but, as Mangione points out, failed to
acknowledge the Project anywhere in the book (Mangione 260). In 1945, Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy collaborated on a historical study of Black migration from the South to northern cities, entitled *They Seek a City*. The two authors, who had met in 1938 at the Chicago FWP office, used interviews collected for the unpublished FWP book *The Negro in Illinois* to trace the individual journeys of ordinary black Americans in a narrative structure that, as a reviewer for *The American Journal of Sociology* notes, suggests “ways of utilizing the language of popular literature in presenting academic subjects to the lay reader” (Walker, H.J. 70). The book was generally well received, though that same reviewer cautioned that in its literary guise, it lacks a “systematic treatment of the social conditions and pressures” that black migrants faced. Others writing for scholarly black journals, however, praised its hybrid genre. “Sociological truths have suffered no loss in the artistic and dramatic treatment of the data revealed” writes a reviewer for *The Journal of Negro Education* (Wright, M.T. 65). And as if trumpeting the very mission of the FWP, a reviewer for *The Journal of Negro History* commends the authors’ portraits of “hitherto unknown characters.” “Out of these early, unkempt communities have originated a galaxy of outstanding American citizens who have made their contribution to the progress of our nation” (Allen 440).

The straddle of history, sociology, and literature would shape the other collaborations that the two writers undertook throughout the decades following the Depression. In 1966, they updated and revised *They Seek a City* under the new title *Anyplace But Here*. Bontemps, who had gained a reputation as a poet during the Harlem Renaissance and a novelist in the 1930s—his 1936 historical novel *Black Thunder* about a slave revolt has been in recent years resurrected as an important contribution to the modern slave narrative—turned his attention almost exclusively to non-fiction after the Depression, alongside Conroy, who had also moved away from the
proletarian genre he had championed in the early 1930s. Together they wrote a number of illustrated children’s books presenting “bottom-up” black history, as well as revised folktales based on Conroy's fieldwork collecting industrial lore in Chicago.

These works constitute but a handful of the much larger body of non-scholarly social histories about African Americans that were published in the 1940s and then in the 1960s, all of which have significant ties to the FWP. Indeed, these journalistic and literary ventures—that today would fall into the category of creative non-fiction—deserve more scholarly attention for the way they so vividly expand on a documentary form that was borne out of the Project’s hybrid methodology and mission to bring black history and experience to the general American public.

But while the continuity between the FWP and later social documentary writing is immediately evident, the connection between the Writers’ Project and later fictional writing remains elusive. Perhaps its tenuouslyness is related less to the FWP’s actual influence on black fiction and more to enduring critical and historical assumptions about both the Project itself and the field of African American literature more generally.

**The Hurston/Wright Prism**

One of the reasons that literary scholars have largely overlooked the FWP’s ties to black fiction might well be because the Project is still entrenched in the periodization of the 1930s. Its influence on later writing thus appears limited, extending perhaps as far as Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. Among the Project’s most notable writers, Hurston and Wright were both immersed in what the FWP is most often associated with: respectively, ethnographic research and social realism. To the small extent that the FWP is explored in connection to black literature, both writers have frequently served as the Project’s literary envoys, having seemingly advanced its methods, at least until these methods were replaced by a new postwar sensibility.
Yet, the particular relationships that Hurston and Wright had to the Project, as well as the work they produced both during and after, actually reveal little about the nature of the FWP, its unique documentary form, or its literary influence. By the time Hurston began her FWP fieldwork in Florida in 1938, she was a relatively well-known author and folklorist who had participated in the Harlem Renaissance, studied under the famed anthropologist Franz Boas, and had published both a collection of folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935) and her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). It is difficult to speculate how the Project may have contributed to her writing or whether she integrated the FWP’s ethnographic tools into her own methods of gathering *Negro lore*. She was already deeply engaged in issues surrounding the transcription of voice and vernacular and in the *living lore* of ‘the folk’ that the FWP was unearthing. Indeed, both her fictional and folkloric studies seem to anticipate rather than reflect the Project’s central concerns. In her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a coming-of-age story of a young woman Janie Crawford who struggles to assert her individuality in marriage, Hurston makes wide use of the cultural practices and speech patterns of the folk communities she had studied in the late 1920s as an anthropology student at Barnard College. Moreover, the critic David Kadlec maintains that Hurston was “by all accounts a thoroughly noncooperative member” of the FWP, who used her time mainly to work on her next novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and only hastily compiled the material for *The Florida Negro* study to which she was assigned (478). Her lack of interest, he speculates, was borne out of a resistance to the Project's political underpinnings and its role advancing the New Deal’s agenda. Kadlec writes, “If the mainstreaming of a documentary culture in the late 1930s served to dampen Hurston’s interest in fieldwork, it may have been because the social realist and
commercial directives that lay beneath this aesthetic prohibited Hurston from representing Negro ‘culture’ in the way that she imagined it” (479).

True, Hurston did not align herself with the political Left as most of her FWP colleagues did, and even later criticized the New Deal for fostering among blacks a dependence on government. As one of the Project’s few trained anthropologists, she no doubt had strong ideas about conducting fieldwork, not to mention a proprietary relationship to the Negro folklore of southern Florida where she grew up. Yet, the abundance of archived manuscripts she contributed to the program, including essays, interviews, folk songs, and folktales attest to her energetic involvement in the assignments, even as she wrestled with her superiors over methods and points of focus. After having drifted into obscurity in the postwar period (publishing very little outside of her 1948 novel Seraph on the Suwanee in which she depicted a poor white community in southern Florida), Hurston has received a posthumous revival in the past several decades, including the excavation of much of her fieldwork on the Project. In 1999, a collection of her previously unpublished contributions to the Florida FWP was published as Go Gator and Muddy the Water. The book is notably the only published collection of FWP writings by a single author, and as such, has cast light on the Project’s documentary achievement. At the same time, however, Hurston’s now well-known association with the Project has, in effect, helped to close the critical space for understanding the FWP’s influence, making her ethnographic fieldwork the apotheosis of what the Project offered black writers.

Ironically, it is Hurston’s most vocal critic who shares the mantle with her as FWP ambassador. In 1937, Wright wrote a scathing review of Their Eyes Were Watching God in which he argued that Hurston’s prose is “cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley” and that the “sensory sweep of her novel carries
no theme, no message, no thought.” He also maintains that Hurston addresses “a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint’” (Wright, “Between Laughter” 25).

By contrast, Wright’s 1940 novel Native Son implicitly exorcises this sentimentality with its gritty portrayal of Chicago’s Southside and the character Bigger Thomas whose blatant lack of self-awareness and violent expressions are anything but “quaint.” Yet, like Their Eyes Were Watching God, Native Son is often associated with the FWP, where Wright was working as he wrote the novel. The inclusion of the Writer’s Project in Wright’s sphere of influences tends to draw on a commonly held assumption about the FWP—namely, that it echoed the concerns and aesthetics of the proletarian genre and 1930s’ documentary culture. Certainly Native Son still looms large over the Depression era, seemingly encapsulating all of the political fervor and social realism for which the literature of the 30s is known. As the father of the so-called “protest school,” which has come to signal the black proletarian genre, Wright not only dominates discussions but is often treated as a lone stand-in for all black writers of the period. In The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt (2001), Robert Washington focuses his entire chapter “The Depression-era Naturalistic Protest School” on Wright, hardly mentioning another writer associated with the genre. It is as if Wright’s depiction of black life in Native Son absorbed all others, providing a convenient shortcut for understanding the ethos of an era. Both Ellison and Baldwin’s later criticism of Native Son, which pivoted on Wright’s sociological approach or “narrow naturalism” (Ellison, “Brave Words” 153), has served critics interested in shoring up the convenient line between the “radical thirties” and the post-war liberalism of the 1950s.
An active member of the Communist Party, Wright served as the first black supervisor in the Chicago office of the Illinois Writer’s Project. On the surface, it makes sense that by extension the FWP would be painted with Wright’s “protest” brush. His is typically among the first names to appear in association with the Project; he offers a prime example of the soon-to-be famous writers that the FWP helped nurture. Not only was he the Project’s most famous writer during his tenure there, but he also operated as a kind of satellite figure around which so many other aspiring young FWP writers orbited. He helped Nelson Algren and Arna Bontemps get jobs in the Chicago office, became close friends with Margaret Walker, whom he encouraged and mentored, and then moved to New York, where he met a young Ralph Ellison and promptly facilitated his hire by the New York FWP. He also co-edited fellow federal writer Dorothy West’s short-lived literary magazine, New Challenge. His essay “The Ethics Of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch” (1937) was first published in the FWP’s publication American Stuff, and would then be published in Wright’s collection of short stories Uncle Tom’s Children (1938). Recognizing his talent after he won first-prize in Story Magazine's short fiction contest for “Fire and Cloud,” the FWP offered him the rare luxury of continuing to collect a relief-work paycheck while pursuing the novel that would become Native Son. Wright quickly became legendary among aspiring young writers who saw in him a formidable example of how the Project could benefit their writing careers.

Wright can also be reasonably linked, at least superficially, to the documentary material he collected for the Project. In her essay, “Native Geography: Richard Wright’s Work for the Federal Writers’ Project in Chicago,” Rosemary Hathaway charts the similarities between an ethnographic essay Wright wrote for the Project in which he describes in great detail a section of Chicago’s South Side and his depiction of Bigger Thomas’s neighborhood in Native Son.
Hathaway’s essay is notably one of only a handful of academic inquiries into the specific connections between FWP fieldwork and later literary work.

And yet, any careful consideration of the FWP’s efforts to document black life soon reveals that *Native Son*, far from being a product of the FWP, seems to be devised entirely outside of the Project’s documentary approach and philosophical framework. Bigger Thomas has no inner life, no agency, no roots, and little voice; he is a despised, near-inhuman product of his environment and the racism endemic to capitalist society, and his only hope of deliverance comes through the teachings of his communist lawyer Max, who converts him and thus reveals his humanity before he is executed for murdering a white woman. The social impact of this novel and the wave of shock it sent through Wright’s white readership are well-known. But it is worth stressing that Wright’s naturalism-meets polemical treatise did not emerge out of the FWP but rather plainly diverges from the Project’s polyvocal writing of history, its mining of personal narratives and folklore, its compiling of historical details devoid of ideological inflection, and its efforts to document how individuals perceive and confront their histories and daily lives.

Overall, Wright and Hurston offer only a very narrow lens through which to approach the FWP’s influence on black writing. Indeed, because their association with the Project often relies on convenient preconceptions about the FWP’s ties to 1930s’ culture—both Hurston’s ethnographic fieldwork and Wright’s naturalism—they can actually serve to obscure rather than enrich our understanding of how the FWP contributed to the unique voice, form, and aesthetic of emergent black writers in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

In recent years, a number of critics have productively upset the literary-historical paradigm of black fiction. Although much of this criticism either ignores or downplays the FWP, within its underpinnings we may find meaningful ways to untether the FWP from Hurston’s
anthropological focus and Wright’s protest genre, and begin to identify the Project’s influence on a much wider pool of postwar black writers.

Rethinking the Black Canon

In *Rethinking Social Realism*, Stacy Morgan challenges the notion of a “tidy progression” from the proletarian genre in the 1930s to the “introspective modernism” of the postwar era (25). Morgan argues that contrary to this long-accepted trajectory, social realism extended for black writers beyond the thirties and well after the war, in part because these writers continued to be victimized and therefore made use of the realist lens to effectively articulate their oppression. In remapping the course of African American fiction, Morgan also calls for a reexamination of the social realist category, which, he argues, has been too narrowly defined and unable to account for the ways that black writers inventively blend genres and recast reality through the prism of various media. He writes,

> The interest of these African American novelists and poets in such media as personal essays, photography, and nonfiction reportage seems to have owed in part to their profound concern with transforming the contemporary social and political conditions critiqued in their literary work. Toward this end, recognizing the potential limitations of literature as an agent of social change, writers dabbled in these documentary modes as a way of authenticating to readers the experiences presented in their novels and poetry and, perhaps, as a way of reading audiences not readily accessible through literary media. (12)

Far from abandoning social realism, many black writers, according to Morgan, elaborated on its literary tenets with new aesthetic and expressive modes. But Morgan neglects to consider *why* black writers chose these other modes, suggesting instead that a spontaneous agreement emerged around their political efficacy. Yet, some of the very writers Morgan refers to—Sterling Brown, Willard Motley, and Margaret Walker, to name a few—worked for the FWP. Moreover, that the documentary form would prove a valuable literary tool for social critique was among the
premises of the FWP. The genre-dabbling Morgan refers to was informed at least in part by these writers’ ground-level engagement with the methods and training of the FWP.

But Morgan downplays the influence of the FWP on black writers because the program “seldom sponsored the literary projects of its employees directly” and instead tasked writers with the “collecting and compiling of information for local and state-based historical guidebooks.” He rightly acknowledges that “many writers integrated material on local history and contemporary social conditions that they had garnered from work with the Writers’ Project into their subsequent literary enterprises” (16). Yet, he cites only one example: Willard Motley’s first novel *Knock on Any Door* for which he drew on his FWP research on Chicago’s Italian neighborhoods. The choice is somewhat ironic because Motley’s novel, which was turned into a major film noir of the same title in 1949, is among the few novels by black writers at that time that does not feature any black characters. Motley was therefore not engaging in the social realist critique that is at the center of Morgan’s argument about black writing. Nevertheless, Morgan’s analysis of postwar black writing helps to illuminate how former federal writers used the Project’s documentary form to reshape social realism, even while he downplays the Project’s influence on these same writers.

Other critics, too, have attempted to broaden the conceptual framework of categories of social realism and so-called protest literature. In *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel* (2011), Kimberly Drake challenges those who “have denigrated and dismissed protest literature for being more concerned with ideology than aesthetics” (4). She maintains that protest novels are actually “consciously experimental” (4). Within their realistic portrayals of urban life, protest writers constructed subjectivities that “involve their readers in the imaginative experience not only social oppression but of the victim’s struggle to understand, manage, and resist that
oppression” (3). In so doing, these writers force readers to confront their own prejudices and class/race bound assumptions as well as their own victimization. She writes, “Witnessing a character examine his or her interior subjectivity in the face of social oppression, readers can imagine a similar self-examination” (21).

However, Drake never explicitly defines or redefines protest, as if assuming a consensus around what the term signifies at the same time that she problematizes that definition. But the term “protest genre” is loaded with connotation—determinist, racial, political, and anti-aesthetic. Yet Drake gives wide latitude to what constitutes “protest,” citing a wide range of writers, including Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and even Langston Hughes. Each, she argues, wages his or her rebellion through a range of textual strategies that showcase individual agency over social determinism. But pulling together a diverse group of writers under the umbrella of “protest” implicitly changes the meaning of the term to incorporate all the literary styles that these black writers use to resist oppression and racial bias, thus giving “protest” significance beyond its descriptor of a socio-historical literary genre. If “protest” begins to mean everything, it ceases to really mean anything.

Even so, Drake’s focus on subjectivity is instructive as it pulls us away from the more conventional interpretation of “protest” as simply exposing readers to an impartial truth. Indeed, this re-reading of “protest” is pertinent to the FWP’s efforts to involve readers in the subjectivity and voice of the subject rather than offering factual, “objective” data. The emotional and psychological engagement of subjects was essential to the FWP’s documentary technique and its mission of promoting racial equality.

By making the categories of social realism and protest fiction more flexible and more relevant to a wider range of black writing, both Morgan and Drake offer a potentially useful
critical lens through which to approach the FWP’s influence. Theoretically, their analyses can be built upon to examine how FWP writers reworked and reshaped these categories specifically by making use of FWP’s documentary model. On the other hand, the degree to which Morgan and Drake both bend and twist these literary terms in an effort to make sense of the diversity of postwar black writing begs the question: Why not look beyond these terms altogether?

One notable critic attempts to do so. In her insightful book *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent, 1945-1950*, Stephanie Brown takes Stacy Morgan’s position to task arguing that critics have been too quick to assign the social realist “protest” genre to black writing far beyond the Depression (8). That is, despite the general waning of the social realist mode in (white) postwar fiction, the prevailing interpretation of African American novels holds that they continued to be dominated by social realism and defined by their political engagement. She writes,

> The tendency to collapse all African American literary production into the model of the racially “authentic” novel of social protest would become more and more marked over the two decades following World War II, even as it grew to be a less and less justifiable representation of the books African Americans were writing and reading. (22)

This persistent and seemingly reflexive view among literary scholars, she argues, has led to both a misreading of many of the novels by postwar black writers such as Chester Himes and Arna Bontemps, whose work critics have crowbarred into the protest genre, and a widespread neglect of others, like Frank Yerby and Willard Motley, who so evidently fall outside the bounds of protest fiction. Significantly, all four of these writers worked for the FWP, and like them, the FWP has been both painted as social realist and neglected for the ways its methods are less legible as protest. Brown does not, however, connect these writers to the FWP, largely overlooking the Project as Morgan and Drake do. But she does rightly maintain that postwar
black writing offers much richer and varied expressions of black experience than the protest
mode affords.

Of course, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* does not belong to the category of social realism. Critics have widely praised the novel for its departure from the naturalist vein and its embrace of a new aesthetic showcasing symbolism and subjectivity instead of the harsh sociological flatness of the previous generation. But as Brown points out, Ellison quickly became “the exception that proves the rule” (30). Much like Wright cast his spell over critics’ view of Depression-era writing, Ellison seems to represent the new postwar sensibility. But instead of paving the way for other black writers, as Wright did, Ellison has been deemed the maverick who defies classification while at the same time confirms the social realism of his fellow black writers. Brown writes,

*Native Son*’s publication date and subject matter enabled the novel’s positioning as a product of a prewar sensibility relevant in an era of postwar progress and abundance only to an African American minority. By establishing Ellison as the exception that proved the rule, critics working within New Critical paradigms privileging self-contained and self-conscious models for fiction and publishers keen to maintain discrete genres could position *Invisible Man* as a brilliant outlier while retaining the dominant narrative of the “authentic” postwar African America novel as racial protest presented in the social realist model. (11-12)

Brown’s point is significant because it highlights not only that these critical terms have come to pigeonhole writers like Ellison (whose work and relationship to the FWP will be discussed at length in the following chapter), but also the paucity of extant categories to describe pre- and postwar black writing. Brown’s rereading of purportedly social realist texts—including Yerby’s historical romances and Chester Himes’ “parodic protest” novels—and her recovery of largely forgotten texts by postwar black writers attest to the need for a broader conceptual framework than “social realism” affords. Preserving the accepted meaning of “protest fiction” as it was pioneered by Wright, she argues that many writers were actually working outside of its generic
structure. Therefore, she is able to “pry open a space in the critical models available” and examine how many postwar black writers were actively engaged in representations of “multiple varieties of authentic black experience” (15). According to Brown, these writers helped lead “the shift from a literature of observation to one of immersion” (26).

The developments Brown describes arose in part because of writers’ interactions with the FWP. Like the writers it trained, the FWP itself was not by any means strictly or simply social realist but actually more dialogic, allowing for a convergence of many expressive modes that would clear the way for new creative paths to exploring African American identity. Two writers who helped forge those paths, Dorothy West and Margaret Walker, deserve close inspection for the powerful yet divergent ways that their work bears the imprint of the FWP’s work uncovering Negro lore.

**Dorothy West**

By the time she began working for the New York Writers’ Project in 1938, Dorothy West had edited two literary journals but had had little success at getting her own work published. Like other ambitious young writers at the time, she took on her assignments for the folklore unit with relish, turning out richly crafted, often humorous, “ethnographic” essays about the “Negro experience” in New York and transcribing lengthy interviews with a wide variety of black informants. As a fieldworker, West was prolific. Dozens of archived FWP documents bear her byline, some of which have in recent years been published as sketches or short stories in two anthologies, *Where the Wild Grape Grows: Selected Writings 1930-1950* (2005) and *The Last Harlem Leaf: The Uncollected Works of Dorothy West* (2008). It is telling that these published short works are accompanied with only a passing mention of their connection to the Writers’ Project. They seem, on their surface, to be conceived independently as inspired works of social
commentary rather than as dispatched field reports for a state-sponsored writing project. Perhaps more than many of her fellow federal writers, West used her experience collecting *Negro lore* to experiment with her narrative voice, which often seems more aligned with Dorothy Parker than Richard Wright, and would later earn her praise for the way it mixed caustic humor with melodic gentility. It is not that West deviated from the documentary form that the Project devised; on the contrary, she stayed well within its loosely-drawn parameters to gather the voices and stories, the rituals and histories of an urban black community. But in doing so, West also honed a wry, often self-conscious, narrative persona that made fine satire out of sociological observation. I argue here that West refined this style and employed many of the documentary techniques and materials she gleaned from the FWP for her 1948 novel *The Living Is Easy*. The novel’s subject matter, a black elite community in Boston, has placed it well outside the categories traditionally assigned to black writers, critically divorcing it from 1930s culture and fiction.

Born an only child to a comfortable middle-class family in Boston in 1907, West made her way to New York in the early 1920s where she embarked on a writing career, earning her first success when she tied with Zora Neale Hurston as a second prize winner in a short story contest sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine in 1926. She soon became enmeshed in the Harlem community of writers and artists, but struggled to gain notice by publishers. By 1934, she decided to try a different route and founded her own magazine *Challenge* which, in its short life, published work by many writers of the Renaissance, including Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, and also a handful of younger writers like Frank Yerby. After it folded in 1937, West co-edited *New Challenge* with Richard Wright. The magazine put out only one issue, within which were Wright’s influential essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and Ellison’s first published piece of writing, a review of Waters Turpin’s *These Low Grounds*. Getting hired by
the Writers’ Project signaled a turning point for West, who found herself among like-minded writers, like Ralph Ellison and Claude McKay, eager to get a paid for recording reflections on the black community in which they circulated. Her FWP work stands out for its ironic but tightly controlled narration and her ear for the rhythms of dialogue and the syncopation of black dialect.

In one essay, titled “Temple of Grace” from 1938, West portrays the parish of a local preacher Daddy Grace, “the self-styled rival of Father Divine”—a Harlem huckster whose mysterious power overshadows his shady efforts to extort his worshippers by selling them trinkets and toiletries. Describing the storefront temple on West 115th Street in Harlem, West provides generous details about the layout of the building, its seating capacity and its the blue walls with “gilt borders.” But her reportage is matched with satirical observations that comment on the baseness of this religious enterprise. She writes “Divine's lease on this property had expired, and at renewal time it was discovered that Daddy Grace had signed ahead of him. Divine’s prestige tottered briefly, for it was a test of faith to his followers to accept the forced removal of God from his heaven by a mundane piece of paper” (“Temple of Grace” FWP-LC).

Far from a moralizing, somber voice typically associated with thirties social documentary, West’s tongue is sharp and dry, yet never at the expense of the physical details she set out to document. Describing Daddy’s sermon, she writes,

[He] began to address the congregation as "dar ones" and "beloved". His voice was oily, his expression crafty. His garbled speech played on the emotions. He spoke feelingly of the goodness of Daddy, of Daddy's great love for his flock. He called them Daddy's children and urged them to obey and trust Daddy, and reminded them that they were part of a United Kingdom of Prayer. When the swelling murmurs of "Amens" and "Praise Daddy" indicated their revived strength and ardor, he bent to the woman who had first started the singing and asked in his smooth voice, “Sister, will you start the singing again?” (“Temple of Grace” FWP-LC)
West maintains this ironic tone when she turns her lens toward her own middle-class world, as in the 1939 FWP essay “Cocktail Party: Personal Experience,” in which she pokes fun of highbrow social gatherings where “mutual coos of endearment fell on the already false air.” Following a detailed assessment of a party that attracts the type she calls “Negro debutante,” West takes to analyzing the hostess:

There had been one or two flamboyant indiscretions in her past, and so every once in awhile, to assure herself and her home town that she had lived them down, she entertained at a lavish party. She was not yet sufficiently secure to give a small affair. And of all the people lapping up her liquor, hardly one would have come to an intimate dinner. As yet it was necessary for her to give large, publicized affairs so that everyone felt bound to come out of fear that it might be thought he was not invited. (“Cocktail Party” FWP-LC)

In another essay about a customary “Amateur Night” at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, West closely scrutinizes her subject with an anthropological eye. Yet at the same time, her literary descriptions and narrative arc give the essay the feeling of a fictional story. She writes,

The emcee comes out of the wings. The audience knows him. He is Negro to his toes, but even Hitler would classify him as Aryan at first glance. He begins a steady patter of jive. When the audience is ready and mellow, he calls the first amateur out of the wings.

Willie comes out and, on his way to the mike, touches the Tree of Hope. For several years the original Tree of Hope stood in front of the Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue until the Commissioner of Parks tore it down. It was believed to bring good fortune to whoever actor touched it, and some say it was not Mr. Moses who had it cut down, but the steady stream of down-and-out actors since the depression who wore it out.

Willie sings “I surrender Dear” in a pure Georgia accent. “I can' mak' mah way,” he moans. The audience hears him out and claps kindly. He bows and starts for the wings. The emcee admonishes, “You got to boogie-woogie off the stage, Willie.” He boogie-woogies off, which is as much a part of established ritual as touching the Tree of Hope. (“Amateur Night” FWP-LC)

Never detached from her subject, West instead seems inside of it, writing from a position that is both literally and emotionally in close proximity. The Project evidently gave her much
autonomy over the material, through which she naturally adapts her amused impressions to social
documentary. But her work also appears to be guided very closely by the FWP’s methodology.
As a competent fieldworker, she probes a wide range of material on Negro life, carefully
recording every detail within view, the voices and manner of her subjects. At the same time, she
seems to flout the conventions of traditional reportage with long literary descriptions or sudden
bursts of psychological insight. Philosophically, too, West’s FWP assignments affirm Brown and
Botkin’s efforts to position the Negro not as a strange object of study—*the other*—or as a
representative symbol of racial uplift, but as an agent who speaks for him or herself and assumes
a rightful role in the larger culture.

In *The Living is Easy*, her first novel, West employs much the same formal and
philosophical approach. Focusing on a small circle of black elites in Boston, West portrays this
cloistered world with the sardonic stance afforded to those that know a social milieu from the
inside. Along with charting the documentary details of this bourgeoisie—the parlors and buffet
tables—West also pursues the inner life of her protagonist, Cleo Judson, a young southern
woman who is desperate to shed her folk past and navigate the maze of upper-class social codes
of Boston. The novel radiates the spirit of the FWP by inviting readers to connect to a unique
and mostly unknown strain of black American experience, both its outer contours and its
psychological manifestations. As the critic Bill Ott writes of *The Living Is Easy*, “West opens
our eyes to a little-known era in black history, but in the process of doing so, she gives us a
heroine who speaks to women of every race and from every era” (*Storylines*). But in its narrative
technique, too, West’s novel creates a string of mise-en-scenes that read like a series of FWP
assignments and even at times draw directly from the material she collected for the Project.
Cleo Judson, is a hardnosed, and ruthlessly ambitious young “colored” woman who left her “happy happy childhood” in the Deep South at an early age, moving north to Boston and eventually marrying a prominent fruit wholesaler. West’s portrayal draws on her own childhood; her father too was a fruit seller, and like Cleo and Bart’s daughter Judy, West was an only child. Cleo, whose consciousness West explores through a third person narrator, is mostly an unsympathetic character, rarely given to any form of generosity and wholly deceptive and self-absorbed. She pays little attention to her daughter and is cold to her affable husband, whose money she is perpetually scheming to pocket. Moreover, she firmly disavows racial bonds, intent on distancing herself from those she sees as the lowly southern Negroes encroaching upon her neighborhood—the “dark unshaven faces split in wide grins,” whose “low, lewd whistles issued from between thick lips” are her “daily cross to bear in this rapidly deteriorating section of Boston” (37). In disgust, Cleo devises a plan to move to a ten-room house in Cambridge where she can construct an identity as a credible Bostonian lady and member of the city’s exclusive black elite that boasts white values and tastes.

The novel oscillates, at times awkwardly and others seamlessly, between its satirical psychological portrait of Cleo in her shameless drive to advance her social status and its documentary examination of the physical and social world around her. West devotes long passages to describing areas in Boston, such as the marketplace Faneuil Hall where the “rumble of wagon wheels was continuous, and drivers cursed each other as they tried to thread their huge loads and huge horses through the nearly impassable lanes” (68). Occasionally she suspends the narrative momentarily to comment—usually ironically—on matters of race and class. In describing a trolley ride with both black and white passengers, West writes,

Boston whites of the better classes were never upset nor dismayed by the sight of one or two Negroes exercising equal rights. They cheerfully stomached three or
four when they carried themselves inconspicuously. To them the minor phenomenon of a colored face was a reminder of the proud role their forebears had played in the freeing of the human spirit for aspirations beyond the badge of house slave. (40)

Similar to her FWP reports, the novel brings together different narrative modes. The third-person narrator is at once the anthropologist, carefully assembling the physical reality with near scientific precision, the satirist who playfully chastises the internal dynamic of a racist society, and the voice and consciousness of Cleo who struggles to control her environment and her own identity within it.

In his introduction to the 1969 Arno Press edition, William Robinson writes:

The book is something of a social worker’s detailed report of a group of turn-of-the-century Boston born and bred Negroes who persist in believing that they are indeed special, certainly superior to southern Negroes, and to many dark-skinned Negroes everywhere….The novel shows the influence of Miss West’s days as a social investigator, for the characters only rarely are fully realized, moving from one situation to another without much attention given to their motivations or reactions. (n. pag.)

Shortly after, however, Robinson notes, “In Cleo, Miss West has come very close to presenting a real, complex fictional human being.”

The implication is that West’s portrayal was successful in spite of its sociological elements. Yet, Robinson also notably locates the novel’s real value in the very social reportage he derides, stating: “With much of the total expanse of American Negro life being made available, at long last, to the reading public, The Living is Easy will contribute much toward understanding a long neglected aspect of life among New England Negroes” (n. pag.). Though somewhat banal, Robinson’s remark frames the novel as a recognizable extension of the FWP’s efforts to engage readers in untold parts of American life. Like the Project she worked on, West’s novel unearths a neglected reality, thus potentially expanding Americans’ awareness of the variety of lived experiences that defy stereotypes and cultural expectations.
But Cleo’s “complex” character is also born out of—and not achieved in spite of—West’s documentary fieldwork. Indeed, the novel’s psychological investigation shows traces of West’s FWP assignments, particularly with regard to Cleo’s relationship to her southern past. While Cleo overtly denies “the South,” deriding expressions of its culture in the southern transplants she abhors in Boston, she is also paradoxically deeply connected to it. She longs for the companionship of her three sisters who are still “back home” and who offer her only connection to her late-mother, her carefree southern childhood, and the communal bonds she left behind. West writes,

Though Cleo did not know the word, and would not have admitted that its meaning was applicable, her yearning for her sisters was greater than her concern for them. All of her backward looks were toward the spellbinding South. The rich remembering threw a veil of lovely illusion over her childhood. Her sisters, with their look of Mama, would help her keep that illusion alive. She could no longer live without them. They were the veins and sinews of her heart. (53)

Eventually, she convinces her sisters to leave their husbands and children for a temporary stay in Boston, which she deviously ensures will last longer than she had promised. The novel’s subplot ventures into the machinations of two elite black families whose social milieu Cleo aspires to join. But the novel chiefly centers around the uneasy cultural mixing that Cleo has choreographed with her sisters’ visit. Collectively the sisters represent Cleo’s folk past; they are forthright, warm, and accepting, completely untouched by the rigid distinctions and practiced personas of the East Coast. Indeed, Cleo’s desire to reclaim her folk past while social climbing Boston’s black elite offers the central tension of the story. West writes, “You really had to love Bostonians to like them. And the part of Cleo that did love them was continually at war with the part of her that preferred the salt flavor of lusty laughter” (44).

Throughout her fieldwork for the FWP, West became well acquainted with the tensions between the North and South and the association of the urban North with the loss and denial of
folk culture. A number of the interviews West conducted in Harlem feature reflections of former southerners who had made their way to New York during the Great Migration and some of whom, for various reasons—not least of which was the economic strain of the Depression—reminisce fondly about their southern roots, their carefree childhoods, and the landscape and folk culture now lost to northern urban struggle. It is not that West’s subjects exhibit any of Cleo’s traits or hypocrisy, but they did seem to offer West, a born and raised northerner, a useful glimpse into southern culture and the yearning for home felt by many migrants, despite the evident hardships for blacks in the South.

In one such interview from 1938, West records Mrs. Emma Ayer from Camden, South Carolina recalling her annual trip with her mother to pick berries. The informant vividly describes the occasion, invoking the carefreeness of childhood in contrast to the hard work of the adults: “When you filled one big pan, you’d start filling another one, and you kept on ‘till you’d picked as many as you could. ‘Course the children ate more than they picked and sometimes they’d run off and play.” She even recalls the daily grind with affection: “We got up early in the morning and had breakfast as soon as it was light…We had salt pork and hominy grits and hot biscuits” (“Mrs. Emma Ayer” FWP-LC).

In her notes that follow the transcript, West writes of the woman: “She wants very much to return to the South where she has a home. Despite the fact that her children are all in New York, she feels that she would be happier in her own home in South Carolina, and it is very likely that she will return as soon as her youngest child is married” (“Mrs. Emma Ayer” FWP-LC).

In *The Living is Easy*, West recreates the nostalgia for a southern childhood, portraying Cleo as a young girl wandering with her sisters feverishly and untethered through a fertile
countryside, seemingly remote from the hard labor and burden of their parents and the grown-up world. “The wildness was in [Cleo],” she writes, “the unrestrained joy, the desire to run to the edge of the world and fling he arms around the sun, and rise with it, through time and space, to the center of everywhere” (13). In depicting one summer morning, West even borrows Mrs. Ayer’s breakfast menu. She writes, “The four sisters sat around the kitchen table, eating their salt pork and biscuit and hominy…” (15).

The blitheness of youth becomes synonymous with the South and likewise, the loss of childhood and innocence reflects the journey north. In another FWP interview, with a Mrs. Ella Johnson, West remarks in her notes that “Whereas Mrs. Johnson came from a localized culture, and no doubt had many folk traits when she reached the North, she is now so urbanized that there was very little in the three hour interview except the games which was worth recording as folk material” (“Mrs. Ella Johnson” FWP-LC). And in an interview with a Mrs. Gardenia Banta, West’s informant scorns an acquaintance for rejecting her southern roots, complaining:

She was always talking about how southern people don't have any sense and all like that. Now, that girl was born up here but her people were all born in the South. She calls herself a northerner. She’s no northerner. If her people, her parents, had been born up here, and then she was born here, she'd be a northerner. But her people were born in the South so she's no northerner. If her people had been born up here, she wouldn’t have that on her tongue (the southern form of speech). (“Mrs. Gardenia Banta” FWP-LC)

In the novel, the South is the site of the authentic folk, where real black culture resides and can be mined for meaning. The North becomes linked to adulthood, with its attendant desires for status and individual gain, and Cleo its embodiment; she is determined and selfish, decidedly anti-communal, and in West’s caustic portrayal, an embodiment of the mercenary northern city. Cleo, as Lawrence Rodgers argues, is caught in a “liminal phase…perched between a moral center associated with the South and the misdirected normative values of the middle-class black
North” (168). He writes, “The values that are missing from Boston society are to be found within the folk culture of Cleo’s pre-migration Southern childhood. Thus, the ongoing, implied juxtaposition of these social, geographic, and psychic poles makes Cleo’s migration the linchpin of West’s satire” (167).

As a result of West’s mocking depiction of Cleo and sympathetic rendering of the authentic southern sisters, the reader is much inclined to prefer the “lusty laughter” of the South to the restrictive social mores of the north. We recognize West’s narrative as not just a piercing critique of the black elite she knew in Boston, but also a celebration of southern folklore and black oral culture, to which West gained access through many of her FWP interviews.

This is not what is typically regarded as the literature of protest. West grapples with matters of race—as well as class and gender—but her critique is couched, often ironically, in the intimate voices of her subject, whose denial of racial constraints only serves to reinforce their existence for the reader. West’s novel can thus prove difficult to situate alongside the work of other black writers of the period, which might partly account for her critical obscurity relative to Wright or Hurston. Rodgers argues that the novel has been misleadingly labeled “middle class fiction,” which “puts it in a position that has frequently borne the critical and cultural burden of being essentially anti-black” (161). But, he contends that the novel deserves attention for the way “West presented to fiction a highly original view of black life” (165). Rodgers also notes that by reading “the novel primarily through its middle-class veil, critics have paradoxically aligned it with the very subject that it mocks” (161). Of course, some of the Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, focused on the black middle-class, with female protagonists who struggle, often nobly, to define themselves within the constraints of an insular black elite. But as Cherene Sherrard-Johnson points out, Cleo is an entirely “new type of African
American heroine” in that she demands no identification with or sympathy from the reader, but remains, despite her irresolvable quandary, insistent that the world bend to her own terms. She writes, “West’s Cleo perceives that the ‘counterfeit’ world she seeks to infiltrate is built on untenable notions of racial superiority; however, instead of working to dismantle these false distinctions of class and color, she manipulates the social hierarchies of the black elite to serve her own selfish needs” (613).

West has, in a sense, let Cleo be Cleo, restraining herself, as Cleo’s creator, from interfering with this flawed protagonist’s quest. Cleo is never enlightened, remaining convinced of her own rightful power, much like “Daddy Grace” or the hostess of the cocktail party, in whom West betrayed no sentimentality, no absolving features that would allow her to more favorably represent Negro experience. Like the subjects West described and analyzed in her fieldwork, Cleo can be recognized as figure of social documentary far more than an envoy for racial protest.

Although well-received by critics when it was first published, *The Living Is Easy* sold few copies and soon went out of print. In 1982, the Feminist Press reissued the novel, earning West new found success late in life. She would later publish her second novel, *The Wedding* (1995), which revolves around a middle-class black community in Martha’s Vineyard in the 1950s. Despite their near 50-year distance from one another, both novels emerged in an era of women’s rights, thereby establishing West as a unique voice within the arena of black feminism.

Scholars have rightly studied Cleo’s defiance of patriarchal norms. Jennifer Wilks, for example, argues that Cleo is “fundamentally at odds with her society’s gendered division of space and labor (569), while Sherrard-Johnson maintains the novel is a “feminist interrogation of heterosexual marriage and black bourgeois society” (610). The latter writes, “West’s novel
destabilizes the perception that an advantageous marriage is the key to social stability or personal happiness” (618). But unearthing *The Living Is Easy* primarily within feminist scholarship has also helped to separate it from its historical roots—pre-women’s movement—and from the field of black literature and thought in the midcentury, and specifically from the documentary mode it employs. Of course, West’s unique historical and private lens into a black social milieu demands a rich array of critical perspectives, and the novel’s ties to the Writers’ Project offer only partial illumination. Yet, at the same time, recognizing its kinship to the documentary style that West cultivated through her work on the Project helps release the novel—and the FWP itself—from the restrictive framework of African American protest literature, thus opening up a new space for theoretical questions around twentieth century black writing.

**Margaret Walker**

The fusion of folklore, historical documentary, and explorations of subjectivity can also be distilled in Margaret Walker’s monumental neo-slave narrative *Jubilee* (1966). If in West we glean the FWP’s role in helping her hone her literary voice and giving her raw material and documentary focus, in Walker we see the larger imprint of the Project’s ethos and philosophy.

Born in 1915 in Alabama, but raised mostly in New Orleans, Walker moved north in the early 1930s and completed her bachelor’s degree at Northwestern University. In 1936, she joined the Illinois Writers’ Project in Chicago where she worked alongside Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Arna Bontemps, and Jack Conroy in the folklore unit collecting *living lore*, which included personal narratives from local Chicago residents, children’s games and songs, recipes, folktales, industrial lore, and religious customs. She had previously met Wright in South Side Writers’ Group, a collective of black Chicago writers. He encouraged her to apply for a position with the FWP and would soon take on the role of literary mentor, as he did for many other
aspiring black writers. (In 1987, Walker published her biography of Wright *The Daemonic Genius of Richard Wright: A Portrait of the Man, a Critical Look at His Works*, in which she details their friendship and their subsequent falling out.) After leaving the FWP in 1939, Walker earned her Masters of creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1940, where she would return to complete her doctoral degree in the early 1960s after she had had four children and begun a teaching career. Her novel *Jubilee* was her doctoral dissertation—but it was also the culmination of more than thirty years of exhaustive research begun around the same time that she worked for the FWP.

Compared to those of other federal writers, few of the manuscripts or transcripts housed in the Library of Congress bear her byline. Some may have been lost, and others are likely scattered in collections of her papers both in Chicago and at the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University in Mississippi, where she taught from 1949 until her retirement. But despite the paucity of FWP documents attributed to her, Walker was no doubt well versed in the Project’s methods of recording folklore and oral traditions and its guiding belief in folk practices as essential expressions of American identity. Transcripts from administrative documents show that Walker was in attendance at meetings with Wright, Algren, and Conroy, among others, in which techniques for gathering folklore were discussed.\(^2\) For her part, Walker was unfailingly positive about her experience on the Project, writing in her essay "Willing to Pay the Price," that the FWP "turned out to be one of the best writers’ schools I ever attended" (17). She also credits Algren, whom she met through the Project, with inspiring her to finish her most famous poem "For My People" when he asked her the question "What do you want for your people?" (17).

Elsewhere, too, Walker acknowledged the FWP for fostering a vibrant community of writers. "It

\(^2\) See my discussion about one such meeting in Chapter Four, pp. 137-139.
was a wonderful time,” she told Charles Rowell in a 1979 interview. “And I was a very young
writer then, but I remember the comradeship of the people on the project” (Walker, “Poetry,
History, and Humanism” 29). In her essay, “New Poets of the Forties and the Optimism of the
Age,” she writes,

The WPA meant two things of far-reaching significance to Negro writers. It meant, first (as it meant to whites), money on which to exist and provision for the meager security necessary in order to create art. It meant, second, that Negroes who were creative writers, and poets especially, were no longer entirely isolated from whites. In cities above the Mason-Dixon Line where the writers’ projects drew no color lines, a new school of Black and white writers mushroomed into being overnight. (104)

In all of her recollections, Walker tends to focus on the Project’s role in cultivating
connections among writers and literary professionals rather than on the training it provided or the
ideas it espoused. Perhaps because of this, critics have also tended to skirt the substantive role
the FWP may have played in her writing. Maryemma Graham only alludes to it when she writes,
“The WPA not only meant getting paid for working with enough time left to write on her own,
but it also meant meeting other writers, finding out about publishing outlets, and being exposed
to new ideas” (21). Ana Nunes maintains that the period “laid the foundations for her writing
career” as it established for her “the bond between political activism and literary creativity that
governed all her writing” (28). Joyce Pettis is similarly vague, writing that during her FWP
years, “Walker secured the poetic form she had been working to develop” (45). But Pettis also
implicitly denies any connection between the FWP and Walker’s literary inspiration, asserting
that “by the time Walker began working on the WPA, she carried the South within her” (45).

Her identity with the ways of her people—with their mannerisms, jokes, songs,
tales, loves, and fears—had been well formed through both her home environment
and living in southern culture, and these ways constituted a richly complex reservoir from which she would draw the substance of both her poetry and the
novel she wanted to write. (45)
This is true, of course. Walker’s early poetry incorporates her experience and observations of black life in the South and her novel *Jubilee* is based in part on recollections that her grandmother relayed about her experience as a young girl living under slavery. But, like West and other writers, the FWP gave Walker access to a unique documentary form and method, as well as a larger philosophical framework through which to distill both her thematic and aesthetic concerns.

We see evidence of this in one of the few archived FWP documents on which Walker’s name does appear, an interview with a southern informant who relates a story about his cousin back home, “de baddest man in town.” Filed as a “folktale,” the 1939 transcript features no editorial or descriptive notes but rather reads as a long monologue without any interjections from the interviewer, a technique that was encouraged within both the New York and Chicago folklore units. Titled “Yalluh Hammuh,” the phonetically transcribed name of the man’s cousin, the monologue is a painstaking reproduction of black southern dialect, demonstrating Walker’s ear for voice and speech patterns. But Walker’s transcription also foretells her strategy of developing a narrative—both the characterization and the sequence of events—*through* voice, so that the plot unfolds within her characters’ speech. In “Yalluh Hammuh,” the speaker describes how “mos evhy week” his cousin “done bump somebody off in de canal.” Then at a local bar in town, as he is dancing with a “real nice lookin gal,” he meets his match when in walks “dis long tall skinny fella whut look lak he got real sloe eyes an jes kin see troo em.” The informant explains, “Now Yalluh Hammuh is a bad guy all right, but dis Pick-Ankle-Slim pose ta be a badder guy. He a bad bad guy. He so bad he real bad; bad as Stagolee.” After mayhem breaks out and guns

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3 See discussion about this technique in Chapters Two and Four.
are fired, Yalluh eventually escapes the bar. The end of the story returns to the canal, where the
two men meet again.

Well den Yalluh Hammuh gone bout his business but de nex time dey drains de
canal evhy body dere ta see who is done bin bumped. Pick-Ankle Slim is right
dere an evhbody bout ta blieve he musta bump Yalluh Hammuh whin heah cum
Yalluh Hammuh walkin right up ta Pick-Ankle-Slim an all de peoples cummence
ta backin on back where dey kin watch Yalluh Hammuh an Pick-Ankle-Slim
tusseln an wraslin right dere on de edge o dat dere canal. Who beat? Yalluh
Hammuh uv cose. He mah cousin an he de baddest man in town. (“Yalluh
Hammuh” FWP-LC)

It is a tall tale made both suspenseful and absurd by the distinctive voice of the teller, whose
delight and humor are registered in Walker’s masterful transcription of his vernacular. The
interview clearly employs the principle method of the FWP’s folklore unit to let the speaker
speak for himself. But more than a linguistic rendering of speech, the monologue conveys the
significance of oral culture to black southern migrants and their worldview. The act of
storytelling, of composing a salacious tale from “back home” within the traditional structure of
the folktale, was a familiar cultural expression among northern blacks of looking back and of
keeping alive the irretrievable and distant southern past. Central to the FWP’s documentary
approach was the transcription of this oral culture—both as a means to anthropologically
investigate black culture and, in a more abstract and perhaps literary sense, to assert creative
power over it. Indeed, arguing that minstrel show representations of black vernacular had
designated Negro culture as “a pathological condition,” Sterling Brown wanted to show how
“African American folk humor functioned as a strategy for exerting control in an often hostile
world” (Tidwell 105).

The Project’s methods and Brown’s literary vision for black folklore resound throughout
*Jubilee*, published more than 25 years after Walker left the FWP. As a document of folk history
that explores folk practices, oral culture, individual voices, and subjectivities, *Jubilee* seems a culmination of the Project’s efforts in the area of black history and could be regarded as the archetype for the new folk literature that Brown and Botkin hoped that the FWP would inspire. Indeed, without invoking the FWP directly, Walker seems to nevertheless acknowledge the thrust of its influence. In her essay, “How I Wrote Jubilee,” she notes that she “always intended *Jubilee* to be a folk novel based on folk material: folk sayings, folk belief, folkways. As early as 1948 I was conceiving the story in terms of this folklore. I also wanted the book to be realistic and humanistic” (25).

Inspired by stories about slavery Walker’s grandmother told her when she was a child, *Jubilee* recounts the life of Vyry Ware, a young woman, modeled after Walker’s great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown, who was born into slavery. The novel spans Vyry’s life as a small child in 1840s, through the Civil War, and into Reconstruction, when Vyry’s daughter Minna, Walker’s maternal grandmother, is a young girl. In the intervening years, we see Vyry grow into an intelligent and self-aware young woman who suffers the brutality of slavery under her own father, who largely rejects her, and his wife, who bitterly resents her. Marrying twice, and giving birth to many children, some of whom die, Vyry is desperate for freedom but fears losing her children in any attempted escape. *Jubilee* is the first novel about slavery written from the point of view of a black woman, and as such offers a perspective grounded in the emotional and domestic sphere of female experience that is largely omitted in other fictional accounts.

Emerging as it did in the mid-1960s at the height of the civil rights movement and the dawn of the women’s movement, *Jubilee* has been most eagerly regarded as extraordinary expression of a society in transition and a signal for a new breed of historical fiction. Melissa
Walker maintains that the novel’s “linear progress toward racial justice” (65) “was able to draw on energy generated by the urgency of the movement itself to bring it to fruition” (64). She writes, “Events in this novel about slavery and its aftermath, and even the form of the novel, are directly related to the struggle for civil rights that peaked in the mid-1960s (57). Calling *Jubilee* “precedent-setting black historical fiction” that laid the groundwork for fiction by Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and others, Pettis argues that the novel, “with its focus on a southern black woman…secured Walker’s position on the cutting edge of literary interest generated about black women characters” (46). The novel was seen by many as a contemporary rewriting of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, and one that channeled the New Left’s efforts to overturn dominant historical representations—what Walker acknowledged when she noted in an interview that while Mitchell “was coming out the front door, I was coming out the back door” (Walker “Poetry, History, and Humanism”).

But though *Jubilee* resonates with the cultural and intellectual energies of the mid-sixties, it belongs as much to the era in which Walker began working on it. In precisely the same fashion that the FWP approached its folklore collection, Walker aims her lens not on the sweeping history of a people, but narrowly on the voices and folk practices of its enclosed world. Divided into three sections: “Antebellum Years,” “Civil War,” and “Reconstruction,” *Jubilee* has on its surface the didactic air of a history book. Yet these monumental historical markers quickly yield to intimate voices and daily lives, the food and its preparation, the music, the spiritual customs, axioms, mythology, rhymes, clothing, plants, and medicinal practices of slave life. As Phyllis Rauch Klotman notes, “Historical fact/incident are the backdrop for the folk experience which is always of primary importance, as indicated by the fact that the folk reference always takes precedence over the historical” (144).
Indeed, folklore and oral culture are not simply sprinkled throughout *Jubilee*, but constitute the novel’s governing structure. Walker begins each of the 58 chapters with an epigraph composed of a fragment from folk music or history. Many of the chapter titles are themselves folk sayings or historical and biblical quotes. For example, the first chapter is titled with the folk saying *Death is a mystery that only the squinch owl knows*, and begins with the fragment from the spiritual song “Swing low, sweet chariot,/ Coming for to carry me home…” The Civil War Years section begins with the first line of “The Battle Hymn Republic,” “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.” The first chapter of this section is the quote: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave” (177). James Spears maintains that “Jubilee is a folk novel from opening to finish. Folk culture undergirds it and mirrors the morals, mores, and sociological patterns implicit in the ethos of the novel” (225). Similarly, Pettis remarks that for Walker, “the re-creation of slave culture, with its folk beliefs and practices, is the essence of the novel… More than physical setting and chronological time anchor this novel in the southern experience of black Americans” (47).

Much the same way that Botkin and Brown advocated the literary use of folklore, in Walker’s treatment, descriptions of folk culture always serve two purposes. One is anthropological and historical, reflecting her documentary desire to “set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and Reconstruction” (Walker “Poetry, History, and Humanism”). The other purpose is more symbolical; folklore becomes a material surrogate that asserts cultural identity, revealing the psychological dimensions of slavery, and expresses the unrelenting push for freedom. For example, Walker devotes long passages to the rich southern foods Vyry’s Aunt Sally prepares in the big house: “beaten biscuits and spoon bread, fried chicken, hot waffles and light bread, light
puddings, fruit duffs, fruit cakes, huckleberry pies, roast turkeys and geese…” In doing so, she provides both a historically accurate rendering and a signifier for the strict divisions between slaves and their masters. She writes, “Vyry had learned from Aunt Sally how to lard quail with salt fat pork and how to cook potted pheasant in cream, to roast and stuff turkey and geese and ducks, but she knew also the penalty for even tasting such morsels if Big Missy found out about it” (139). Within this passage alone, food connotes the work of the slave woman, skills that are passed down through generations, as well as a luxury, an object of desire that is denied to those who produce it. But food also offers the slaves a way to circumvent their repression. Walker writes,

At night when they closed that door it was like going off in another world that was grand and good. Vyry was so devoted to Aunt Sally she would never have told anyone how often she saw her steal great panfuls of white folks’ grub, and how many pockets she had in her skirts and her bosom where she hid biscuits and cakes and pie, even though, even though Big Missy had threatened more than once to have Aunt Sally strung up and given a good beating if she ever caught her stealing. Once safe in the cabin they would fill their stomachs full of good food, tittering over the thought of how many different kinds of fits Big Missy would have if she knew she had been outsmarted. (42)

Food, then, becomes a channel for subversion, a way for a woman to offer a slice of freedom within the safety of her own domestic space. In writing about the role of food in the FWP former slave narratives, Charles Joyner notes that “Whenever a former slave speaks of good times in slavery, seldom does he leave food out of the picture…such joys as slavery allowed were centered around food and actually found in the food itself, creating a desire deeper than hunger for that kind of food” (177).

Similarly, Walker’s inclusion of children’s rhymes fulfills a dual-role. In portraying the childhood bond between Vyry and Miss Lillian, the master’s daughter and Vyry’s
unacknowledged half-sister, Walker describes in detail a number of the games they play and songs they chant.

They played “Go in and out the window” and “Hold up the gates as high as sky, Let King George’s horses pass by, and their laughter rang out with

Last night, night before,
Twenty-four robbers at my door.
I got up and let them in,
Hit ‘em on the head with a rolling pin
All hid??

But Miss Lillian’s favorite game was

Here comes a gentleman just from Spain,
To court, to court, your daughter Jane.
My daughter Jane she is too young,
To be controlled by any one.
Oh let her be old,
Oh, let her be young.
It is her duty,
And it must be done.
Stand back, stand back,
You sassy man,
And choose the fairest
In the land.
The fairest one that I can see,
Is come pretty maiden and walk with me. (52-53)

These rhymes are among several others that Walker includes in this section to illustrate the girls’ unique friendship despite the forces that separate them. The nature of the rhymes, too, suggest that the games provide the children with an emotional outlet through which they can escape—or even have control over—the oppressive structures around them. And yet, one or two examples might have sufficed. But here, as elsewhere in the novel, Walker showcases her exhaustive research, compiling for the reader an extensive window into folk history while at the same time relating the aspirations of slaves *through* the practice of folklore.
Vyry’s story is most powerfully expressed through Walker’s use of the folk voice. Walker is a close and careful observer of language and the manner it intersects with race and class. She varies the inflection of speech among her characters and recreates the natural rhythm of dialect—an approach that Walker admonished Margaret Mitchell for failing to employ in her representation of vernacular, noting that “she does not distinguish between her cultivated whites and uncultivated whites. She had all the blacks speaking one way and all the whites another. That is wrong in the South” (“Poetry, History, and Humanism”). James Spears writes,

“Walker is a dialectologist in the strictest sense of the word, and her use of eye dialect for characterization is both accurate and effective. It captures the essence of black dialect in pronunciation, vocabulary items, usage, and grammar, particularly syntax. An exhaustive study should be made of the novel’s language itself…” (226)

Again, however, Walker’s use of the folk voice is not simply mimetic but also emblematic of emotional and cultural resilience. Speech is the novel’s guiding force, filtering and shaping the reality that Walker portrays. Indeed, Jubilee opens with folk voices—a conversation between Grandpa Tom, “the stable boy,” and May Liza, “Marster’s upstairs house girl,” both of whom are introduced after their initial un-narrated dialogue:

“May Liza, how come you so restless and uneasy? You must be restless in your mind.”
“I is. I is. That old screech owl is making me nervous.”
“Wellum, tain’t no use in your gitting so upsot bout that bird hollering. It ain’t the sign of no woman nohow. It always means a man.”
“It’s the sign of death.” (3)

The folk voice and folk mythology announce the private tragedy endemic to slavery—the imminent death of Sis Hetta, Vyry’s 29-year-old mother who has borne fifteen children, most by the master, John Dutton. Motherhood and its perpetual endangerment among slaves is the core crisis around which the events of the novel circulate. But within Walker’s narrative construct, the folk voice is always affirming itself, upsetting and at times even injuring the white authority that
forever threatens it. After Vyry bears a son to a free black man, Randall Ware, she approaches her master/father to ask for the permission to marry. When he balks, she asks plainly: “Marster, is you mad cause I asked you to let me marriage with my child’s own daddy?” Shortly after, she asks: “Marster, do you think it’s a sin for me to want to be free?”

Her words were knifing him like a two-edged sword. He opened his mouth and his lower jaw sagged. A dull red moved again over his face and mottled the blood through his skin. (144)

Through voice, we travel through Vyry’s consciousness. As an older free woman, she and her second husband Innis flee with their children when members of the Klu Klux Klan set fire to their new house in Alabama. Vyry reflects:

I oughta be glad we is living. I oughta be glad ain’t none of my chilluns got burned up in that fire. I oughta be glad me and Innis is still strong and can build us another house. I oughta be glad we is got food saved, and if we ain’t got nothing but the clothes on our backs I can make more. I oughta be glad for the chickens and the cow and the pigs, for the new team of mules, and for the crop we got planted in the fields. But I ain’t. Lawd, I ain’t glad about nothing this morning. You knows I ain’t. This here ain’t nothing but a gray morning for me when I can’t see no sunshine shining nowhere. Lawd. I done tried and tried. (379)

Even as she expresses defeat, her rich inner speech with its rhythms and repetition evoke a profound sense of endurance—the affirmation of both Vyry’s survival and the survival of the folk voice, the basis of cultural identity. Just as the novel begins, it concludes with the folk voice. Vyry’s child Minna listens to her mother “crooning to a huge flock of laying hens: Come biddy, biddy, biddy, biddy, Come chick, chick, chick, chick!” (497). Vyry’s folk voice thus offers the novel’s final words, and in doing so, signals the ultimate resilience of the slave and the continuation of the folk tradition.

Along the agonizing trail toward freedom that the novel travels, the folk voice is constantly sounding out, and in effect, exposing and then transcending slavery’s ruthlessness. Walker does not produce this voice for documentary realism alone, but as the essence of identity
and survival of a people—in the same way that Brown and Botkin sought to present folk speech as far more than an aesthetic device or an artifact, but a way a culture understands, expresses, and sustains itself.
CHAPTER THREE

Ralph Ellison: Capturing the Idiom

Few American writers have been as celebrated for rendering the complexities of African American consciousness as Ralph Ellison. Though he only published one novel in his lifetime, the acclaimed *Invisible Man* in 1952, Ellison is still widely upheld as the most discerning voice of black experience, and one that seems to occupy its own category of twentieth century black literature.

Yet, for all of the literary godliness that he emits, Ellison remains contentious for some critics on the Left. Following the publication of *Invisible Man*, many Marxist scholars were preoccupied by what they perceived as the anti-communist bias of the novel. In more recent years, some leftist writers have drawn a new line of attack, arguing that in disassociating himself from radical politics, Ellison largely covered up his own leftist past. Barbara Foley, the first and most adamant of these critics, has attempted to show a strong disconnect between Ellison's fervent disengagement from politics in the 1950s and his political participation in the 1930s while he worked for the Federal Writers’ Project, which, she claims was testament to his literary proletarianism (“Ellison as Proletarian Journalist”). Michael Denning argues that *Invisible Man*, despite being embraced for its fierce post-war brand of individualism, is also inscribed with the class-consciousness and collectivist ideals of the Popular Front from which Ellison has been mistakenly distanced (332). And while lamenting Ellison’s “complicity with the anticommunist rhetoric of the McCarthy era,” Raymond Mazurek maintains that Ellison’s posthumously published short stories in *Flying Home* “suggest a closeness to the working class movements” that he fostered in the Depression and then later rejected (110).
Underpinning these arguments is a commitment to the strict divide between the 1930s and the 1950s, between the class-based analysis that often dominated the Depression era and the quest for personal identity and fulfillment that apparently carried writers away in the years following the war. This divide has shaped much criticism around Ellison; he is seen as either the poster child for 1950s liberalism or a leftist in an individualist’s disguise.

But he was neither in such clear terms. When we look at Ellison’s body of work from the 1930s through the 1960s, we see a great deal more continuity than much critical work would suggest. While he was loosely aligned with the Communist Party during the Depression, and wrote for various leftwing publications, such as *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker*, he was never very politically active in radical causes. At the same time, while the cultural shift in the post-war era to a more subjective, identity-driven approach to the human condition was real, Ellison did not adopt this mindset in order to fall in line with Cold War values or advance his career, as Foley implies (“Ellison as Proletarian Journalist”). In fact, Ellison’s liberal humanist worldview, his focus on individual identity and his distrust of political organization were largely cultivated not after the war but in the 1930s—particularly through his work for the Federal Writers’ Project.

That Foley and others have cited the FWP as evidence for Ellison’s repressed radical past is ironic. Though it attracted communist intellectuals and was later under investigation by Congressman Martin Dies’ red baiting Congressional committee, the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, the Project actually had few specific political goals beyond echoing the spirit of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and little expressed interest in feeding the “proletarian” literary genre. Instead, its vision was diffuse, blending the reformist spirit of the Popular Front with the literary techniques of modernism. As I discussed in Chapter One, under
folklore editor Benjamin Botkin and Negro Affairs editor Sterling Brown’s national direction, the folklore division, for which Ellison worked in New York City, promoted the idea that transcribing personal narratives and oral histories and writing the first-person perspective would allow Americans to better respect one another and thus the nation’s diversity. Fostering awareness of each others’ unique backgrounds, our dialects, our folk experiences and traditions, would have, in Botkin’s own words, a “unifying and enlarging influence” on national identity (Hirsch, “Folklore in the Making” 11). The goal was not to foster immediate social change as much as it was to know, knowledge and understanding being among the chief outcomes of creative expression. It was an abstract, even metaphysical response to the concrete problems of social life. In many ways, the FWP bridged the historical divide between the 1930s and 1950s—between the ideological commitments of the Depression and the new liberalism of the postwar period—long before the divide was even recognized.

The four years Ellison worked for the Project in Harlem collecting Negro lore and assembling the stories and fragments of individual lives would influence both how he perceived the world and how he would incorporate that worldview into his literary vision. His biographer Arnold Rampersad maintains that what Ellison composed for the FWP “didn't rise to literature” but what ultimately “mattered far more was his exposure to a vast store of information and theorizing that, over the years, drastically altered his sense of the past and of human nature and culture itself” (116). In the thirtieth anniversary edition of Invisible Man, Ellison relates the rain-like effect of his FWP work as he sat down to write his first novel after the war: “Details of old photographs and rhymes and riddles and children’s games, church services and college ceremonies, practical jokes and political activities observed during my prewar days in Harlem—all fell into place” (qtd. in Taylor 225).
The Project did not necessarily align Ellison with radical politics or working class movements. If anything, it helped him turn away from the naturalism of many of his peers, providing him instead with an important venue for working through some of the central thematic and aesthetic elements of his writing: his original use of the vernacular and his reimagining of folk art forms, his fusion of oral culture with the reverberations of jazz and blues, and his abiding belief in the first-person voice and its power to fuel democratic principles and help define American identity.

This chapter will examine correlations between Ellison’s work for the FWP collecting folklore and his fictional writing. My discussion will focus first on a series of interviews that Ellison conducted with residents of Harlem and how these personal narratives helped to inform both formal and conceptual aspects of *Invisible Man*. Then I will concentrate on the children’s rhymes he collected in Harlem playgrounds and how the rhyme form itself became for Ellison an important vehicle for Ellison’s narrative rebellion against societal constraints and his reclamation of both folk and individual identity.

**Collecting Folklore for the FWP**

Ellison came to the Project in 1938, after having moved to New York City with no money and armed with only a musical education from Tuskegee University and an interest in studying sculpture. In Harlem, he met Richard Wright, who was both politically active and actively publishing works of fiction, and with Wright’s encouragement Ellison joined the Writers’ Project (for which Wright had worked in Chicago), and began to pursue a writing career. At the FWP, he was initially put to work compiling facts and figures about New York’s black community. In 1939, he was moved to the “Living Lore Unit,” a branch of the folklore division where his time
was devoted to collecting *Negro lore* in the form of miscellaneous slices of life on the streets of Harlem.

His colleagues did the same. Some documented the calls of street vendors peddling fresh fruit and hot yams; others wrote ethnographic essays describing in vivid detail the storefronts and homes of the neighborhood. They set out to gather strands of daily existence and to create a portrait of black urban life. That portrait remains unfinished, and today the efforts of the FWP workers survive in their original sundry form, filed in the archives of the Library of Congress. Like much of the FWP’s work, the collection of *Negro lore* comprises an un-curated collage of verbal snapshots.

With only pencil and paper—he had no other recording device—Ellison approached strangers perched on brownstone stoops or bar stools, asked them for their stories, and then attempted to transcribe the flow of their monologues. He later explained: “I would tell stories to get people going and then just sit back and try to get it down as accurately as I could. Sometimes you would find people sitting around on Eighth Avenue just dying to talk so you didn't have to encourage them too much” (qtd. in Banks xvii). He also sat in playgrounds and carefully transcribed the rhymes and songs the children chanted.

Many of the people Ellison interviewed were originally southerners, transplants to New York City who spoke in a characteristic black dialect that Ellison would attempt to recreate in his written report. As all federal writers were, he was required to fill out a cover sheet for each interview stating facts about his subjects, such as their names and street addresses, and any descriptive details about their appearance and the environment in which the interview took place. Ellison tended to make little use of these forms, often including only the most bare-bones information (except for the children’s rhymes, for which he wrote some explanatory notes).
Instead, he focused his attention on presenting the substance of his interviews, his subjects’ stories. And for these he refrained entirely from including his own questions or any third-person narration. He wrote each interview in monologue form, often beginning in mid-thought, so that the final narrative reads as one long stream of consciousness without a clear motivation or conclusion.

There is something almost oxymoronic about these final documents, how they combine a clinical format and hard data with rambling vernacular prose, like a modernist poem slipped into a fieldworker’s report. But though Ellison was notably experimental in his approach to the material, this mixing of genres, this strange amalgamation of anthropology, literature, and documentary journalism, was at the heart of the folklore division's mission. As discussed earlier, under Botkin’s direction, the Project aimed to break down the boundaries between the social sciences and artistic expression, to create a hybrid form that could simultaneously speak to individual self-expression and the collective urgencies of the period. He believed the creative writer could act as the “transmitter” of the cultural group, translating the myths, symbols and practices that constitute the folk into works of the imagination. Botkin encouraged FWP writers to aestheticize and develop symbolic language to capture the personal narratives of their folk subjects.

Ellison energetically answered this call, and as a result, according to Rampersad, “his interest in folklore would become almost scholarly in the coming years” (116). Nonetheless, Ellison would later credit T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, not the FWP, for influencing how he adapted folklore to the literary form. In his interview with The Paris Review in 1954, Ellison explained,

When I started writing, I knew that in both The Waste Land and Ulysses ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and significance to the material, but it took
me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way. ("The Art of Fiction")

Botkin, too, was moved by Eliot’s merging of myth and literature, and the questions he posed about the relationship between tradition, modernity, and the individual. But he was also troubled by Eliot’s anti-Semitism and insistence that outside cultural forms risked corrupting the purity of traditional America. Botkin grounded his efforts to revolutionize the field of folklore in the idea that the material and practices of everyday lives bear the same mythopoeic meaning as the traditions that were studied by the older folklorists. Both Ellison and Botkin rejected a top-down view of folklore, believing that folk practices are embodied in all lived experience, and that folk groups are forever engaged in a cultural exchange with each other. Both men perceived the protean nature of cultural practices, the idea that folklore maintains its vitality even as it changes and adapts to modern, urban environments, and both saw extraordinary potential in the democratizing power in folklore. By bringing these marginal voices to the center of the public consciousness, the writer could begin to upend conventional (racial and ethnic) hierarchies and modernize American identity. Cultural historian Jerrold Hirsch is one of the few critics to directly connect Botkin’s philosophy to Ellison's literary vision:

In Invisible Man Ellison found a way to create a work of art that, in its very structure, wrestled with all the issues that Botkin had hoped federal writers on the Living Lore units would learn to deal with: the nature of the relationship between the individual and the folk group, between provincialism and cosmopolitanism, between tradition and modernity, and between the fact of diversity and the need for unity. ("Eliot, Botkin, and Politics" 35)

Many of Ellison's contemporaries, like Zora Neale Hurston and poet Carl Sandburg, also actively incorporated folklore into their writing. But where Hurston committed herself to anthropological preciseness and Sandburg to populist grandiosity, Ellison was drawn early on to a kind of existential humanism, like that embodied in the work of one of this heroes, French
theorist Andre Malraux. Using the rich pool of rituals, rhythms, and oral narratives in *Negro lore*, Ellison tackled questions of subjectivity and identity, the meaning of self and how it negotiates the parameters set for it by society. For Ellison, the folk perspective is always universal. He was perpetually expanding from the particular, taking instances of black folk expressions and translating “meanings into wider, more precise vocabularies” (“Change the Joke” 112).

Despite their differing cultural backgrounds, Ellison and Botkin maintained remarkably similar positions on black folklore and its importance in shaping our collective national identity. Ellison argued that black folk forms are an integral part of American history and experience, “not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture” (“Art of Fiction”). Botkin too saw black history and folklore as a metaphor for the larger American experience: the historical drive for progress, symbolizing ‘the twentieth century in its mad chaotic forment [sic] of transition.’ (qtd. in Hirsch, “Folklore in the Making” 14).

In his 1971 lecture “Remembering Richard Wright,” Ellison lauded the FWP for motivating “an important surge to Afro-American cultural activity.”

The result was not a 'renaissance,' but there was a resuscitation and transformation of that very vital artistic impulse that is abiding among Afro-Americans....Afro-American cultural style is an abiding aspect of our culture, and the economic disaster which brought the WPA gave it an accelerated release and allowed many Negroes to achieve their identities as artists.” (“Remembering Richard Wright” 664)

Ellison recognized both the FWP’s role as a conduit for transforming black identity and the series of fortunate ironies that made this possible: the calamity of the Depression that inspired a massive government system that would ultimately fuel an artistic resurgence spearheaded, in part, by the victims of both the economic crisis and the systemic racism that plagued American life.
Yet, the lines between disaster and change travel the length of history, and it is no accident that the FWP stewarded the “accelerated release” of black artistic expression. The Project, at its core, was aimed at counteracting narrow, repressive, and notably white definitions of American identity by unleashing a plurality of American voices. Along with hiring a workforce that reflected the country’s diversity, Botkin wanted to cultivate a sense of shared identity by effectively charging this workforce with bringing a range of experiences and voices and cultural practices to the public consciousness.

That we see traces of Ellison’s FWP work in his fiction should come as no surprise. The folklore division offered writers untold amounts of raw material in the form of characters and stories, and memorable snippets of dialogue to rework and mold into their own writing.

In 1939, Ellison interviewed an anonymous man named at Eddie’s Bar on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem. Like all his interview reports, this one reads as single dramatic monologue. We never hear from Ellison himself, other than his few factual notes on the prefatory pages, and everything we learn about the speaker emerges through his barstool philosophizing:


Ellison would later drop this man’s words into the mouth of his character Mary Rambo, a protecting landlady and among Ellison’s folk figures, who warns the young Invisible Man:

“Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted” (Invisible Man 255).
But more than a recyclable quip, the line presents an instance of self-assertion, a modest claim for a self that pushes against the terms of the society that defines it. Both Mary and the man in Eddie’s bar have divested themselves of Harlem’s harmful effects. They are both from the South—the homeland of the Negro folk—and have made the journey north. But New York is an alien, invasive force to which they insist they are impermeable. The monologue, in short, addresses a problem inherent in black identity: how can one be one’s self in a racially hostile world?

More than economic realities, Ellison was interested in the psychological dimensions of social life. This interest emanates from his FWP interviews, and indeed was likely cultivated through his fieldwork for the Project, which by its very nature was invested in extracting the first-person folk perspective. These lines from his 1964 essay “Harlem is Nowhere” seem as if they were written for an FWP handbook: “But much has been written about the social and economic aspects of Harlem; we are here interested in its psychological character, a character that arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities” (321).

The FWP interviews helped to inform and enliven Ellison’s analysis of black individual identity as something not fixed or predetermined, but fluid and changing, and realized by a complex interplay of influences, both social and subjective. Like the man in Eddie’s bar, Ellison perpetually sought to define himself against outside expectations and racist prescriptions—the same ones that chase and ultimately drive the Invisible Man underground. The people Ellison met through his FWP work would afford him a window not only into the social realities of Harlem, but more significantly for him, into the black subject’s defiance of the social categories that constrain him. These individuals’ stories would testify to the extraordinary flexibility of self-definition, and give him fresh, unprocessed material for his own writing.
The Interviews

Tricksters

In June 1938, on the corner of Lenox Avenue in Harlem, a man identified only as Leo Gurley told Ellison a tall-tale that might well have provided the aspiring writer with the “organizing motif” for Invisible Man (Foley, “Ralph Ellison” 541). In Ellison’s transcript, Gurley offers an uninterrupted account of “Sweet-the-Monkey,” an unmistakably “wicked” fellow from the teller’s hometown of Florence, South Carolina, whose distinctive trait was that he “could make hisself invisible.”

You don’t believe it? Well here’s how he done it. Sweet-the-Monkey cut open a black cat and took out its heart. Climbed up a tree backwards and cursed God. After that he could do anything. (“Leo Gurley” FWP-LC)

Gurley describes Sweet’s triumph plundering the white folks’ belongings—“Lotsa times he just did it to show em he could”—while perpetually and mockingly avoiding their punishment:

The police would come up and say, “Come on, Sweet,” and he’d say, “You all want me?” and they’d put the handcuffs on im and start leading im away. He’d go with em a little piece. Sho, just like he was going. Then all of a sudden he would turn hisself invisible and disappear. (“Leo Gurley” FWP-LC)

The tale is one of a trickster, the recurrent figure of black folklore who both outwits and enacts revenge against his oppressor. He is a shape-shifter who is able to resist white authority, not by confronting it but by eluding it and constantly slipping from its grasp. The trickster manipulates himself to escape the reality which others are forced to endure. He is an ambivalent, indeterminable figure, both a folk representative and a perpetual other. Gurley says, “Hell, he had everybody in that lil old town scaird as hell, black folks and white folks.”

But while Sweet’s ability to disappear affords him freedom to do what he pleases, in the end, his conquest is called into question. Gurley finishes the tale:
They followed [Sweet’s footprints] till sundown when he came partly visible. It was red and the sun was shining on the trees and they waited till they saw his shadow. That was the last of Sweet-the-Monkey. They never did find his body, and right after that I come up here. That was bout five years ago. My brother was down there last year and they said they think Sweet done come back. But they cain’t be sho because he won’t let hisself be seen. (“Leo Gurley” FWP-LC)

The teller leaves Sweet’s outcome uncertain: did the police nab Sweet when he became momentarily visible, or was he able to vanish for good? That they “never did find his body” suggests that the police may have killed him and covered it up, evoking the customary murders of black men by white authorities throughout the country. On the other hand, Sweet was capable of existing outside of his body, and therefore might again have eluded them. Either way, this ambiguity ultimately undermines Sweet’s assertion of advantage. His fate, which is itself a matter of hearsay, remains unknown by the teller, and leaves the reader without the benefit of a completed fantasy.

Of course, the idea of invisibility itself implies ambivalence: one is both there and not there. To be invisible is to be both powerful and powerless. In *Invisible Man*, invisibility signals both the narrator’s inability to be seen for his true self and his own reclamation of his identity by disappearing from his tormentors. Invisibility is both the source of and the solution to predicament; it is saying say “yes” and “no” simultaneously, as the narrator’s grandfather instructs him to do at the novel’s outset.

In black folklore, the trickster figure often represents a fantasy of power among the powerless, the mediated release of repressed anger at the slave master. But he is not necessarily wicked or physically devious. Henry Louis Gates shows how the “signifying monkey” figure in African-American folklore uses figurative, often equivocal language to outsmart his oppressor, the lion, who fails to make sense of this symbolic communication, or “signifying” (*The Signifying Monkey*). Brer Rabbit, a folk trickster dating back to slavery uses this strategy as
well. In Gurley's folk-tale, the trickster's maneuvers are physical, but his nickname “Sweet the Monkey” points back to this tradition.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison embodies versions of these trickster figures in Peter Wheatstraw, whose wisdom and complexities are shrouded in his cheerful, offbeat black dialect, and Rinehart, whose perpetually camouflaged persona allows him to be everywhere and nowhere at once. Recognizing the narrator as a fellow southerner, Wheatstraw signifies to him in the metaphoric language of their past: “Oh goddog daddy-o... who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before!” (173).

Roaming the city streets in the early morning with a cart full of discarded blueprints, Wheatstraw is surreal and elusive, but also familiar to the narrator who feels “as though we’d walked this way before through other mornings, in other places...” (175). Like all tricksters, he cannot pinned down to one form: “I'm a piano player and a rounder, a whiskey drinker and a pavement pounder. I'll teach you some good bad habits” (176). The character of Rinehart, too, plays opposites; he is pimp and a preacher, gambler and lover, both real and fiction. When the narrator unwittingly impersonates Rinehart, he feels empowered by this new dialectical reality—his ability to flip over every given category of black identity.

Ellison’s tricksters reflect, as Berndt Ostendorf notes, something “deeply antirepressive both in the accumulated historical wisdom of black folk and in the African heritage of black culture” (154). At the same time, they serve as the incarnation of modern identity—fluid and indeterminate, defying both the rules and grasp of society. Morris Dickstein argues that Rinehart is “the novel’s version of the malleable, self-fashioned identity that Ellison evokes in his essays, a way of stepping out of imposed roles or shaping them to your needs” (207). As a folkloric icon, Sweet-the-Monkey not only speaks to the psychological dynamic of black resistance to
white rule, but also offered Ellison a symbolic framework for challenging one-dimensional definitions of blackness and expressing the elasticity of self-definition.

Capturing the Idiom

Though he did not directly attribute his interest in folklore to the FWP, Ellison did credit the Project with training him to render the patterns and cadence of speech in writing. “I tried to use my ear for dialogue to give an impression of just how people sounded,” he explained. “I developed a technique of transcribing that captured the idiom rather than trying to convey the dialect through misspellings” (qtd. in Banks xvii).

In her ethnographic studies in southern Florida for the FWP, Zora Neale Hurston translated the vernacular with phonological exactness, spelling out each syllable sound—a strategy she brought to her fiction and one that meshed well with the favored 1930s style of documentary realism. But Ellison largely rejected this formal approach. Preferring impression to precision, he aimed to capture the essence of speech, the sum of all the improvised parts and the ebbs and flow of enunciation. His was the voice of jazz, the so-called modernist idiom, through which the impulses and rhythm of the individual emerge. There is little doubt that his musical background enhanced his ability to discern these arrangements in the spoken voice. The vernacular, he writes, is a “dynamic process in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves” (“Going to the Territory” 608). It is thus a jazz-like negotiation between the standard form and the ever expanding universe of interpretive possibilities.

In his FWP interviews, Ellison proved particularly adept at conveying character through voice. Like Ernest Hemingway, one of his heroes, he could elicit a whole world of feeling and
experience simply through the subject’s patterns of phrase, choice of words, and even the spaces between words. But as a fieldworker, Ellison was not alone in breaking away from a strictly realist mode; the larger goal of the folklore division was to glean a suggestion of dialect and a feeling of character—the subjective viewpoint which was seen altogether more powerfully evocative than a verbatim interview transcription. Botkin was ultimately less interested in the accuracy of what was said, fixing his attention instead on the broader ability of writers to transmit the folk in a creative way—one that marshaled their unique talents for ensuring an aesthetic dimension to the individual voices. He argued that gathering folklore should entail “selecting and presenting aesthetically as well as socially valid expressions of folk-sayers—the individual creative geniuses and transmitters of the folk group or community” (“We Called it ‘Living Lore’”).

Ellison's 1938 street-corner interview with a man named Jim Barber demonstrates his ability to “capture the idiom,” and allow the sound and flow of a voice bring new meaning and depth to the material. Ellison’s transcription begins:

I was sitting up on the bandstand drumming, trying to make myself some beat-up change. Wasn’t such a crowd in the place that night, just a bunch a them beer-drinkers. I was looking down at em dancing and wishing that things would liven up. Then a man came up and give me four dollars just to sing one number. Well, I was singing for that man. I was really laying it Jack, just like Marian Anderson. What the hell you talking about; I’d sing all night after that cat done give me four bucks; thats almost a fin! But this is what brings you down. One a these bums come up to the stand and says to the banjo player:

“If you monkeys dont play some music, Im gonna throw you outta de jernt.”
Man, I quit singing and looked at that sonofabitch. Then I got mad. I said:

“Where the goddam hell you come from, you gonna throw somebody outa this band? How you get so bad? Why you poor Brooklyn motherfriger, I'll wreck this goddam place with you.”

Man, he looked at me. I said:
“Dont look at me goddamit, I mean what I say!” (“Jim Barber” FWP-LC)
The reader knows nothing about the speaker from the outset and is forced to orient him through his words alone, as if we are listening in on a conversation. The effect is to amplify the subject’s voice, making the sound of his speech the chief guiding force of the narrative. Ellison only occasionally misspells words to emphasize pronunciation, rendering the dialect through sentence structure and punctuation, where subtle stops and starts contribute to a natural rhythm. That he largely ignores the apostrophes in Barber’s contractions only accentuates the easy flow of Barber’s narration. Moreover, Ellison’s use of dialogue within the subject’s monologue points to the creative license he clearly took while recording the man’s speech. After all, it would be nearly impossible to accurately copy Barber’s breezy recollection of his conversation with the belligerent audience member without stopping him for clarification.

But the vividness and immediacy of Barber’s voice also help to reverse the racial conflict that he relates: the exploitative dynamic between black musicians and their white audience. As the teller, Barber has the benefit of commanding the narrative so that he is the victor in the exchange. Of course, this is true of all stories that we tell; the narrator owns the action. Yet, in omitting any context or third-person narration from the interview, Ellison further empowers Barber with one long uninterrupted monologue that presents a kind of personal proclamation.

It is within Barber’s continual, unbroken speech that we glimpse an important source of influence in the FWP: the Project offered Ellison not only techniques for recording dialect, but also an early handle on what he would later call the “democratizing action of the vernacular” (“Going to the Territory” 611). If the FWP interviews trained Ellison in the craft of replicating speech, they also taught him the importance of isolating speech, of giving the speaker the proverbial stage for his performance and control over his own story. By restraining the authoritative voice of the interviewer and by transforming the interviews effectively into one-
man shows, Ellison privileged the subjective over the clinical perspective, thereby leveling the playing field between the subject, his appraiser, and the world at large. Barber's monologue ends on a different note than it began:

See this bag? I got me a head a cabbage and two years a corn. Im going up here and get me a side a bacon. When I get home, gonna cook the cabbage and bacon, gonna make me some corn fritters and set back in my twenty-five-dollars-a-month room and eat my fritters and cabbage and tell the Jews to forgit it! Jack I'm just sitting back waiting, cause soon things is gonna narrow down to the fine point. Hitlers gonna reach in a few months and grab and then things'll start. All the white folksll be killing off one another. And I hope they do a good job! Then there wont be nobody left but Sam. Then we'll be fighting it out amongst ourselves. That'll be a funky fight. Aw hell yes! When Negroes start running things I think I'll have to get off the earth before its too late! (“Jim Barber” FWP-LC)

His comical finale seems a celebration of his fatalism. Armed with his folk roots—in the form of a bag of southern food staples—he laments that after being mistreated by a white audience, there is nothing left for him to do but watch from afar the inevitable pandemonium of war. Like the narrator in *Invisible Man*, whose baked yam turns him back to the cultural identity he has been trying to flee, Barber seems to surrender to himself and his place. He is resolute and helpless at the same time, aware that he has projected his own smallness against the raging, uncontrollable currents of history. But he is also aware that his smallness is a product of his race, which has been left outside of history to somehow, chaotically fend for itself.

Ellison conducted another interview in 1939 with a man whom he met on bench in Harlem’s Colonial Park and whom he describes simply as “an elderly Negro man, born in Virginia.” Here again he manages to convey a striking connection between history and the individual. The interview begins:

Its too bad bout them two submarines. They can experiment an everything, but they caint go but so far. Then God steps in. Them fellows is trying to make something what'll stay down. They said they'd done done it, but look what happened. Take back in 1912. They built a ship called the Titanic. Think they
built it over in England; I thinks that was where it was built. Anyway, they said it couldnt sink. It was for all the big rich folks; John Jacob Astor—all the big aristocrats. Nothing the color of this could git on the boat. Naw suh! Didnt want nothing look like me on it. One girl went down to go with her madam and they told her she couldnt go. They didnt want nothing look like this on there. They told the madam "you can go, but she caint." The girls madam got mad and told em if the girl didnt go she wasnt going. And she didnt neither. Yessuh, she stayed right here. (“Colonial Park” FWP-LC)

Again, Ellison provides no context for the man’s rambling, beginning the interview in mid-conversation. It appears as a stream of consciousness, in which an audience is implied only through the man's evident gesture toward his own skin: “Nothing the color of this could git on the boat.” As continuous prose, the interview seems at first glance a series of disjointed comments, but on further inspection, reveals a metaphor: the sinking vessels are themselves the failure and injustice of segregation. The analogy has emerged naturally in the rhythms of his speech. Like Hemingway, Ellison embodies the insight in stark, disconnected language without commentary. The monologue has the flow and spontaneity of a real voice, but bears the imprint of Ellison's craft: his ability to compress larger moral and psychological truths into vernacular speech.

The man finishes his speech with a prophecy of war:

Look at the dust blowing in that wind. Thats the way all the money they got gonna be. You see things, folks, they call white, but man aint got no idea of how white God gon make things. Money wont be worth no moren that dust blowing on the ground. Wont be no men down to Washington making fifty-thousand dollars a week and folks caint hardly make eighteen dollars a month. Evrybodyll be equal, in God's time. Wont be no old man Rockerfeller, no suh! Today you caint even buy a job if you had the money to do it with. Wont be nothing like that then. He'll let loose and somethingll slip down here and them what done took advantage of everything'll be floating down the river. Youll go over to the North River, and over to the East River and youll see em all floating along. And the river'll be full and they wont know what struck em. The lawd's gonna have his day. Theyll be a war. But it wont be no more wars like the World War. It wont bother me and you. Wont really be no war. Itll be the wicked killing the wicked! The war like the World War'll never be agin. They fooled now. They building navies and buying guns. But
dont you worry, it'll be just the wicked killing out the wicked. Its comings; God's time is coming and its coming soon! (“Colonial Park” FWP-LC)

Like a preacher before a large crowd, his voice seems to swell and intensify as his speech culminates in an apocalyptic vision. The powerful, he predicts, will inevitably self-destruct and, through God’s will, humanity will belong to the dispossessed. But the speech sounds less prophetic than cathartic; alone on a park bench with Ellison, the man seems to be unleashing his indignation at his own weakness, and in the process finds strength.

The FWP interviews afforded Ellison a valuable medium for working out the problem that lay at the heart of black identity: that, denied their own voices, blacks are too often spoken for, having their social world rather than their own words define who they are. For Ellison, black oral culture is a form of self-definition, a refusal to be defined by the outside, just as all black folklore announced “the Negro’s willingness to trust his own experience” (“Art of Fiction”). The subjects he interviewed are each defiant in his own way, each attempting through his own voice to entrap and exert power over the uncontrollable forces of his existence.

Writing about Invisible Man, critic Jack Turner notes the importance of narration—the act of story-telling—to the Invisible Man’s self-discovery. The narrator, he explains, “is realizing freedom within segregation through narration. Narration allows him to transform experience into meaning, to objectify his subjectivity on the written page” (70). The same is true of these interviews in which Ellison skillfully grants his subjects self-possession, the right to articulate their impressions, and in the process liberate themselves from the white ideology that governs their external reality.

Barbara Foley cites both of these FWP interviews as evidence for Ellison’s early Marxist leanings. In highlighting the “sharp class consciousness of various Harlemites,” Foley writes, “Ellison clearly discerned vital links between proletarian politics and vernacular speech; he did
not see articulating cultural identity as a matter of bricolage” (“Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist” 542).

Putting aside the fact that being conscious of racial and economic inequalities does not necessarily align one with proletarian politics, Foley seems to ignore Ellison’s real emphasis: he is not highlighting class conflict so much as the conflict these men voice between themselves and the world. The “vital link” Ellison discerned is actually between the vernacular and self-assertion, which together allow these individuals to, in effect, tame the larger historical and cultural forces that threaten to crush them.

The interviews thus also provided Ellison with a structure for showcasing forms of African-American speech and for calling into question the assumed authority of so-called “standard,” white English. Houston Baker has brilliantly theorized this dynamic as the “deformation of mastery.” He argues that the written expression of black dialect exposes not its substandard nature, but the contingent, fluid, and impermanent nature of all language. He writes, “The deformation of mastery refuses a master’s nonsense. It returns—often transmuting ‘standard syllables’—to the common sense of the tribe” (56). This resonates for the narrator of Invisible Man when he sees a group of young southern black men on a subway platform: “For the boys speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams” (144). At once, the narrator realizes that their language ultimately belongs to everyone. In his monologue-interviews, Ellison rejects the hierarchical paradigm of language; he performs an equalizing action that reveals vernacular discourse as naturally democratic.

Mark Twain, whom Ellison deeply admired, well understood the narrative value of isolating speech and allowing the vernacular to give meaning to individual experience. In his
1874 short story “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word As I Heard It,” the white narrator opens with a question for his cherished black housekeeper: “Aunt Rachel, how is it that you’ve lived sixty years and never had any trouble?” (70). The narrative is then ceded to Rachel, who, in an uninterrupted monologue in black southern dialect, tells of her anguished life in slavery, having all of her children robbed from her and sold like cattle. She ends the story with the ironic answer to the original question: “Oh, no, Misto C –, I hadn’t had no trouble. An’ no joy!” (73). The ignorance of the white narrator is thus exposed—and by extension, the ignorance of the white readership of the Atlantic Monthly where the story was published. In allowing the slave to speak for herself and ultimately control the narrative, Twain reverses her otherness, pushing the white narrator to the margins and putting Rachel’s subjectivity at the center of the story. Her language then drowns out the standard English that launches the narrative, in effect, as Baker would argue, obliterating the master’s power.

Ellison understood that Twain’s use of black dialect went far beyond the typical regionalist style of other white writers. Twain, he argued, “knew very consciously that he was using the moral predicament surrounding the racial conflict in this country to give structure to his imagination and his stories” (Conversations 249). Both writers recognized that the humanity and individuality of African-Americans could be realized through narration, that supplying air for the richness and variation of vernacular expression could help us face the racial divisions that spoil the nation's principle of equality. As Ostendorf explains, for Ellison, “the American vernacular is involved in an unending fight to achieve a better fit between word and thing, between the promise and the reality of its Constitution; hence it is a deeply moral agency with particular relevance for discourse in race relations” (158).
The Speeches in Invisible Man

The FWP’s imprint is perhaps most detectable in the endless variety of monologues comprised in Ellison’s novel. *Invisible Man* is a novel of speeches. Not only is it full of speeches, the novel itself constitutes one long, uninterrupted monologue by the unnamed narrator who ultimately finds his identity through the act of telling his story. Oration, as a form of expression, as performance, and as an act of self-assertion, is the axis around which both the novel’s design and thematic force revolves.

In a formal sense, Ellison’s FWP interviews seem to comprise a series of early sketches for *Invisible Man*—unconnected soliloquies that trained him to deftly transform the spoken voice to the written word. But on a philosophical level as well, the voices from 1930s Harlem provide some of the fabric for the novel’s existential and moral disposition.

For Ellison, all speeches and acts of speaking are not equal. Much of the novel amounts to an indictment of the scripted speech, of the sanctioned formal address that follows an established form and serves, in Ellison’s view, to prop up the central dogmas of authority. As Ostendorf points out, “It is a matter of existential survival for Ellison’s heroes not to accept centralized monologues whether they come from the church, the union, or the Brotherhood” (151).

The narrator’s quest for self-discovery begins with the speech he delivers to wealthy white citizens urging humility and submission for blacks as “the very essence of progress.” His script meets the expectations and prejudices of his audience and he is praised for being the kind of boy who will one day “lead his people down the proper path” (17). Later, before Reverend Barbee’s well-crafted sermon mythologizing the university’s founder, the narrator comments on the staged earnestness in the chapel:
Around me the students move with faces frozen in solemn masks, and I seem to hear already the voices mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved....Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors. (111)

Ellison skewers the same calculated, artificial environment that is created by the Brotherhood, his approximation of the Communist Party, which later hires the narrator to give speeches promoting its ideological platform. Anxious to be accepted, the narrator excels in this public role before coming to the painful realization that he is only a mouthpiece for their cause, a regurgitator of the party line.

By contrast, the kind of speech that Ellison favors is spontaneous and authentic, free-flowing and unscripted, speech that challenges, even upends expectations and the established form. The grizzled black farmer Trueblood is the essence of folk as he delivers his monologue to an awe-struck white businessman, Mr. Norton, about how he unwittingly impregnated his teenage daughter. His uninterrupted speech is both tormented and reflective, flowing easily from him and coalescing into a lamenting affirmation of self: “I ain't nobody but myself” (66). Here Ellison has carefully sewn together the act of speaking with the musical form of the blues: both genres involve extemporizing and complicating the melody. Like a blues musician, Trueblood improvises over a standard form; his story of incest overlays the structure of folk storytelling. By his own account, Trueblood started singing “a church song” one morning and “I ends up singin' the blues” (66). He moves naturally away from rigid forms toward the earthy realness of the blues.

And yet we see evidence that Trueblood's speech might not be as honest as it initially appears. At its outset the narrator describes the “raw gash” across Trueblood's face, but over the course of his story we learn that his wife attacked him with an axe immediately after the act of
incest. His daughter's now visually apparent pregnancy suggests that the incest took place months before, more than enough time for Trueblood's wound to fully heal.

In other words, this might well be a fabricated story by a man who understands his effect on the white listener. Norton is amazed and eager to listen, and at the end, rewards Trueblood with a hundred dollar bill “to buy the children some toys” (69). We can only imagine why his response is so encouraging: having projected his own fantasy of the low life of black folk, the story has a redeeming, validating force. But it is Trueblood, not Norton, who is in control of the exchange. In singing his blues, he is also fooling this white man by appropriating his racist assumptions and stereotypes. The blues-speech then becomes not only an act of self-expression, but also an act of rebellion, the two being entirely interlaced in Ellison’s view.

Other characters in the novel use the form of the improvised speech as a way to upset and counteract the means by which their identities are imprisoned. When the narrator witnesses Tod Clifton on a city street selling Sambo dolls, he is initially horrified and confused. His talented black colleague who left the Brotherhood on principle is now peddling the ultimate symbol of racist betrayal. Clifton’s syncopated sales speech alongside the dancing black-faced dolls is akin to a minstrel show:

\[
\text{
Shake him, shake him, you cannot break him  
For he's Sambo the dancing, Sambo, the prancing,  
Sambo, the entrancing, Sambo Boogie Woogie paper doll. (432)
}
\]

After Clifton is shot and killed by a police officer, the narrator begins to view the episode as more complex. In manipulating the doll to make it appear as if it is dancing on its own, Clifton may have been reenacting the Brotherhood’s own puppeteering of its black followers. His street jingle then takes on a powerfully ironic tone:

\[
\text{
Sambo-Woogie, you don't have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed  
he'll kill your depression
}
\]
And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile. (432)

Like Trueblood, Clifton wields black stereotypes, taking control of their expression in order to slyly undermine white authority. Yet, his speech is an actual melody, a jazz riff that ad-libs over the standard form of the street vendor calls as well the underlying structure of racial oppression.

When the narrator delivers his impromptu eulogy at Clifton's public funeral, he too is playing over the sanctioned form of the occasion. He takes the Brotherhood's platform and uses it instead to express himself in opposition to their tightly controlled political rhetoric: ‘Listen to me standing up on this so-called mountain!’ I shouted. ‘Let me tell it as it truly was!” (457).

Of course, none of these solo acts prove at all punishing to their targets; in an objective sense, they wind up reinforcing the dominant order and the accepted practices they are meant to challenge. And Ellison has been roundly criticized for this. The critic Susan Blake, for example, argues that while Ellison seems to position the folk as a negation of white supremacy, in the course of the story his representation of negro folk signals an acquiescence to the white world order, even “an acceptance of chaos as reality” (88). She continues,

The ultimate effect of Invisible Man's reinterpretation of the black folk image is not to elevate Sambo...but to reduce the archetypal black folk hero to Sambo. Thus the result of the protagonist’s identity quest is not self-definition at all but reaffirmation of the identity provided by white culture. (91)

Moreover, the goal of Invisible Man, she writes, “is to know, not to change; knowledge is presented as the equivalent of change, but knowledge does not necessarily produce change” (91).

Such criticism is important, not because it repudiates the social and political value of the novel, but because it focuses attention on the fault line that separates the personal from the political and continues to disrupt our sense of Ellison’s achievement. Ellison was invested in knowing, not as a direct channel to societal change, but as an essential part of the human
experience that allows us to recognize ourselves and others as free individuals. Trueblood, Clifton, and the narrator each come to know the structures that constrain them; they are not capable of overcoming these constraints, but they do resist them through the act of speech, which Ellison assigns aesthetic and philosophical purpose. Ostendorf argues that Ellison’s “detractors ignore the radicalism of his philosophical anthropology, which refuses to posit simple utopias of being.” Ellison, he writes, “puts more faith in the energy of day to day combat and believes in accumulating wisdom in the here and now” (157).

This is how Invisible Man can be understood in such close alignment with the FWP, which committed itself to bringing to light the day-to-day psychological combat of the powerless. To know was in fact the point of gathering so many stories and ideas—so many speeches. Out of his interviews with Harlem residents, Ellison crafted monologues in which his subjects engage in free-form riffs, defying any script and often overtly railing against their coercion by a racist society. He charted the syncopations of their speech and the peaks and valleys of their stream of consciousness, and out of it all Ellison constructed a theory of speech that he would begin to realize in his fiction. From these interviews he also gleaned the transgressive nature of self-expression, that in speaking for ourselves we control the ability to define not only our individuality but also the symbols—Sambos— and social codes that silent us.

**Rhyming Rebels**

*I won’t go to Macy’s any more, more, more!*
*There’s a big fat policeman at the door, door, door!*
*He grabbed me by the collar*
*And he made me pay a dollar*
*And I won’t go to Macy’s any more, more, more!*

R.W.E. 135th St. Negro Harlem
Like the monologue, the rhyme became for Ellison an important folk form through which to make claims for the self, to assert independence and to playfully, sometimes ironically, upset or resist society's rules, as we see in Tod Clifton’s vendor call.

Throughout his fiction, Ellison made extensive use of the folk rhyme, putting it to work as both an aesthetic motif for black culture and a metaphor for self-assertion. In doing so, he was likely inspired by his FWP work gathering children's rhymes. From 1939 to 1940, Ellison interviewed children and visited playgrounds around Harlem, transcribing dozens of poems and songs that children chanted as they played. The rhymes range widely in topic and wordplay. Some are variations on old folk rhymes (“London Bridge is Falling Down” is among them); others are newer, improvised songs that speak to the children's contemporary lives. Most seem to convey a certain tension, at times rascally at times violent. They are irreverent, whimsical, metaphorical, and occasionally cruel. As historical documents, these rhymes offer a singular angle on the intensity and turbulence of Harlem in the 1930s through a child's eyes. But as creative expressions, too, they articulate the restless, vibrating, rackety psychological world of childhood.4

My mother and your mother
live across the way
315 East Broadway
Every night they have a fight
and this is what they say
Your old man is a dirty old man
He washes his face with a frying pan
He combs his hair with the leg of a chair
Your old man is a dirty old mane

Counting out rhyme, 141st & Hamilton Tr
Negro R.W.E.

4 The rhymes quoted here (unless otherwise noted) were retrieved from the Records of the United States Work Projects Administration, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The information that follows each rhyme conforms to how that information appears on the original manuscript. Please see Ellison, “Rhymes” on the Works Cited page.
I had a little monkey,
I send him to the country
To buy a loaf of bread.
Along came a choo choo
And knocked my monkey coo coo
And now my monkey's dead
With a bullet in his head.

“Ball Bouncing” (handwritten in the margins)

Calling Car Seventeen
Catch that Nigger with the Bowl of Beans

“Pasttime Rhyme” R.W.E.
Utopia House, 130th & 7th

Red White and Blue
Your Old Man is a Jew
Your Mother is an Irish Potato
Just like You.

“Harlem Negro” R.W.E.
130th and Lennox [sic] Ave.

Chink Chink Chinaman
Sitting on a fence
Trying to make a dollar
Outa fifteen cents

“Harlem Negro” R.W.E.
Covenant Temple 141st and 8th Ave.

Some of the rhymes are adaptations of old folk songs, such as the following “Buckeye the Rabbit” rhyme. As a preface to the poem, Ellison quotes the young girl he interviewed: “When the 134th Street girls get together we all say this rhyme. We made it up ourselves.”

Take off your shoes and stockings,
And let your feet go bare.
For we are the girls from One-hundred thirty-four,
So don’t you dare come near.
So, Buckeye, the rabbit,
"Shake, shake,
Buckeye, the rabbit,
Shake, shake,
So don’t you dare come near."

Here, the Buckeye refrain reinforces the girls' defiance and their combative self-assurance. But the poem is flexible and can be adapted to other improvised rhymes.

In *Invisible Man* Buckeye appears when the narrator, emerging from unconsciousness in the hospital, is asked by a doctor: “Who was Buckeye the Rabbit?” to determine his mental fitness, his own cultural awareness. Confused by the question, the narrator thinks to himself,

Somehow I was Buckeye the Rabbit...or had been, when as children we danced and sang barefoot in the dusty streets:

```
Buckeye the Rabbit
Shake it, shake it
Buckeye the Rabbit
Break it, break it... (241-242)
```

After the doctor asks him “Boy, who was Brer Rabbit?” he recalls that “they were one and the same: 'Buckeye' when you were very young and hid yourself behind wide innocent eyes; 'Brer' when you were older” (242). The passage alludes not only to the interconnectedness between the folk and identity, but also to the very way that a child's innocent sense of power and self-possession is inscribed in rhyme. As you grow, Buckeye and his raucous rhythm, morphs into Brer, the adult trickster of tall-tales.

Ellison’s own memories figure in his FWP fieldwork. Sprinkled throughout his transcripts are rhymes that he apparently recalled from his childhood in Oklahoma. He appended to these no explanatory notes except to mark his hometown, “Oklahoma City” and the date he recalled hearing the rhyme.

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My mother and your mother
Were hanging out clothes
My mother hit your mother
```
Right in the nose!
O-U-T spells out!

(R.W.E.) Oklahoma City 1925.

Enny Meany Minny Moe
Catch a white peck by the toe
If he bites you let him go
Enny meany minny moe!

(R.W.E.) Oklahoma City 1922

That he includes these rhymes in the collection suggests that the task of gathering folklore serves to connect the fieldworker to the subject, something Botkin saw as an essential ingredient for writing “history from the bottom up.” Botkin believed the division between the folklorist and the people he writes about should dissolve so that “he becomes not merely an interpreter but a voice—their voice, which is now his own” (Hirsch, “Folklore in the Making” 20). Rhymes are especially evocative in this regard because, like food, they are meaningful within a folk group, and even as they change over time their form is familiar and culturally binding. As ritual and as music, rhymes exercise our cultural memory, drawing the past into the present, and feeding a collective sense of self. The narrator of Invisible Man becomes nostalgic when he hears Peter Wheatstraw sings a blues rhyme:

It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times that I had heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders.

“She’s got feet like a monkey
Legs like a frog – Lawd, Lawd!
But when she starts to loving me
I holler Whoooo, God-dog!
Cause I loves my baby,
Better than I do myself...” (173)

But while he feels in this tune a connected sense of longing, it somehow seems strange. The
narrator asks, “What does it mean, I thought. I’d heard it all my life but suddenly the strangeness of it came through to me” (177). Ellison suggests here that the narrator’s own estrangement from himself and his past has defamiliarized this rhyme, rendering it at once familiar and peculiar.

Of course, the novel is ultimately a folkloric journey back to the self. Wheatstraw is the essence of folk, the unencumbered self whose brazen sense of belonging both fascinates and repels the narrator. It is no accident that he speaks in rhymes: “My name’s Blue and I’m coming at you with a pitchfork. Fe Fi Fo Fum. Who wants to shoot the Devil one, Lord God Stingeroy” (176). His improvisational, rhythmic speech echoes both his cultural rootedness and his ease with himself.

Outside of Invisible Man, the design and spirit of Ellison’s FWP rhymes are apparent in his “Buster and Riley” stories, which he wrote fresh off his stint in the Harlem playgrounds and published in several literary journals in the early 1940s. These stories are included in the posthumously published collection of Ellison’s short fiction Flying Home (1998). Each centers around a conversation between Buster and Riley, two young boys who lazily pass summer days in the southern landscape of Ellison’s own youth. In all three stories, the act of rhyming helps to liberate Buster and Riley from an adult world that seems to conspire against them, crushing their free spirits with religious piety and the codes of racial segregation.

The epigraph to the story “Mister Toussan” is a rhyme that appears in other versions in Ellison's FWP transcripts:

\begin{quote}
Once upon a time  
The goose drink wine  
Monkey chew tobacco  
And he spit white lime
\end{quote}

Rhyme used as a prologue to Negro slave stories (“Mister Toussan” 22)
In identifying the rhyme as he does Ellison attaches historical weight to the boys’ own riffing, making it a part of a continuum of folk tradition. In rapid call and response form, the boys invent the achievements of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian revolutionary leader whom they know only from their school teacher as “one of the African guys named Toussan what she said whipped Napoleon” (26). Their improvised history lesson fires them up until they are interrupted by Riley's mother:

“Oh, he was a hard man!”
“He was mean...”
“But Toussan was clean...”
“. . .He was a good, clean, mean,” said Riley.
“Aw, a, he was sooo-preme,” said Buster.
“Riiiley!!”
The boys stopped short in their word play, their mouths wide. (31)

Inventing black history proves only provisionally empowering. Riley's mother reprimands them: “White folks says we tear up a neighborhood when we move in it and you all out there jus proving’ them out true” (31).

The same is true in “Afternoon,” in which Buster and Riley while away a summer afternoon signifying as they wander through farmyards:

“Look at that ole dead cat!”
“Ain't on my mama's table.”
“Mine neither” (37)

The backdrop to their play is the adult world where segregation and religion loom large, but the boys shield themselves from these forces by rhyming and inventing games. Their creative wordplay frees them, if only temporarily, from the heavy burden of life and the violence that awaits them. Riley says about his father, “Boy, and can he beat you! One night be come home from work and was gonna beat my ass with a piece of 'lectricity wire. But my ole lade stopped 'im. Told 'im he bet' not” (43).
In “That I Had Wings” the act of rhyming drives the story’s plot and its metaphor of flight. Here, Riley is reprimanded by his God-fearing aunt Kate for chanting a verse that she deems both “sinful” and offensive to whites for its playful parody of authority:

If I was president
Of these United States
Said if I was president
Of these United States
I’d eat good chocolate candy bars
An’ swing on the White House gates—
Great—God-a-mighty, man—
I’d swing on them White House gates! (47)

In response, Kate demands: “What yuh think would happen to yo po ma if the white folks wuz to hear she wuz raisin’ up a black chile whut’s got no better sense than to talk ‘bout bein’ president?” She then urges her now deflated nephew to sing spiritual songs instead, such as “that Ah had wings of-vah dove/Ah’d fly to mah Jesus.” But when the boys are left alone again, Riley begins to riff: “If I had the wings of a dove, Aunt Kate, / I’d eat up all the candy, Lawd, / An’ tear down the White House gate...”

Maybe God would punish him. He bit his lip. But the words kept dancing in his mind. Lots of verses. Amazin’ grace, how sweet the sound. A bullfrog slapped his granma down. He felt the suppressed laughter clicking and rolling within him, like big blue marbles. (50)

Riley's giddy lampoon of spiritual songs signals more than a harmless payback for his aunt's scolding; he is rebelling against the confinement of childhood, of religious doctrine, and of racial oppression, all three of which he sees as indelibly linked. His natural childish fantasizing—dreaming of eating chocolate and swinging on the gates of power—collides with the racial order in which even the imagination poses a dangerous transgression.

Moreover, Riley’s rebellion plays into the story's central metaphor of flying: Riley's “wings” are his rhymes, which allow him to fly away from the claustrophobic state of a black
child. In admiring a rooster called “Ole Bill”—“the Louie Armstrong of the chickens!”—Riley breaks into rhyme: “’Ole Bill says, *Tell all the dogs, an' tell all the cats, they better be good or go join the bats,’ rhymed Riley, 'cause the mighty Ole Bill's in town’” (53). The bird becomes both the muse and embodiment of jazz improvisation—the unrestrained expression of autonomy. But when Buster tells Riley that roosters can’t fly, he is bent on proving his friend wrong. He captures two small chicks and accidentally sends them crashing to their deaths attached to a makeshift parachute (an event that actually Ellison recalled from his childhood). When his aunt scolds him, he becomes enraged:

   Suddenly the words rushed out, scalding: 'I hate yuh,' he screamed. 'I wish yuh had died back in slavery times....' Her face shrank, turning a dirty gray. She was proud of being old. He felt a cold blast of fear. (61)

Improvising has its dangers. Like his rhymes, Riley’s outburst at his aunt is impulsive and cruel, if liberating. More than rebel against her prying, he has degraded her past—his own ancestral past—that ultimately keeps him from flying.

   In all of these stories, rhyming provides some expressive relief from restrictions, a way to bring down oppressive structures, to play with and ridicule them. As part of the “day to day combat” of life, rhymes give the children weapons to symbolically resist their persecution. Rhymes belong to children and are designed to protect them.

   And yet, Ellison seems to tacitly insist throughout his fiction that rhymes never simply act as a distraction from the real world; rather they are constructed entirely out of the substance of our social world, and as such, pose real hazards and contain real wisdom with transformative potential.

**An American Voice**

   Like the Writer’s Project, Ellison imbued social power in acts of self-expression.
Though he had turned away from the naturalism and ideological allegiances of other 1930s writers, his interest in the vernacular, in speech, and in improvisation was never divorced from the real conditions of life around him or from the marginality of his race. His creative project and his philosophy—his identity quest—were always footed in a desire to give voice not only to the individual’s experience but to the American experience. Unlike many of the brooding modernists to whom he felt aesthetically connected, he was deeply optimistic about American culture and its capacity for renewal. He was a romantic nationalist, in the same vein as Benjamin Botkin, who wanted, as Jerrold Hirsch characterizes it, “to integrate alienated individuals into pluralist society” (“‘My Harvard Accent’” 313) “I'm unashamedly an American integrationist” Ellison once said (Conversations 235).

For Ellison, the process through which we make language malleable and an agent for how we construct our identities is embedded in the progressive, dissenting spirit of Americans. In his 1972 essay “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language,” he argues that within the effort to adapt the English language to represent new social and physical realities, “to make it tell the truth about processes and relationships between people in this country, there somehow lay the beginnings of the American Revolution” (453). Self-expression, and therefore self-discovery were for Ellison entwined with America’s promise of freedom and opportunity.

The FWP gave Ellison a singular view of folklore and the vernacular as dynamic and expressive of both the human condition and American plurality. His subjects, the people he worked alongside, and the vast number of personal narratives the Project produced all testified to the extraordinary diversity of American experience. Ellison saw great promise in this diversity, and his own role in promoting it.
Moreover, the material helped to shape the aesthetic and moral framework of Ellison’s fiction. From his interviews in Harlem, he learned to translate the idiom, the energy, and subjectivity of individuals, trusting his extraordinary ear for voice and creating verbal jazz tunes out of streams of consciousness.

Of course, we cannot know with certainty the scope or quality of the FWP’s influence on him. While over the course of his lifetime, he often alluded to the Project’s importance to his artistic development, he never fully explored how it shaped his perspective, at least not in the same way that he tackled his other influences. Perhaps he never wholly considered the Project’s distinctive role, as interlaced as it was with all of the other creative stimuli in his early career. Nevertheless, to read how Ellison describes the motivation behind *Invisible Man* is to unmistakably behold Botkin’s vision for the FWP:

Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. It would use the richness of our speech, the idiomatic expression and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive among us. (“Brave Words” 153)
CHAPTER FOUR

Nelson Algren: Naturalism on Its Head

Writing about Nelson Algren in 1953, the critic Maxwell Geismar noted a dramatic difference between Algren’s first novel, *Somebody in Boots* from 1935 and his second novel, *Never Come Morning* from 1942. The former, he claimed, is “in the straight documentary style of the 1930s: a thesis novel of social protest,” written in a tone that is both “sentimental and melodramatic” (122). The latter is “an entirely different story.” Here, “in this literary orbit of bitter, hungry lusts, of stunted emotions and stuffed lives,” Geismar writes, “the realism is cold and brutal” (123). But though struck by Algren’s curious stylistic shift, Geismar does not delve into its conceivable source. As if to shrug off whole thing, he remarks: “What happened to Nelson Algren himself during these seven years I have been unable to find out” (122).

From a vantage point of some sixty years later, with a wealth of biographical and historical perspectives available, we can discern that “what happened to Nelson Algren” in that time frame was the Federal Writers’ Project, where he worked between 1936 and 1941. Algren’s early evolution as a writer in Chicago, like Ralph Ellison’s in New York, was in part born out of his engagement with the principles and methodologies of the FWP. It is through the Writers’ Project that he would develop his distinct ability to fuse the urban realism of the documentary form with the language of human psychology and personal identity.

Another case in point: in 2009, a selection of Algren’s previously uncollected and unpublished stories, essays, and sketches was published as *Entrapment and Other Writings*. Organized chronologically and grouped into prewar and postwar categories, the collection provides a bird’s eye view of the contrast between his writing prior to joining the Writers’ Project the work he produced shortly after he left the program.
Take, for example, three short vignettes that date from 1935: “Lumpen,” “Within the City” and “American Obituary,” published respectively in The New Masses, The Anvil, and Partisan Review. All adhere roughly to the naturalism of the proletarian form in which working people are portrayed as victimized by the ideology and inequalities of American capitalism. “Lumpen” follows a conversion narrative where the drifting narrator, appalled by witnessing blacks and whites marching together in solidarity, winds up taking a job selling Huey Long’s leftwing newspaper The American Progress. In the end, we know his enlightenment is imminent (33-36). “Within the City” is a journalistic account of a soft-spoken “mulatto girl” who dances in the dime burlesques, and stoically endures the degradation of Chicago’s mean streets. Algren closes the piece pondering revolution: “And when I left her it seemed to me that this city will one day flame into revolt from the quiet ways of such beings as this mulatto girl: that all the daughters of the poor will rise, their voices no longer docile, and that day is not far” (38). Finally, “American Obituary” sketches one Frank Mears, “unemployed by civilization,” who wanders drunk waving a dollar bill “like a flag,” for which he is mugged and murdered on a Chicago street. In an elegiac tone, the narrator tells the young dead man: “you still wouldn’t have gotten drunk one day if you’d had a day’s work to do” (40).

Each story displays Algren’s ability to incisively render the landscape and language of the underclasses. These are the people that would become Algren’s lifelong muse: the lost souls of urban blight and the Great Depression. Yet all three stories suffer the stiffness of politically-motivated writing, in which the vividness of the characters and prose is undermined by their service to the larger message. To be fair, these stories represent early documentary sketches aimed at left-wing journals during a time of intense political engagement among writers and
artists. But the affecting and literary qualities of Algren’s material are nonetheless dampened by his polemics.

By contrast, the story “The Lightless Room,” written in 1939 and previously unpublished, reveals a sharpened narrative style through which Algren allows the individual voices of his characters—rather than his own voice—to guide the storyline. Based on a newspaper clipping (the story’s epitaph) about a young Irish boxer nicknamed Blackie who dies in the ring, the story brings together a string of perspectives about Blackie—from his girlfriend, his manager, and each of his parents, all of whom have unforgiving words for the boy they portray as violent, drunk, inept and utterly selfish. His father calls him “simply no good a-tall” (43), while his mother claims he is “the sort of lad who’d strike his own mother” (46). The final perspective is from Blackie himself, speaking from the dead and reflecting on the night of his death and the regrettable life that led to it. In the process, he exposes the hypocrisy and failings of the people who have condemned him, the humiliation he suffered and his ultimate longing for innocence. He recalls his final living moments: “Then it was just me and the big cool dark and no wind near at all, as still, as small and safe and warm as the place where I laid as a small sick child” (52).

On one hand, the story can be viewed through a naturalistic lens, whereby in the end, the reader interprets Blackie’s rottenness as the inevitable outcome of the corruption that surrounds him. Like the characters in Algren’s earlier stories, Blackie is ultimately a victim, not an agent, of society’s moral breakdown. Yet, what Algren has done here is more complex than this determinist framework might first suggest. It is as if he is now tapping into the consciousness of the characters he previously put forward as objects, mere emblems of class oppression. Though impoverishment and brutality might be responsible for Blackie’s fate, Algren fixes his attention
not on these conditions but on the young man’s self-awareness and his ability to construe the forces that work against them. He begins with the material of the social world—a newspaper clipping—and transforms it into an exploration of subjectivity.

Moreover, in showcasing the competing subjectivities of these characters, Algren reminds us that perspective and meaning shift simultaneously—indeed, that personal perspective and the individual’s voice are what create meaning and are therefore the source of Algren’s art, perhaps the cradle of all abiding art.

Malcolm Cowley observed this in Algren’s style and labeled it “personalism” as opposed to “naturalism.” Cowley argues that Algren moves past, even undermines, any strict determinism by concentrating his lens on his characters’ motivations. He writes, “Instead of repeating that vast forces are grinding these people down, he takes the forces for granted. What he emphasizes is the other side of the picture, the rebellions and lies and laughter by means of which they retain, even the most repulsive of them, some remnants of human pride” (16). Indeed, and as Cowley points out, in Never Come Morning Algren emphasizes Bruno Bicek’s inarticulable remorse for having allowed his girlfriend Steffi to be gang raped. It is ultimately his guilt—and not the narrow world of the Polish enclave—that closes in on him.

But what Cowley does not draw attention to is the fact that this personalism represented a new approach for Algren, a key stylistic departure from his politically-motivated from his first novel, which would later reject for its naïve Marxism. That this literary shift occurred after he left the Writers’ Project is no accident. Focusing on the first-person voice, personal narratives, and the expressive potential of those at the lower end of society, the Project helped to instill in Algren an awareness that “the self” with all its contradictions and limitations, is the basis for powerful fiction, the essence of the literary form. Within this realization lay the seeds of
Algren’s portrayals: the inner agony of Frankie Machine in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, the tragic-absurdity of Dove Linkhorn in *A Walk on the Wild Side*, and all the hapless outcasts who populate his short stories. But his awareness would also foretell the inward turn of the postwar period, the self-questioning and self-analysis embarked on by the writers of the 1950s who were seeking to understand themselves and their place within the confines of society—much as the Writers’ Project pursued a wider awareness of individual realities.

**Algren and the FWP**

The Federal Writers’ Project was in many ways tailor-made for a writer like Nelson Algren, who was both by nature and circumstance part beat reporter, part cultural anthropologist, part poet, and part poor man—all identities that the Project either catered to or cultivated.

Though college educated—he earned a journalism degree from the University of Illinois in 1931—Algren spent several years hitchhiking and hoboing throughout the Southwest, even spending a short time in jail after he reportedly stole a typewriter from a woman’s college. Unemployed and back in Chicago, he came to the Illinois office of the FWP when he was 27 years old, alongside his friend Richard Wright whom he had met through the John Reed Club. He was one of the few writers hired to have already published a novel, which, despite its weak critical reception, earned him admiration from his colleagues. Sam Ross described Algren’s appearance in the office: “sandy-haired, looking half starved, the Madison Street Dostoievsky with *Somebody in Boots* already under his belt, striking the grimy streets of Chicago among the freaks, the drunks, the derelicts.” (qtd. in Mangione 121)

Initially hired as a relief worker, Algren was soon promoted by then director John Frederick to a supervisor position, overseeing research and writing in the unit that gathered
folklore. He was a popular fixture in the office, palling around and performing his fieldwork in the bars, brothels, police precincts, and back alley settings that would comprise his fictional world. Though he often chafed at its bureaucracy, Algren immersed himself in the Project and its boisterous culture, befriending many of the soon-to-be famous writers—including Studs Terkel, Margaret Walker, Sam Ross, Studs Terkel, and Meridel Le Sueur. In 1937, he recruited his longtime friend Jack Conroy who had published the proletarian novel, *The Disinherited*, and had been working for the Wisconsin FWP. Together, the two became, according to Jerre Mangione, “the Illinois Project’s two most prominent published novelists” (123). (Wright left for New York in 1937, and would publish *Uncle Tom's Children* the following year.) As such, they enjoyed the esteem of their many aspiring writer colleagues. A much younger Saul Bellow recalled, “We had little to do with each other. I rather looked up to them; they rather looked down on me” (qtd. in Mangione 123).

Yet, despite Algren’s ranking and long tenure with the FWP—from 1936 to 1941—only a handful of manuscripts from the FWP have his name attached to them: several oral histories and two guidebooks. But what we lack in original manuscripts, we make up for in considerable documentation of Algren’s time with the program—from meeting notes, correspondence, and interviews with both him and many of his Project colleagues. Moreover, the long term results of his apprenticeship with the FWP are everywhere in a body of fictional work that reverberates the ethnographic methodology of the program. Algren’s dispossessed characters of Chicago’s immigrant neighborhoods, his frequent use of first-person prose, his rhapsodizing monologues addressing invisible audiences in the idiom of Chicago streets, his careful, sometimes painstaking descriptions of surroundings, and his deep identification with his subject matter, all seem to spring from the documentary vision of the program. Of course, his fascination with
slums and their miscellaneous, browbeaten characters preceded his work for the Project; but in the Illinois office he found not only a supportive environment for any writer interested in showcasing marginalized realities, but also the methods and encouragement to do so.

Among the few scholars who have written about Algren’s association with the FWP, a consensus has emerged that the program did guide his later work. Brooke Horvath, for example, argues that the FWP taught Algren “that aesthetically effective authenticity hinges on the accurate rendering of idiolect and dialect, the strategic deployment of revelatory factual detail, and the creation of a prose style able to enliven subjects emotionally and sensually, to conjure mood, and to convey ideas without intrusive authorial editorializing” (38). Though he does not investigate how or why this influence played out in Algren’s work, Horvath does suggest something important: that in addition to its documentary methodology, the FWP provided Algren with a way to approach the more nebulous substance that gives fiction its emotional force.

As I discussed at length in Chapter One, the FWP encouraged writers to reconstitute their fieldwork—the real voices and conversations, lively anecdotes and amusing turns-of-phrase they collected—into fictional form. The Project’s visionaries hoped to foster a body of literature that would showcase an extraordinary range of answers to the question of what it means to be American. In seeking the subjective perspective, the diverse viewpoints of America, these writers could create remarkable documentary from the inside. Such an approach would have consequences, particularly for writers like Algren who began committed to producing work aimed at fueling revolutionary politics.

It is not that Algren abandoned his leftist sympathies. Although he was never officially a member of the Communist Party, he remained active in its ancillary causes, including the League of American Writers. He proudly described himself as belonging to a “radical tradition” of
American literature shared by Whitman, Crane, Dreiser, and Hemingway, and felt that his mission was to write on behalf of those who could not articulate themselves and to expose the American middle class to the realities of the urban poor from which they were so resolutely closed off (Giles, *Naturalistic Inner-City* 116). What drove him to write, he said, was “a kind of irritability that these people on top should be so contented, so absolutely unaware of these other people, and so sure that their values are the right ones.”

> [T]here’s a certain satisfaction in recording the people underneath, whose values are as sound as theirs, and a lot funnier, and a lot truer in a way. There’s a certain over-all satisfaction in kind of scooping up a shovelful of these people and dumping them in somebody’s parlor.” (qtd. in Boddy 73)

He could thus fairly be called a “protest writer,” an artist compelled by dissent and the desire to upend conventional dogmas and expectations. Like Richard Wright whose Bigger Thomas startled white readers who held onto illusions of racial harmony—Algren told Wright that he was “slugged out of a coma” when he read *Native Son*—Algren’s Bruno Bicek awakened many to a brutal underworld that existed unnoticed under their collective nose (Algren, “Letter”). But Algren’s protest is not against, or not only against, the social problems that underpin his fiction; he opposes the ignorance, alienation and psychological chaos that these problems help to generate, the metaphysical consequences of social and economic turmoil. He is fighting, in a sense, for identification with the *other*, and for *knowing* the internal forces that govern otherness. This is what aligns him so closely with the Writers’ Project and its ultimate quest for self-knowledge; it is also what has made Algren such a critically elusive writer, even to this day.

**Algren and the Critics**

Algren’s work continues to present a challenge to those who try to label him in both historical and thematic terms. While Ralph Ellison’s place in the canon of postwar American
fiction is well-established, Algren is still widely regarded as a Depression-era writer, despite having published the majority of his work after 1940. His engagement with society’s lower depths has long associated him with the class-consciousness and political writing of the 1930s, and put him at odds with many postwar critics. As writers moved largely away from socially conscious subjects, Algren’s gritty urban realism, where characters are ensnared by the mean streets that created them, seemed—and still seems to many—relegated to the throwback category of naturalism, a term that had become nearly toxic to the new generation of young writers after the war.

But while the literary-historical category of 1930s naturalism has now held Algren in its pocket for the last half century, it has never done so comfortably. In addition to Cowley, other critics over the years have defended Algren against claims that he was stuck in the 1930s or that he fetishized the underclasses. In a 1957 article in The Chicago Review, Lawrence Lipton chastises both Norman Podhoretz and Leslie Fiedler for their disparaging critiques of Algren’s A Walk on the Wild Side, which they claimed, respectively, was written “in the spirit of boozy sentimentality” and held appeal purely for its “voyeurism” (qtd. in Lipton, “Voyeur’s” 6). Lipton counters that Algren’s subject matter was still relevant to 1950s America, despite the ascendance of a distinctly middle-class literary voice, and that Algren was not detached from his subject like “laboratory technicians who work with unpleasant and pathological ‘specimens.’” Rather, “he brings to his work the human compassion without which there can be no true diagnosis” (4). Moreover, far from his characters being sentimental, “nowhere in Algren’s books is there any prostitute with a heart of gold” (6-7).

Since then, a handful of other critics have launched reevaluations of Algren's work that recognize how it both upsets and broadens the naturalist category. James Giles, for example,
argues that unlike his naturalist predecessors—Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris—Algren examines the psychological effects of economic and cultural deprivation, demonstrating that “naturalism can accommodate external and internal forces of destruction” (Confronting 14). While Giles calls Algren an “absurdist” naturalist (10), Barbara Foley labels his work “surreal proletarianism” (Rev. of Capetti 131). Moreover, in his recent study Understanding Nelson Algren—a title that suggests the categorical problem Algren poses—Brooke Horvath contends that Algren incorporated the existential anguish of his characters into his naturalistic assessment of the societal forces that bear down on them. About Algren’s Never Come Morning, Horvath writes, “The poverty and threadbare sense of self, the moral turpitude and pervasive sense of powerlessness and exploitation, humiliation and ignorance, that characterize the world of [the novel] can...be accounted for circumstantially and environmentally” (45).

In one of the most compelling rethikings of Algren’s work, Carla Cappetti rightly maintains that the term naturalism is “a worn-out label” that tends to disparage and pigeon hole literature that engages social problems rather than telling us anything useful about the work itself. Algren, she argues, complicates all labels because he takes on many at once, choosing to be “both the Dickens and the Baudelaire, the Dreiser and the Dostoyevsky of Chicago...” He refused, she writes, “to give up either the empirical legacy of realist and naturalist traditions or the poetic legacy of symbolism and surrealism” (156).

Cappetti’s central argument is that Algren, along with other so-called urban realists working in Chicago during and after the Depression, was guided not simply by literary forms, whether naturalist, proletarian, or otherwise, but more by the famous empirical studies produced by the Chicago sociologists of the first half of the 20th century. Urban sociology, she argues,
“was in the air” in 1930s Chicago, as sociologists and their studies began to gain celebrity in the public consciousness. In response, Algren drew on sociological tools to expose the realities of the underclasses to mainstream America. Cappetti writes, “More critically than any other author during the 1930s, Algren borrowed from sociology and used it to show his readers that their cozy and protected world is 'unreal'” (159).

Cappetti also recognizes that Algren’s fiction expands the sociological imagination by transforming “the prostitute or the delinquent, and by implication the larger class each symbolizes, from helpless victim of heredity and the environment or passive recipient of social workers' benign intentions to active historical and existential subject” (106). She maintains, as I do, that the strength of Algren’s writing lies in the way he neutralizes the otherness and stereotypicality of his marginal subjects.

And yet, while Cappetti readily acknowledges the role the FWP played in Algren’s development, especially in training him in the ethnographic techniques that would heighten his realism and help shape his prose style, she does not examine the Project as an important source and inspiration for Algren’s effort to integrate the indeterminate terrain of subjectivity into his portraits of urban slums. Focusing on how the program influenced the empirical and sociological side of Algren's work, she and other critics largely overlook the theories and practices of the program that helped to inspire the metaphysical, existential, surreal elements of Algren’s short stories and novels.

The FWP complicated the sociological method, putting the poet in charge of gathering empirical data. More than that, the program put the poet on relief in charge, a figure who both identifies with his subjects’ victimization and who employs the symbolic language of selfhood. Beyond specialized training, what differentiated the federal writers from sociologists was their
proximity to the material they studied and collected. The whores, delinquents, and drunks that Algren wrote about were not outside of his purview; they were part of his daily world, his neighborhood, utterly fascinating and uniquely knowable to him. As Studs Terkel wrote, “Nelson is speaking for those with no defense. He isn’t looking at them through the microscope, nor living in a cork-lined room. He becomes one of them” (Afterword, Neon Wilderness 289).

As I previously discussed, the importance of becoming the subject was central to Benjamin Botkin’s vision of the writer’s role in gathering living lore. As both a formal strategy and a democratic philosophy, the merger of narrator and subject, of outsider and insider, would influence Algren’s narrative voice. In his preface to the 1968 edition of Never Come Morning, Algren writes, “I felt that if we did not understand what was happening to men and women who shared all the horrors but none of the privileges of our civilization, then we did not know what was happening to ourselves” (xiii). This, in essence, was the doctrine of the Writers’ Project, which proposed that in knowing each other, we can know ourselves and the many co-existing realities of America. Such a focus on identification alone demands that Algren's work be viewed outside of the naturalist category, whatever that now implies. Perhaps a better conceptual reference point is Walt Whitman, whose words Algren made the epigraph to Never Come Morning:

I feel I am of them—
I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them—
For how can I deny myself?

**Interviews, Notes, and Transcripts**

Interviews with both Algren and others suggest that he had a sometimes vexed relationship with the Project. He was known to make fun of it, to disparage its bureaucracy, and
to downplay his own work for it. By his own admission, he stayed with it perhaps too long, and watched enviously as the career of his friend Richard Wright took off while his own seemed to stall in what he comically referred to in a letter to Wright as the “W.P. & A.” (qtd. in Taylor 65).

He developed a cynical view of the FWP and often dismissed the Project’s assignments as having little value beyond the income they provided. In one interview, he recalls his relaxed work schedule: “Everybody used it to the extent that it was a place where you could report at ten in the morning and then leave at two and then you had the rest of the day to yourself” (qtd. in Taylor 65). According to Mangione, Algren regarded the FWP “in retrospect, as a training period for acquiring the 'goldbricking' skills that were to serve him in good stead as a soldier in the army” (121). He recalls, even proudly, his precarious reputation with the director of the Illinois office:

I used to get fired every six weeks regularly by John T. Frederick. He kept assuring me I'd be happier off the project and hand me a 403. Then I'd find I was happier on it. So I'd go down to the relief station again, register as a pauper, receive a sack of moldy potatoes; and materialize the following morning in the Project office.” (qtd. in Mangione 121)

However, other sources tell a different story. According to Jack Conroy's biographer Douglas Wixson, Algren “liked to give the impression that he didn't do anything for the Writers' Project” when in truth, he contributed his fair share (570n65). Though Wixson does not speculate about Algren’s motives for exaggerating his disservice to the FWP, one might reason that this denial was part of the persona Algren had cultivated: that of the misanthropic ironist, whose disheveled detachment precluded an earnest investment in the program. He liked to see himself as institutionally unaffiliated.

Or perhaps he was ashamed of not having pursued his literary aspirations to the extent that Richard Wright had, and he did not want the appearance of having immersed himself instead
in government relief work. Algren admired Wright but was also envious of his drive and success, telling Mangione that it was Wright, not him, “whom the Illinois Project helped the most...He was more alert to its advantages and more diligent than most of us. He used the time it gave him to write *Big Boy Leave Home* and *Native Son*” (121). Algren gave Wright the title of his first novel, originally called *Native Son*, and later Wright wrote a glowing introduction to the first edition of *Never Come Morning*. As their letters to each other after Wright left for New York can attest, there was tremendous warmth and support but also some friction between them. In a notably edgy letter to Wright after he had received a $500 publishing contract for *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Algren made an appeal for cash, writing, “You will recall that you intended to send along a couple bucks I loaned you, when you could spare it. So you see I have a long memory, and besides we live here pretty much on the grim verge ourselves. Let’s hear from you” (qtd. in Taylor 61). It was 1939, the same year his marriage was falling apart. Algren was struggling to write seriously and feeling trapped in the Project.

Many years later, Algren spoke more positively about his experience with the FWP. In his book length interview with H.E.F. Donohue he recalls the important role it played for struggling writers and others, and how the Illinois office provided not only a paycheck but also a measure of dignity.

I believe that the first thing it was, it served to humanize people who had been partially dehumanized. There had been, I believe, in those years between 1929, 1930, ’31, when people had been self-respecting, lost their self-respect by being out of work and then living by themselves began to feel the world was against them. To such people the WPA provided a place where they began to communicate with people again. They got a little self-respect back, and, uh, I know it put me in touch with people again, and it also put me in touch with people who were politically alert and I know there are oftentimes now when I think, well, where did everybody go? .... There were all shades of opinion. There was a lot of communication. (Donohue 64-65)
Moreover, meeting notes from the Project archives suggest an actively engaged supervisor grappling with many of the technical and philosophical issues raised by the interviewing process.

A transcript from a “Staff Conference in Industrial Folklore” dated July 13, 1939, reveals Algren’s awareness of the Project material as a potential source of pioneering fictional work. Along with Algren, those in attendance included Jack Conroy, Sam Ross, and Margaret Walker. At the beginning of the meeting, Algren introduced a new strategy for collecting folklore that drew on the work coming out of the New York office. According to the transcript, he told his colleagues:

> The people on the New York Project are doin [sic] almost straight dialogue for this volume. We have an example here from the recent American Writers Congress in New York. It’s the feeling of the New York Writers that realism in American letters will become increasingly documentary [sic]. (“Staff Conference” FWP-LC)

This strategy of “straight dialogue” is reflected in Ralph Ellison’s work for the FWP, discussed in the previous chapter. It is the technique of removing narration or any authorial interference and allowing the subjects’ voices to speak for themselves, and it had important implications in terms of privileging individual voices and capturing reality through the filter of the subjective perspective. Algren, who clearly recognized this, remarks “The point of these documents is that they reveal what is really a new way of writing - which we'll attempt here.”

> It seems that the idea would be that we are interested in contemporary folklore which differs widely form [sic] the old conventional idea of the tall story. That is, the document which substitutes dialogue for just a sort of literary pattern is the most contemporary form of folk literature and that will probably have a significance in the future that would also be termed "proletarian literature" for some years to come. (“Staff Conference” FWP-LC)

More accurately this approach would diverge from the narrative style we tend to associate with the proletarian genre, but his remarks demonstrate nonetheless that Algren was
attentive to how the documentary techniques of the FWP could be applied to contemporary fiction.

He was also aware of the creative constraints that this public work entailed. When Sam Ross raised the issue of whether to record the words of interviewees verbatim or from memory—a dilemma that the FWP never clearly resolved in its methodology—Algren cautioned that either way, federal writers were obliged to edit the documents for public consumption:

In writing it up, you’ve got to use discretion, especially about insertions of obscenity. This may be naturalism, but we aren’t working here as individuals: we’re working in a group observed by the society about it, and what appears to be “naturalism” may not be at all worth the cost. Let’s not stick out our necks for a fettish [sic]. (“Staff Conference” FWP-LC)

Such editorial restraint is somewhat ironic from a writer who would become well-known for his uninhibitedness in exposing a reality to which he believed many Americans were naïve. His remarks display not only his sense that there are limits to the creativity that could be employed in producing public documentary, but also that he, as supervisor, had a responsibility to the collective image of the Project. Whether or not this responsibility was borne out of conviction for the Project’s work or of self-protection in his role as supervisor is a matter of speculation.

We can in retrospect, however, be more certain of Algren’s allegiance to the Project’s theoretical principles and larger vision for collecting folklore. In the same meeting transcript, it is noted that Jack Conroy read aloud from a speech delivered by Benjamin Botkin to the “Folklore Craft session” of the 3rd American Writers Congress in 1939, titled “The Folk and the Writer.” The text of the speech is not included in the transcript, nor was it published in the conference proceedings. But an archival copy of the same speech indicates that Algren had direct
knowledge through that meeting of Botkin’s philosophical model for the contemporary folklorist and his creative purpose.

In the speech, Botkin argues that writers should make creative use of folk materials, and that folklore is “not something far away and long ago, but real and living among us and that the writer has more than materials, idiom and forms, to gain from it. He gains a point of view.”

To fully and effectively assume this point of view, the writer, Botkin claims, must identify deeply with his subject:

The satisfying completeness and integrity of folk art derives from its nature as a direct response of the artist to the group and group experience with which he identifies and for which he speaks. When instead of this identification the artist knows only the need of pleasing himself or his ‘public’ – of indulging, exhibiting or selling himself – art is in danger of becoming a commodity, an escape, an anodyne, a cheap dodge, a show. (“The Folk and the Writer”)

Botkin claims that the foremost purpose of such identification in literature is “its attempt to make the inarticulate articulate and above all to let the people speak in their own voice and tell their own story by recording and stimulating the worker as writer” (“The Folk and the Writer”).

Botkin also stresses the importance of listening: the writer who utilizes folk sources, he writes, “must be a good listener with a good ear for remembering both what is said and how it is said.” There “must be a creative rather than an imitative listener. He must be able to catch the inner as well as the outer accents and rhythm. He must also be able to live many lives.” Botkin's conception of folklore is not “an old woman’s tale to frighten children or a song to lighten the tedium of labor or leisure,” but a “social portraiture and protest, an outlet, organizer and interpreter of social thought” (“The Folk and the Writer”).

Botkin's speech presents one of his clearest and most succinct articulations of his theory of folklore and literature, which generally served as the guiding principles for the FWP's folklore division. The speech is also remarkably similar to Algren’s own philosophy of writing, which he
laid out in a number of interviews and essays, most squarely perhaps in his essay “Do It the Hard Way,” published in the magazine *Writer* in 1943 (and included in *Entrapment and Other Writings*). In the essay, Algren offers advice to the would-be writer, urging him, as Botkin did, to keep “his eyes on his subject and not on his reader,” to avoid the lure of the “best seller list” or aim “deliberately at a shocker with the identical venality employed by those who write to comfort the reader at all costs” (69). Here, Algren also stresses the importance of identifying with the subject, of listening carefully, and sharing “in the common experiences of common humanity” (69). Fiction, Algren maintains, is found “in the talk of people, especially those on the streets,” where lies “an endless wealth of story-stuff.” “And if you listen long enough,” he writes, “the commonest speech will begin to ring like poetry” (71). Individual creativity he maintains is sparked by the act of channeling real speech. “It's all there for the taking,” he writes. “All the manuals by frustrated fictioneers on how to write can’t give you the first syllable of reality, at any cost, that any common conversation can” (72).

Algren’s essay takes Botkin's vision for folklore and recasts it from the perspective of the worker writer himself, the figure in whom Botkin had great faith. But his essay also suggests some of the implications of this vision, claiming as it does that in identifying with his subject so closely, the writer is ultimately engaged in a form of self-revelation. The essay begins: “A book, a true book is the writer's confessional. For, whether he would have it so or not, he is betrayed, directly or indirectly, by his characters, into presenting, publicly, his own inmost feelings” (67).

It is a curious preface to an essay that goes on to argue for a literature that arises not out of the writer’s imagination but out of deliberate and exhaustive fieldwork in the tangible world. “[N]o studied effort at invention of literary images can ever replace the simplest sound of experienced reality,” Algren writes (70). But the conceptual leap is telling, because for Algren it
seems that “inmost feelings” and social realism are not in opposition to each other. It is through the realist subject that the writer can truly and most effectively express himself and can “feel [his] way into a story” (71). For a writer like Algren this makes perfect sense: he identifies so closely with his subject, has spent countless hours living and working and drinking among the individuals he writes about, that their reality and their expression are his.

Algren describes this merging of the self and his fieldwork as “emotionalized reportage.”

My kind of writing is just a form of reportage, you might call it emotionalized reportage, but—as you know—the data has to be there. Compassion has no use without a setting. I mean you have to know how do the law courts work. You have to know how many bars there are in a jail cell. You can’t just say, “The guy’s in jail.” You’ve got to know. You’ve got know there are different doors—there are solid doors, doors without bars. Some cells have one bar left out in the middle for a little shelf there. You have to know what the shelf is for. Actually it is used to put coffee on, or a little Lily cup of milk or something when the prisoner gives money to the matron or the screw—they go out and get coffee or milk and put it on that little shelf. Or if the prisoner comes in late at night, it is a little pantry. They use that. And you have to know do they get the blankets or not. You’re talking about a jail in Texas—well, how do you know if the cot is iron or not, or if the blankets are cotton, or whether you get blankets, or whether you get a mattress or not. Some jails have mattresses. The reason I’ve never read Jack Kerouac is because the first book of his I picked up says in the first sentence that the guy was lying in a gondola. Well, I stopped to think: a gondola is a coal car and the bottom opens. You can’t lie in a gondola; you’ll hit the track. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what he talks about, so why read him? But if you read one sentence, if you read the first sentence of John Cheever, then you know Cheever knows. If you are a serious writer, you have to find out more than anybody else.” (154-155)

Algren’s approach to writing is that of the journalist, the anthropologist, the fieldworker, and even the detective. The fictional writer is different, of course, because of his emotional and aesthetic response to the material, but the compassion and imagination he brings to his work must be grounded in the material facts of existence. Otherwise, as Algren suggests, those feelings lack meaning or credibility. This is essentially the method of the FWP, which maintained that the source for a new kind of American literature could be found not in the isolated minds and
fantasies of writers, but in the public sphere, in the real lived and studied experience of ordinary people. “There is no better way of recording the American saga,” Algren said in a 1957 interview, “than to study it from behind its billboards and comic strips, which tend to dwell more upon the American dream than upon the American reality” (“Interview” 301).

But within its documentary approach, the FWP blurred, as Algren did, the distinction between objective and subjective truth. What Algren seems to reinforce in both his essays and his fiction is that confession and social realism exist not in conflict but on a continuum with each other, that merging documentary and subjectivity can create new forms that raise critical questions not only about Algren’s criminals and drunks, for example, but also about the universal struggle for individual identity. The critic Stephen Hardman explains it this way: “Algren’s commitment to the lower classes was based not merely on an enumeration of the ills of certain sections of society but also on the engagement with more dynamic processes of identity formation” (43).

**Algren’s FWP Interviews**

The early construction of this literary vision is discernible in Algren’s fieldwork interviews for the FWP’s folklore division. Two of these interviews engage subjects that Algren would continue to pursue throughout his writing career: the boxer and the prostitute. In both we witness Algren developing skills at turning the oral style into a literary voice, of conveying the essence of a character through the rhythms and patterns of speech, and of removing or subduing his own authorial voice to unleash the perspectives of his subjects.

The first interview, dated April 13, 1939, features the voice of the young boxer, Davey Day, who would later become known as one of the last great Jewish fighters in Chicago. Algren
describes Day in his prefatory notes: “Five feet nine and one half inches, weighing, stripped, one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Rangy, raw-boned, dark eyes and hair, lends appearance, when dressed, of man weighing about one hundred and fifty-five pounds.” In transcribing the interview, Algren eliminated his own voice altogether, so what appears is a series of answers to unknown questions. The transcript begins:

“You're from that newspaper I guess? I always come down for a newspaper man - I guess there's a story in this alright. Aint there?

“Yep, I’m him; Davey Day, that fast-stepping Jewboy on his way up, all fight and fancy footwork. And nothin’ wrong with the old heart, I guess you know, was you listenin' Monday nights.

“Well, that one's over now, but Pian (Co-manager) is going to get him again for me at the ball park. I'll beat him (Henry Armstrong) there, this is my lucky town. Dropped just one pro fight in my life here, that was in 1931, my fourth fight. I've licked everybody you want to name right around this town . . Frankie Sagilio, Roger Bernard, Bobby Pacho and I guess maybe a hundred others. And you can bet that Armstrong will got on that list, too, 'cause little Davey is on his way up and he got that ol' confidence [sic].

“I licked Lou Ambers too, but that was in N. Y. and he was the champ, so they tossed him the duke. Wait’ll I'm the champ though – I’ll keep it right here in my old home town, and they’ll be tossin’ the duke at me like that too. I'll be the houseman then. (‘Industrial Folklore” FWP-LC)

Algren does not attempt to make the speech flow seamlessly, even though he no doubt took artistic license when reproducing the subject’s words. This somewhat disjointed approach is telling when judged against the “straight dialogue” technique that he lauds in the meeting notes, transcribed two months later. It suggests that when Algren spoke with Davey Day he was not yet familiar with the way Ralph Ellison and others in the New York office were artfully constructing stand-alone monologues out of their interviews. Nevertheless, the transcript does reveal both Algren’s fascination with and his nuanced ability to record the cadence of voice and dialect. It
also points to his love of the one-liner, the poetry of the fast-spoken, hard-edged quip that would turn up everywhere in his later fiction.

We see this attention to voice again in Algren’s interview with a prostitute titled “When You Live Like I Done,” dated July 17, 1939—four days after the staff conference in which read aloud from the monologues recorded in the New York Project office. Apparently taking his cue from the work he admired, here he crafts a longer, smoother, and more unified dramatic monologue in which he more gracefully removes himself from the narrative. The transcript begins:

> When you live like I done people give you a line all the time, all day long wherever you're at. All day long, everybody’s givin everybody else a line, and after a while without thinkin much about it one way or another, just trying to get along you know, there you are givin somebody a line just like everyone else is doin - only what you're really doin is just givin yourself a line I guess, ’cause nobody is listenin to anybody else these days anyhow, everybody's just talkin to hisself in a way. (“When You Live” FWP-LC)

Algren’s hand in the text is invisible and the oral quality of the language is so vivid that it seems as though the reader is listening directly to the woman. Through repetition and sentence structure alone, he beautifully conveys a person who is somehow both defeated and persevering.

It is not surprising that both this character and her lines would migrate over to Algren’s second novel, Never Come Morning, in which Mama Tomek, the matron of the brothel and a heroin addict who has a proclivity for self-reflection, routinely drifts into telling her life story. “You got to kid every’body, mostly yourself,” she laments, “When you live like I done, don’t believe nobody” (173). Algren lifted a number of passages directly from the interview, often tweaking them only slightly to emphasize his character's accent. In the original interview, the prostitute tells him:

> I don’t mean it’s no bed of roses. It’s bad alright, but it aint no worse, take it all in all, nor no better neither, than the next racket that girls without folks or schoolin
[sic] can get into. When a girl got nobody who cares and she got to quit school after 4th grade like I done, it don’t matter much what line she goes into, she ends up pretty much the same way every time. (“When You Live” FWP-LC)

Similarly, Mama Tomek tells her own sympathetic listener:

Oh I don't mean it's no bed of roses. It’s bad awright, but it ain’t no worse, take it all n’ all, than the next racket that girls without folks gets into. When a girl got nobody, one way ’r another, ‘n she got to quit school in fourth grade like I done, she grabs at the first thing comes her way ’n you know what that is. It don’t matter what line she goes into, she'll end up savin’ snipes all the same.” (174)

If the interview offered him the poetry of the spoken word and the fluid sound of an authentic voice, it also gave him a rich source of material with which to deepen Mama Tomek's character and heighten the story’s realism. In the novel, Algren lingers over her speech, allowing her voice to take over the narrative, much as he did in transcribing the interview.

**Tall Tales**

Two other short manuscripts from the folklore unit have been published in collections under Algren’s name. Both are considered “Industrial folklore”—labor-related reworkings of traditional tall tales, a form that Ann Banks claims was invented by the Chicago Writers' Project. One, titled “Hank the Freewheeler” and published in Botkin's *A Treasury of American Folklore* (1944), features a Henry Ford-like industrialist: “Hank Lord…a man that wanted everything on wheels and moving about before he owned an automobile factory” (Botkin 540). Hank is so obsessed with productivity and efficiency that he rises from the dead to reprimand his pallbearers for carrying his coffin at too slow a pace: “PUT THIS THING ON WHEELS,” he cries.

The other tall tale, titled “High Pockets,” and published in Ann Banks’ *First Person America* (1980), tells the story of a mill worker who used every part of his body, from head to toe, to operate factory machines with superhuman speed. The tale ends this way:
He was true blue, that cornfield canary was, and a credit to the human race. The kind of man that gets somewhere in this plant. He grins game as a fighting cock and chirps right out loud:

“Sure if you want to sick a broom someplace, I think I could be sweeping the floor!” (Banks 92)

Both stories show the writer’s adeptness at evoking the vernacular and spoken voice of the workingman. But the prose is jaunty and brisk, and seems to share little with Algren’s other work for the Project. According to Wixson, these tales were more likely written by Conroy, who generously allowed Algren to claim credit in order that he gain favor with his boss, John Frederick. Writes Wixson, “Conroy was not one to feel possessive about his tales, and besides, he owed Nelson a favor for helping him get on the project.” Not only “are the style and locutions unquestionably Conroy’s” but the subject matter itself—workplace lore—deviates too far from Algren's well-known fixation on the non-labor lumpenproletariat. “Algren had probably never set foot inside an auto factory,” Wixson writes (439-40).

Wixson's account is based on his 1987 interviews with Conroy, who also told him that Algren eventually felt foolish for having claimed Conroy's work as his own, and suggested to Frederick that Conroy be given any future Industrial Lore assignments. Algren then resumed his own fieldwork in the places that drew him most: “at the racetracks and in Chicago's night court, from which he drew the material of A Walk on the Wild Side, The Man with the Golden Arm, and other novels” (439).

It makes sense that Algren would be more interested in interviewing barflies, prostitutes and boxers than factory workers; he certainly never wrote fiction about standard wage-earners or the culture of industrial work. And his talent would generally prove less for the construction of a tale than for the reproduction of a voice.
The FWP and *The Neon Wilderness*

The FWP's methodology resonates throughout much of Algren's short fiction, particularly his first collection *The Neon Wilderness* (1947) in which many of the stories appear as if they were plucked directly out of fieldwork. The collection features only two stories Algren wrote before 1936, including his first published story “So Help Me” from 1933. Grouped together, these stories demonstrate a range of styles and narrative approaches; some are short bursts of monologue; some are poetically drawn portraits, and others seem only partially rendered. For example, the story “A Bottle of Milk for Mother,” in which we are first introduced to Bruno Lefty Bicek, serves as an early sketch for *Never Come Morning*. The reader bears witness to a writer developing his craft, getting comfortable with the voices, the inner workings, and the descriptive possibilities of wanderers, criminals, gamblers, and lonely dreamers.

As Brooke Horvath points out, nine of the twenty-four stories that comprise the collection are told in the first person, which he argues, reflects the desperation of Algren’s characters “to have their stories known, to assert themselves, to find some way of buttressing their shaky pride and tottering self-respect” (55). Algren's biographer Bettina Drew suggests that he began to use the first person voice only because the third person had “failed him so miserably” in *Somebody in Boots* (116). But it is also plausible that he was inspired in part by the first-person approach of FWP fieldwork.

What seems to bind the collection together is Algren’s insistent focus on the psychologies of his characters. The stories written from the first person perspective often feel like occasions for confession, almost therapy sessions, in which the speakers tell their invariably wretched tales to an invisible but clearly sympathetic audience. These are intimate, honest monologues—not loud or declarative confessions, but the kind of sighing, chin-stroking talk that happens on a bar.
stool late into the night. Algren’s narrator always has the blues. He or she—Algren wrote an impressive number of stories from the female perspective—is tormented, wracked with guilt and shame, addicted to drugs or alcohol, engaged in some criminal activity, abused and abandoned, and wishing desperately for a life change, but sensing somehow that it is a hopeless. They all seem to ask: “Am I really so bad?”

In his 1985 introduction to the collection, Tom Carson writes about Algren's characters:

Trapped they may be—but their various delusions, eccentricities, addictions and other skewings of reality are often made to appear not as symptoms but active responses, survival strategies, necessarily inventive ways of coping and sustaining some sense of self in the trap. This is understanding on a unique and unmediated level. (Carson 9)

These are real people, not abstractions or emblems of class oppression. Algren no doubt knew them, or close versions of them, and in the process of turning them into characters and airing their confessions, he managed to reveal psychological truths beyond the parameters of his subject matter. Usually in the first paragraph, his characters are engaged in self-confrontation, and although the circumstances of their lives—the poverty and corruption that surround and consume them—are central to their stories, Algren keeps his eye trained on their attempts to make sense of their lives.

The story “A Lot You Gotta Holler” begins with the young man's sad pronouncement: “I think I started stealing right after the old man threw Aunt out of the house” (104). The line suggests a causal link between the boy’s loss of this woman and the crime he committed. He recounts the love he felt for his “Aunt,” whom the reader comes to realize was in fact his father's estranged lover. The boy spends much of his youth committing petty crimes and enduring beatings from his father, while trying to find the woman who took care of him. When he discovers that Aunt has died, he goes on a crime spree, spends time in “Juvenile,” and struggles
to understand the resentment he feels for his father: “I've never figured out to myself why I pinned everything onto the old man. Sometimes I think I started blaming him before I was born almost. It wasn't anything I tried figuring at all, it was just the way I felt, so deep down that it was beyond all figuring” (116). The framework of the story might be naturalistic—the circumstances of the boy's life control his fate—but Algren's narrative focus is squarely on the boy’s emotional response to his conditions, and not the conditions themselves.

Two other stories written in a similar vein feature female narrators, both of whom share a contemplative, beaten-down tone that is reminiscent of Algren’s FWP interview with the prostitute discussed earlier. In “Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone,” the narrator, Rose, recounts her relationship with a controlling tyrant nicknamed Doc who winds up killing a young man whom the couple has roped into a money-making scheme and with whom Rose falls in love. In retaliation, Rose beats her lover to death with a bat. As if in mid-conversation, the story begins as the narrator reflects wistfully on her arrest by the police: “You know what I was thinkin’ when that crowd moved back a little to make room for me to get into the wagon? I was thinkin’, my whole like it's the first tim... (147).

Revealing her sense of isolation before the reader even knows her crime, the story announces itself as one grounded in the personal and the psychological. This emphasis is reinforced by the title, a reference to an Ella Fitzgerald song that seems to abbreviate the entire monologue in which Rose sadly yearns to be considered a better person by a mocking world around her. The story ends where it began: with Rose reflecting on how her arrest ironically made her feel respected for the first time. “It was just the first time my whole life people was makin’ a little room for me. And now just look what for.” (156).
The story “Is Your Name Joe” also begins and ends with the narrator's self-pity: “I hate t’ see the spring ‘n summer come so bad. I just don’t seem so good as other people any more. Sometimes I’m that disgusted of myself I think: ‘Just one more dope, that’s me’” (42). Algren actually extracted these lines from a conversation he overheard and which he refers to in his essay “Do it The Hard Way,” where he recalls “being caught by the language of a girl in an all-night hamburger joint...an unprepossessing little thing in some small trouble all her own, confiding some of it to the counter-jumper: “I hate t’ see the Spring ‘n Summer come so bad,” she was telling him, “I just don't seem so good as other people any more. Sometimes I’m that disgusted with myself I think: ‘Just one more dope, that’s you’” (71-72). “If that isn't poetry then Saroyan is a dentist,” Algren writes. Soon after, he would work the girl’s words into this short story, in which the narrator recounts her abuse at the hands of men named Joe. Written as a rambling monologue delivered to an invisible audience whom the narrator calls “Specs” (for his glasses, which Algren wore), the story centers around the narrator’s struggle to fathom her predicament. “You figure maybe somethin’s wrong with me?” she asks, referring to the way that these Joes continually abuse and leave her (42). “Look at me. I’m a beat-out flower now but still I don’t give in” (43). No doubt she is a victim, as all of Algren’s characters are, but the author keeps the reader’s attention not on the sources of her victimization—the beastly Joes who beat her and by extension the depraved world around them—but on her painful struggle to orient herself, to find and claim her identity, which is perpetually indeterminate.

That Joe, he beat me to blood-soup twenty times—you think I give in t’ him ‘n ‘Gawd’ fer that? I hit with the iron board instead.” Then I hit him with the iron. ‘I’m fightin’ fer Poland now,’ I told him.

‘She fights like a damned man.’ He told the court that time ‘n ever’body laughed. They laughed at me that time I wasn’t even natural. That’s why I keep on thinkin’ I’m no good. They’re always laughin’ at me, all of ‘em, behind my back.”
That’s why I fight so hard, I guess. I ain’t that bad. Nobody’s that bad, Specs. (44)

She fights back and continues to lose, but her battle is as much psychological as it is physical. She cannot escape, not only the abusive world around her but her own grinding self-doubt that is itself a product of the abuse. Toward the end, she tries again to define herself:

I’m American-born, I’m an educated girl, I got a good Polish education—you just don’t know. But when I was down ‘n he was kickin’ me, ‘n then the name he said. I couldn’t stand for that. That was worse than kickin’ even. He said I was a whore once, when I wasn’t. I didn’t mind him sayin’ that. But what he called me then—I couldn’t go back now. (45)

The passage begins with self-assertion but ends in defeat. She never tells her audience the name she was called; its awfulness is left to the reader’s imagination, and this ambiguity only underscores our sense of her disorientation. Her effort to label herself is trampled by the labels imposed on her. Of course, the title of the story suggests that identity is locked up by the names we are given: Joe is not simply a generic name but a whole category of abusive men. It is as subjectively meaningful as it is objectively arbitrary.

The narrator’s story then ends as she recounts her dream in which she was “eating’ a potato ‘n a skinny white snake come out. He just keep comin’ out, all night” (46). The vile image alludes to the cyclical nature of her struggle: her inability to change her life and cut loose from the violence of these men. Like the previous story, the last lines of this story repeat the first: “That’s why I hate to see the spring n’ summer come so bad. I must be the girl than men forgot awright,” reinforcing her ineluctable state (46).

Algren uses such repetitions in his stories not simply to mimic speech patterns—the tendency of people to reprise key phrases in conversation—but as a lyrical device to accentuate the very hopelessness of the characters he portrays. This alone sets him apart from his more
reform-minded peers, who, like John Steinbeck and others, were more likely to convey the potential rather than the utter bleakness of the lower classes. Despite their ties to immigrant groups and ethnic enclaves, Algren’s characters seem rootless, estranged from their heritage and families, unlike the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* in whose bonding the reader finds relief. From Algren, we get no relief, no sense that his characters’ internal resources will ultimately help them flee their unhappy fates.

Yet, these stories also somehow elude a naturalistic treatment of humans as simply victims of environmental forces despite the inescapable quality of those environments. Algren does not capture his characters’ misery from the outside as many naturalist writers do, but rather he engages and expresses their internal meanderings, their psychic disorder and their deep sense of aimlessness. In doing so, he creates a world that often becomes an abstraction of itself, with the effect of peering into a realist painting from an inch away. He turns the determinist drive of his narratives into an exploration of psychological crisis more in line with existentialism than with naturalism.

Existential malaise pervades his story “The Captain Has Bad Dreams,” which, like “Is Your Name Joe?,” features a dream, confirming Algren’s emphasis on the interpretive possibilities in his characters’ consciousness rather than in the physical world in which they exist.

Written in the third person, the story is chiefly about a police captain’s waking life—his job processing a line of recidivist criminals. The story has no plot or central conflict, only a catalogue of often comical exchanges between the captain and the criminals, all of whom seemed to be stuck in an interminable line-up, an endless cycle of degeneracy.

In one exchange, an old man approaches the desk:
“I was very drunk 'n clothing disarranged,” the old boy next in line confessed, with the blunt-nosed leer of a hyena in heat.

“You mean you're a cannibal 'n they should of drowned you when you were three. You're a dangerous man to have on the streets. Your roof is leaking. What do you do, next man?

“I'm sort of a mechanic. I fix juke boxes.”

“The hell you do. Your partner grabs a man's arms and you kick his legs out from under him. That's the kind of mechanic you are.” (27)

The dialogue continues in much the same way: as a stockpile of one-liners that forces the reader to wade through a tragi-comedy of individual failure without any resolution.

“What are you here for this time, Ginger?”
“I don’t know, Captain.”
“I’m sure I didn’t send for you. Did you drink with that man?”
“We lifted a couple.”
“You think he’ll ever wake up?
“I didn’t know he’d gone to bed.” (30)

But as the comedy routine rolls, the title reminds us that while the structure of the story is shaped by the hard reality of a police precinct—material Algren likely culled during his fieldwork—the core meaning of the narrative emanates from the psychological effect that this reality has on the Captain. Briefly interrupting the flow of dialogue, Algren writes,

They lived in an unpossessed twilight land, a neon wilderness whose shores the Captain sometimes envisaged dimly; in sleep he sought that shore forever, always drawing nearer, like a swimmer far out at sea; yet never, somehow, attaining those long, low sands. (22)

Algren's layering of these accounts is, perhaps ironically, reminiscent of Whitman’s technique of compiling and listing the stuff of ordinary life to create a sense of shared humanity. But Algren’s registry is alienating rather than bonding; it presents a vision tinged with nihilism, the dark underside of Whitman's light-filled declarations.

And yet, like Whitman who maintained that we are all integrally connected to one another, Algren suggests that these criminals are bound both to each other and to the system that punishes them. Despite his surface detachment, the captain is, as Algren states, “haunted” by
these people: “In sleep he saw their pale lascivious faces; watched them moving like blind men beneath the thousand-columned El, where a calamitous yellow light filtered downward all night long” (22). He is not immune to their wretched hopelessness; rather he shares it, is even responsible for it, a feeling against which he fights in his waking life with his derisive retorts. As Tom Carson argues, the “tension between the captain’s struggle to deny that he is as much part of the wreckage as the debris before him, and his yearning to give in like them to a nihilism that seems less compromised than his own existence, has made him near to mad” (9).

In essence, the story is a confession. In the deep recesses of his subconscious mind, the Captain confesses the bond he has with these guilty deviants. Algren marshals the documentary form to capture the experience of nightly police line-up, but then transforms this realist portrait of urban degeneracy into an existential reflection on human culpability.

Guidebooks

The remaining two FWP writing assignments that bear Algren’s name are guidebooks for the Project’s American Guide Series, both of which have also generated some disagreement about the extent of Algren’s actual involvement.

One of these is the Midwestern portion of America Eats, an FWP project aimed at collecting recipes and gastronomic customs that would showcase the country’s diversity. Algren was reportedly tasked with gathering information from essentially anyone who was willing to provide it, including housewives, farmers, and tavern owners, but it is not clear how he wanted about compiling or transcribing the results. The final manuscript remained unpublished until 1992, after Algren’s friend, the Chicago chef and restaurant owner Louis Szathmary purchased it at a silent auction Algren held in his apartment in 1975 when he was short of money. With the title “Am Eats Algren” scrawled on the cover in Algren’s handwriting, the volume was justifiably
attributed to his FWP work and published under his name with a foreword by Szathmary. According to Szathmary, Algren was bemused by the chef’s interest in the collection, commenting: “The recipes in it are lousy. It was a government writers’ project. I did it because I needed the money.” But he nonetheless told Szathmary to do with them what he wanted, and that he had written these recipes down “as best he could” (Algren and Schoonover, xiii).

In the editor’s introduction to the full America Eats collection, published in 2009, Pat Willard maintains that although the Midwest region manuscript was “reputed to be written by Nelson Algren…it was more likely the work of many hands—including Richard Wright and Saul Bellow” (Willard 6). It is indeed likely that Algren collaborated with others to produce the collection, but it is doubtful that Wright or Bellow were those “other hands.” Wright left the Illinois Office before the research on this project began and Bellow, as far as it has been documented, worked mainly on writing biographies of Midwestern writers. Nevertheless, Willard’s doubt about Algren’s sole authorship is warranted as the FWP guidebooks were typically collaborative projects.

Algren’s book reads as a cultural history of American eating, peppered with depictions and anecdotes from wide assortment of immigrant groups, including Polish, Hungarian, Jewish, African, Arabian, and Russian, French, Dutch, and Greek. But as it adheres to an anthropological mode of citing traditions and practices around food preparation, it also very clearly sets out the FWP’s mission to promote cultural bonding and democratic pluralism. The opening passage, which Willard also quotes in her introduction and attributes to Algren, describes the “cauldron” of various American cuisines in metaphorical terms: “Such a cauldron would contain more than many foods; it would be, at once, a symbol of many lands and a melting pot for many peoples. Many peoples, yet one people; many lands, one land” (Algren and Schoonover 1). It is the same
didactic and cheerful prose that pervades the FWP’s guidebooks. A section describing the French adoption of many culinary customs from Indian tribes reads: “In the old French time the voyageurs sat at roast-dog feasts, clothed as colorfully as the blue-feathered braves themselves” (25). In another passage, the practice of “sopping” food is reported in detail as taking “sweeping forays into the liquid surrounding the meat on the large platter or gravy dish and conveying it carefully back to the mouth.” The description is followed by a local rhyme: “Hello boys, ain't it a sin/Watch that gravy run down Sam's chin” (45-46).

But in places the writing is poetic, even hauntingly so, its bare images evoking a rugged past lost to modern ways. This is especially true in the first chapter, titled “The Buffalo Border,” which shares many of the qualities of Algren’s prose, particularly his ability to infuse purely descriptive passages with a kind of restless melancholy that seems to suggest wider meaning. Describing the former practices of the Chippewas Indian tribe on Lake Superior, he writes:

Jerked and tenderized venison steaks they stored and packed in makuks, or birchbark boxes, the covers of which were sewn down with split spruce root. The fall-killed deer they dried in fire or wind, packed it in hide, and jerked the meat against the bitter lake winters. (3)

Similarly, he conjures a plaintive sense of history in his description of the landscape of central Illinois: “Before the land was laced by the railroads and the long fields bound by Sears Roebuck fencing, the prairies yielded abundant game. Deer and wild turkey wandered the land” (9).

This particular passage is very similar to the language Algren used in his short sketch “American Obituary,” published several years before in 1935. There, he writes:

Though Sangamon County has been laced with long steel rails the prairie still plunges, like a wild horse with outstruck hooves, across the planned ties and over the planned Sears-Roebuck fences, past the low siloes, through the Indian corn, across the fields and the farms and the mines and the factories between Hurricane Creek and the slow Sangamon. America is a long dust-road.” (40)
That he seems to have borrowed phrases and imagery from his earlier writing suggests that he may have taken the task of writing *America Eats* more seriously than he let on, and that he used the Project to hone his writing, to rework ideas and experiment with his style.

But the substance of the writing also indicates Algren’s early interest in conveying a certain bleakness in the background, an aura of loss around the landscape and the people he describes. The Writers’ Project set out to document both the physical and experiential dimensions of America, and Algren brought to this undertaking a poetical sense of those two facets are intertwined, how the stirrings and disappointments of the people can be correlated in the tangible parts of the country.

This approach is visible again in Algren’s work on the *Galena Guide* (1937), a guidebook to one of Illinois’ largest cities and an offshoot of the larger *Illinois State Guide*. The guide documents the history of this once booming mining town which had once been home to Ulysses S. Grant and which had, by the late 1930s, suffered a steep decline. The book is also a serviceable visitor's guide, with practical information and brief descriptions and photographs of all the major sites.

Competing copies of the manuscript, both annotated by Algren, indicate that he either wrote several of the book’s brief eight chapters or only one. According to Matthew Bruccoli, and corroborated by Horvath, we can be relatively certain that Algren wrote at least the chapter titled “A Middle-Aged Clerk in a Faded Army Coat,” which recalls Grant's arrival and less than illustrious career in Galena prior to his becoming the famed Civil War general (Bruccoli B2). Though these scholars base their assertion of Algren’s authorship on his annotation next to the chapter title that reads: “I wrote this by hand,” we can also see similarities to Algren’s style that separate it from the more matter-of-fact, guidebook-like prose in much of the book.
Algren portrays the young Grant, a retired soldier, as an outsider to his more ambitious, entrepreneurial father and brothers who ran a prosperous tannery in Galena. According to Algren's account, Grant had trouble settling into civilian work. His family included him in their business “only with misgivings, and largely out of pity.” “Fifteen years in the army had maladjusted him for civilian life,” Algren writes (FWP, *Galena Guide* 43). In line with Algren's favored characters who move against the grain of middle-class society, Grant “who possessed decision, judgment, and courage, was too soft-hearted to press a debtor and too honest to misrepresented merchandise” (43). This description is telling in its evident sympathy for a man whose temperament Algren interprets as ill-fitted for the ways of mainstream commerce that Algren assumes to be somehow corrupt. Even as he charts Grant’s ascendance to Civil War general, he depicts a retreating, humble man who “took no part in the depot ceremonies” and who made his way to war “alone with his battered luggage” (44). The juxtaposition of Grant’s quiet sincerity against the glorified pomp that surrounds him gives this short chapter a psychological force and a slightly skewed angle on American history. In the public consciousness Grant is a larger than life icon of the Civil War, a storied symbol of the nation's might and fortitude; but Algren portrays him here as diminutive and rugged, marginalized yet more honest than the country he fought for.

Grant emerges elsewhere in Algren's repertory, again as the outsider who brings into relief the emptiness of the modern mainstream. In his interview with Donohue, for example, Algren compares the writer John O’Hara, whom he deeply admired, to Grant in appearance, claiming that their likeness is what damaged O’Hara among his many southern critics (Donohue 278).
Grant also appears in Algren’s story “Kingdom City to Cairo,” included in *The Neon Wilderness*, as a symbol of a lost past, a figure representing a moral strength against the hypocrisy of modern life. The story is written from the perspective of a drifter who is picked up by an erratic-driving, hard-drinking reverend, recently excommunicated by his parish for illicitly running a brothel out of the Hotel Ulysses, where Grant allegedly stayed before going into battle. This is the kind of character Algren loved: a straight-talker whose unapologetic pronouncement of his near-absurd moral failings manages to upend our own categories of decency. “I’m just a Seventh-Day Adventist off on a six-day binge,” he remarks off-handedly (180), as if the two states are perfectly congruous. But while the subject is standard Algren fare, the centerpiece of the narrative is less this colorful character than the narrator’s voice remembering the encounter, a voice that is notably *writerly*. When the driver brings him to the Hotel Ulysses, where he has offered his weary passenger a free night’s stay, the narrator shifts his focus from the idiomatic dialogue of the car ride to the dilapidated setting of the hotel. His tone is mournful and melodic: “On that long-ago evening, from the musty lobby of that decaying Civil War hotel,” he writes, “I saw the cottonwoods crowd for warmth behind the abandoned filling station: a thousand nameless weeds thronged the prairie water front” (184). The story then moves metaphorically toward questions of American identity, where the sense of disorientation and loss in the characters is mirrored in the landscape. The hotel, which “squatted like a blind red ox, squat as Grant himself, staring blindly toward Vicksburg at midnight” (184), is the embodiment of decline. The narrator is shown the room where Grant supposedly slept, and notes that the bed “looked as rumpled as though the general had just risen from it after a bad night with the bottle.” The history of Civil War battle is reduced to the cheap thrill it can sell. The narrator goes to sleep exhausted in a vacant room only to be awakened shortly after by “a civilization of bedbugs”
which emerges like an army from the walls and the bedclothes (186). Horrified, he runs aimlessly into the darkness of the night in an attempt to shake the bugs, and only succeeds when a hobo in a boxcar gives him matches with which to burn them off his body. The story ends with the narrator wondering if the driver who had offered him that infested room had in fact played a practical joke on him.

It is an excellent example of Algren’s distinctive tragic-comedy, where life’s fabric is conspicuously stripped of all of its shiny threads—the narrative of American triumph, for example, or the sanctity of religious service—and laid bare and ludicrously raw. This relic of the Civil War is infested not only with bugs and crime but with the hypocrisy of its facade. The hotel and its history, and Grant himself are irrecoverable.

At the same time, the story seems to put into symbolic language the kinds of questions that were being raised through the FWP about what it means to be American, and the relationship between the storied past and a dismal present. Most concretely, “Cairo to Kingdom City” echoes Algren’s writing in the FWP guidebooks. But in a more subtle way it reflects the FWP’s larger documentary approach which sought to transform town guides and individual stories into reflections on the American character, its strange kaleidoscope formation in the modern era. The story conveys an almost dream-like sense of disharmony and confusion, which is amplified by the ironic names of these washed-out midwestern towns.

A Different Kind of Guidebook: Chicago: City on the Make

The imprint of Algren’s work writing guidebooks is perhaps deepest in his 1951 book Chicago: City on the Make in which he transforms the classic WPA guide into a poetic, often tortured reflection on the history and internal tensions of his unruly city. It is as if he is rising to
Botkin’s call to inventively refashion FWP material; all the fieldwork, oral histories, and ethnographies coming out of that office seems to converge in this one subversive lyrical essay, published nearly a decade after the FWP had closed.

Of course, Algren does not celebrate or promote Chicago; on the contrary, he derides the city’s history of crime and corruption, often depicting a moral wasteland, an inversion of the American dream. Beginning with the Pottawattomies and their encounters with newcomers—the hustlers and scoundrels upon whose scheming Chicago was founded—Algren whisks the reader through shadowy streets pervaded by degeneracy and tensions that pit the wealthy against the poor, “where the chrome colored convertible cuts through traffic ahead of the Polish pedlar’s pushcart” (48). Not surprisingly, the book offended the city’s boosters and civic leaders who were struggling to rehabilitate Chicago’s image in the prosperous post-war era.

But the essay is not all disdain. In fact, it has been called “a love poem” to Chicago, an ultimate tribute to the gritty, restless, and improvisational city that shaped Algren’s worldview. He dedicated it to Carl Sandburg on whose 1916 poem “Chicago” the piece is loosely based. Indeed, Botkin held up Sandburg as a model for his use of living folklore to create a kind of modern epic of American life. Like Sandburg, Algren blends literary styles and culls from miscellaneous fragments of dialogue and half-rendered impressions to create a collage of Chicago’s contending forces. Occasionally, the prose is guidebook-like, offering a summary account of the city’s diversity, as in the following passage:

Cruising down Milwaukee Avenue on any Loop-bound trolley on any weekday morning, the straphangers to Success who keep the factories and the ginmills running stand reading the papers that could as well be published in Israel or Athens, in Warsaw or in Rome. On either side of the tracks are the shops with the American signs in one window and alien legends in the other: Spanish, Polish, Italian, Hebrew, Chinese or Greek. (44-45)
Elsewhere it has the ring of spoken verse, with a repetitive quick beat that barrels along through Algren’s stream of consciousness: “It used to be a writer’s town and it’s always been a fighter’s town. For writers and fighters and furtive torpedoes, cat-bandits, baggage thieves, hallway headlockers on the prowl, baby photographers and stylish coneroos…” (62). Punctuating his meditations are bits of old rhymes and random voices, sometimes scathing social commentary and poetic imagery.

Algren seems at ease in this confluence of genres, as if breezily stitching together scraps of writing from his desk drawer. The essay also rather gracefully straddles that divide between the pre- and postwar periods. Echoing the introspective mood of the country in the 1950s when artists brooded over the effects of accelerated prosperity, he writes, “The vital cog in our culture now is not the artist, but the middleman whose commercial status lends art the aura of status when he acquires a collection of originals” (83). But the narrative is also a continuation of the Writers’ Project and its quest to encapsulate the meaning of the country’s many little worlds. Not only does it rely heavily on the kinds of living lore that the FWP assembled, Algren seems to reach for a broader vision in the cacophony of Chicago’s competing realities:

[T]here, there below the miles and miles of high-tension wires servicing the miles and miles of low-pressure cookers, there, there where they sleep on someone else's pool table, in someone else's jail, there where they chop kindling for heat, cook over coal stoves, still burn kerosene for light, there where they sleep the all-night movies through and wait for rain or peace or snow: there, there beats Chicago's heart. (68)

At the same time, it is a deeply personal essay that weaves its way through Algren’s inner world, from his childhood recollections of the 1919 Black Sox scandal to his present experience of longing and loss. “And never once,” he writes, “on any midnight whatsoever, will you take off from here without a pang. Without forever feeling something priceless is being left behind in the forest of furnished rooms, lost forever down below, beneath the miles and miles of lights and
lights” (76). Chicago is correlated in Algren's psyche, and we sense in his winding composition, an alignment between the clutter and thoroughfares of the city and the ruminations in his mind, as if he identifies not only with the people but with the hard lines of the city itself.

The notion of identification is at the core of Chicago: City on the Make, as much as it is the essential element in all of Algren’s writing. And hovering above his appeal to connect is always Whitman, whom he quotes in the essay to elucidate his literary vision:

> When Whitman wrote that ‘there shall be no difference between them and the rest’ he made the great American beginning for a literature expressing an exuberant good humor: which yet sought darkly for understanding of Man. (89)

But not only Whitman resonates for Algren—also Twain and Faulkner and even Fitzgerald, all of whom felt their way into the voices of their subjects, compelled as they were by what Faulkner termed, “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” Unlike the famous American naturalists or the proletarian writers who deftly exposed universal constraints on individuality but were ultimately detached from the internal lives of the individuals they portrayed, Algren reaches into and speaks through the most confining space of all, the self. In his book-length essay Nonconformity, written in the early 1950s but not published until 1996, Algren reiterates his commitment to “the secret multitudes who belong to no world, no way of life, no particular time or place, are the truly displaced persons: displaced from their true selves” (36). As if to gently amend the proletarian message in Conroy’s novel The Disinherited, Algren writes, “they are not the disinherited: they are those who have disinherited their own selves” (36).

Algren’s commitment to the selves of the weakest fools, the addicts, and the delinquents has complicated the ever knotty category of social literature. Richard Wright recognized this upset in his introduction to Never Come Morning, where he notes that Algren’s interest in social
change has “paradoxically, riveted and directed microscopic attention upon the stratum of society that is historically footloose, unformed, malleable, restless, devoid of inner stability, unidentified by class allegiance” (ix)—in essence, those least likely to generate social change. Wright’s point was to praise Algren’s innovation, but he also singles out what has long marginalized Algren as a writer. The moral universe Algren portrays is viewed, to quote James Giles, as “deeply pessimistic,” and the fact that he treats “the lumpenproletariat with a harsh compassion that offered no hope for their ultimate reform or salvation” (*Naturalistic Inner-City* 116) has put him at odds with both the socially-conscious, reformist, and ultimately optimistic 1930s world from which he emerged and the self-reflective, decidedly middle-class world in which published.

But when we consider Algren through the lens of his apprenticeship with the FWP, his work appears, on one hand, a great deal less pessimistic than it has been labeled, and on the other, more in line with the inward, existential mood of the postwar era. In the spirit of the Writers’ Project, he was writing “history from the bottom up,” the mainstay of Botkin’s vision, and such an act of engagement with the bottom rung is itself an act of faith. This is faith borne out of the FWP’s view that by understanding and appreciating Americans’ many realities and complexities, we can unite and progress as a country. Algren’s vision is no doubt dark, but its undercurrent is hopeful because the process of identification—of becoming one’s subject—ultimately holds the promise of human compassion.

At the same time, his close-up portraits of agonized self-confrontation, molded from fieldwork, correspond to the inward turn of other postwar writers. While in their depictions of suburban gloom might seem disconnected from the rough streets of the Depression, in Algren we witness a striking continuity, the link between two eras.
Algren has long been seen as the quintessential outsider—both outside the critical and cultural mainstream. But in another sense, he is a true insider, one who navigates the muddled interior world of the cultural *other* as if with a special pass. The inside/outside paradigm is in fact a useful way to approach Algren; the manner in which he can be both at once reminds us of the dialectical nature of the FWP as documentarian of both objective and subjective truth.
CONCLUSION
Forging a Critical Path

Fresh from their FWP assignments in the late thirties and forties, a handful of writers set out to record the experience of working for the Federal Writers’ Project in fiction. Having no doubt appreciated the extraordinariness of both the Depression era and the Project itself, these writers were eager to document the intriguing new communities of writers and artists that their government had engineered. Alexander Williams penned a crime novel, *Murder on the WPA* (1937), and Jack Balsh wrote *Lamps at High Noon* (1941), a fictionalized account of the Missouri Writers’ Project. In her autobiographical novel *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), Anzia Yiezerska recounts at length the internal politics and personalities in the FWP’s New York office. But many more writers would bring the raw material they collected for the Project into their fiction, as Ralph Ellison, Nelson Algren, and Dorothy West did. Meridel Le Sueur’s 1939 novel *The Girl*, about a young woman thrown by poverty into prostitution, reportedly features material from her FWP interviews with women in Minnesota (Le Sueur was during the McCarthy era and her novel was not published again until 1978). According to Mangione, Sam Ross’s 1979 novel *Windy City* about Chicago’s jazz scene was entirely based on Ross’s extensive FWP fieldwork in jazz clubs. And the work of an impressive number of well-known writers who served on the Project has yet to be mined for the scraps of conversation, folk wit, and urban lore these writers recorded in their fieldwork. Doing so would require scrupulously comparing the authors’ archived FWP reports to their creative output.

But such an investment might in the end offer only a surprising revelation of the origins of an image or phrase. If one is to historicize the work of former FWP writers, it is worth taking the long view. In addition to the raw material the Project engendered, the disciplinary fusion of
literature, sociology, anthropology and history that it sought in its documentation of American life, its wide use of first-person voices and fixation on orality, its frequent rejection of the authoritative objective perspective, its mission to rewrite history from “the bottom up,” and its philosophical concern with claiming marginalized cultural and personal identities would, I argue, smooth the transition to—and indeed, help shape—a new postwar literature.

The writers I have presented here illustrate in their fiction an ongoing commitment to both the formal and aesthetic documentary techniques and the broader identity claims and philosophical embrace of cultural pluralism that the Project pursued. Of course, and as I note in the Introduction, these writers’ engagement with the FWP’s documentary approach constitutes only one source of guidance among many often more powerful literary and social influences. And yet, reading them through the methods and convictions of the Writers’ Project is uniquely valuable: it enriches our appreciation for their craft—Ralph Ellison’s masterful use of the monologue, for example, and Walker’s deployment of folklore as both textual and psychological—and allows us to productively blur the theoretical boundaries that have long enclosed many writers—as naturalism has constrained interpretations of Algren—or have excluded them altogether. Dorothy West’s relegation to the sidelines of the mid-century black canon is borne out of her caustic, ironic humor and unwillingness to “protest.” But recognizing in her fiction key elements of her FWP fieldwork, including her fascination with voice and creating a vivid documentary portrait of an a little known corner of black culture, draws her into a province of black writers long critically marginalized for their dissociation from the strains of Richard Wright’s social realism that even today dominate the interpretive lens of African American fiction. Former federal writers like Arna Bontemps, who turned his attention to historical children’s literature, and Frank Yerby, who wrote wildly popular historical romances
throughout the fifties, deserve consideration not only because they’ve been undervalued as individual artists, but also for the way they continued to deploy the FWP’s thematic and formal concerns. In his series of “costume novels” that reimagined the Reconstruction era, Yerby's protagonists, though rarely black, are outsiders to the cultural mainstream, flawed, rough-hewn immigrant strivers whose portraits depose the mythologized American hero. In the manner of the FWP’s rewriting of history, Yerby tramples the clichés of American triumphalism and creates instead narratives of struggle of ordinary people compelled by historical forces and in search of their unique but always elusive sense of place. As one critic notes in a 1968 reflection on Yerby's career, the author “has concentrated on the theme of the outcast, who, as in existentialist literature, pits his will against a hostile universe” (D. Turner 570). And, as if nodding to the sociological emphasis of the Project that helped train Yerby, that same critic complains that Yerby “frequently snarls his plots with digressive essays on customs, language, philosophy, and history” (570).

Yerby worked for the Chicago office of the FWP in the division that oversaw “Social-Ethnic Studies.” Initially a committed leftist writer, he turned to historical fiction in the mid-1940s, and within ten years, had turned out a dozen best-selling novels that garnered a wide white readership, making him the most popular black fiction writer of the century. His early novels were roundly criticized by many black intellectuals who saw Yerby as a sell-out to low-brow “drugstore fiction” that failed to engage race in any meaningful way. At the same time, his white mainstream admirers lauded what they saw as his ability to transcend the racial problems. Though he benefited financially from his success, Yerby was—until quite recently—largely dismissed as a pulp writer and is still rarely included, even as a footnote, in African American literary studies. In The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent 1945-1950
Stephanie Brown re-reads Yerby’s early novels and locates instances where he does problematize race, in effect, challenging the historical constructions around slavery. On the other hand, the critic Stacy Morgan reduces Yerby’s literary career to the change of public tastes and economic pressures in the postwar period that made some black writers abandon “politicized social realist fiction” and move to popular forms (22).

While there may well be truth in this, the FWP also offers an alternative perspective, and one that does not discount Yerby for his turn to historical fiction, but actually helps account for the turn itself, thus drawing him into a more nuanced portrayal of postwar writing that figures other writers like West, Walker, Ellison, and Algren, and others who blended historical reportage with subjective explorations of those marginalized individuals struggling to tame the forces of history that threaten to overwhelm them.

This is among the goals of this study: to provide and encourage a fresh look at writers through their association with FWP, and therefore allow the FWP to bond them artistically and illuminate their fiction not as isolated artifacts but as beneficiaries of the Project’s great repository from which writers drew philosophical, cultural, and technical inspiration.

Perhaps chronology makes this task all the more compelling, though also potentially dangerous. The fact that most, though certainly not all, of the notable former FWP writers began writing while they worked for the Project—and many of these writers credited the Project with helping them launch their literary careers—makes it more tenable to claim parallels between the training they received and the writing they produced. But while these “discoveries” can reveal sources of inspiration previously unknown, one also runs the risk of exaggerating or stretching the link between the social world these writers occupied and their literary muses. As Morris Dickstein makes clear, such historicism can breed facile conclusions, where critics offer “what
simply look[s] like an analogy between the text and its imagined context, little more than a structural resemblance, a pattern of inference rather than a genuine source or point of origin” (251).

But reading *through* the FWP is also alluring for the way it promises to upset traditional classifications of literary history. The FWP occupies one period—“the thirties,” with all of its connotations of protest and proletarianism—while the creative output of its writers largely occupies another—“the postwar,” with its own literary spirit of self-examination and disclosure. From our vantage point then, the FWP, as a critical, historical instrument, allows us to witness continuity between periods where typically we see rupture. Ellison is a striking example of a writer who despite having begun writing in earnest during the thirties has been embraced almost singularly as a voice for a new era concerned more with identity construction than collective struggle. Some critics, such as Barbara Foley, have attempted to excavate Ellison’s latent leftism, arguing that he was formed in the cradle of Depression-era politics more than is commonly appreciated. However, my point is less that Ellison was politically motivated—though he flirted with communism, in truth, he always maintained a more skeptical stance than many of his peers—and more that his literary voice was shaped and sharpened in the process of conducting his FWP fieldwork—of collecting folklore and transcribing stories and the idiom of African Americans in 1930s Harlem.

But such a claim has implications beyond Ellison, suggesting as it does that the FWP provided writers with literary resources to carry into—and indeed that were suitable to—a new era in which many minority, working-class, and immigrant writers were sounding their unique voices and thus claiming their place in American culture. As Dickstein remarks, “Voice—volatile, immediate, and seductive—was the secret weapon of fifties writers against the postwar
resurgence of gentility and good form” (92). But the FWP was brandishing this weapon long before. Culturally, economically, and politically, the postwar period undeniably broke sharply from the Depression. But the FWP, through its mobilization and training of a new generation of writers, reveals a continuum where larger societal transformations infer a break.

Yet, the problem with hinging an argument about the Writers’ Project on its capacity to dissolve the lines between literary periods is that this process of liquefying these divides is already well underway. In recent years, as scholars look for yet more new ways to debunk the old formulations and conventions in literary studies, periodization seems among the most compelling of targets. What was once considered strictly thirties social realism is now being reconsidered for its ties to twenties modernism, a movement which, as it turns out, began decades earlier. Remapping the literary-historical landscape can yield important new encounters with writers who were previously neglected or who suffer from tired branding. But it can also become a critical game in which one risks subversion for the sake of itself. Any consideration of the FWP as a contributor to ongoing literary developments must begin not with the framework that buttresses—albeit now tenuously—notions of periodization, but with rigorous readings of individual writers.

And the FWP offers no shortage of alumni to choose from. Granted, in some cases, little is known about the specific work these writers performed for the Project; only an anecdote told by Jerre Mangione or the appearance of a writer’s name on an archived meeting roster tells us that he or she was there. How there is up for interpretation. With the exception of Margaret Walker, the other writers in this study were chosen in part because of a wealth of archival material that indicate their active involvement in their units. But of equal importance is the fiction they produced that distinctly echoes the tropes and values of the FWP in revealing and
often unexpected ways. Yet, we cannot deny that as many writers were distinctly uninspired by the Project as were engaged with its fieldwork. John Cheever, for example, was hired as the editor of the *New York Guide* in 1938, a position he left within a year and characterized as “twisting into order the sentences written by some incredibly lazy bastards” (Cheever 47). Can one reasonably seek out connections between the FWP’s documentary mode and Cheever’s stories and novels chronicling the postwar middle-class? Probably not.

Saul Bellow, though, might offer a more convincing case. The young Bellow worked for the Chicago office in his first paid writing job alongside Algren, Conroy, Wright, and Walker. According to both Mangione and Bellow’s biographer James Atlas, Bellow’s experience on the Project was formative, as he was inspired by the lively literary environment in the Chicago office where he spent at least part of his time writing brief but incisive biographies of Midwestern writers, including Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson.

Bellow’s early novels all seem to adopt the FWP's tight focus on the individual's voice and apprehension of the changing world. Though he is among the postwar novelists least associated with the socially conscious writing that dominated the Depression, in his fiction we can detect the Project’s first-person documentary approach, which he converts into explorations of psychological angst. Written in diary form, his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944) follows the tortured reflections of Joseph, a young married man waiting for the Army's call for induction. Joseph *dangles* psychologically between longing for social purpose as a soldier and his nagging sense of ultimate purposelessness. His internal crisis, which never ultimately gets resolved, is set against the backdrop of the Chicago streets, which seem to vibrate with the nervous energy of a country at war. Yet, the narrative's conflict is existential rather than social. The novel even begins with Joseph's outright rejection of the previous age, what he calls the “era of
hardboiledom.” As if to usher in a new period of emotional expressiveness, Joseph writes “If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine” (9). But in his reclusive self-scrutiny, Joseph seems an ambassador from the era he condemns, his voice echoing the sense of loss and disorientation that rings out from many of the FWP interviews. His victimization is not economic, and yet his attempts to make sense of his value and his identity within and against the currents of modern history are akin to the rambling monologues of those 1930s subjects who were asked to meditate on their lives. In his novels that were to follow, Bellow continued to adopt the FWP’s monologue structure, with its un-interrupted flow of speech and lack of narrative direction. Dangling Man is an experiment with voice and with the psychological underpinnings of societal change—as much of Bellow’s work is—and as such functions as a kind of oral history in the agitated climate of war.

Because of the breadth of the Project, the question arises whether—or how—to be representational in a discussion of its influence. Do select federal writers stand for others or tell us anything about the writers who were to follow? My study concentrates entirely on writers from the New York and Chicago offices, which, perhaps not surprisingly, turned out many of the most notable postwar voices. But would a more geographically diverse discussion yield a different portrait of the Project’s literary imprint? Most of the historical accounts of the program are divided by region—not only because this is how the FWP itself was organized, but also because each regional unit had its own character and emphasis. As I have noted, in the southern states, racial politics often impeded national efforts to gather unbiased material about African American communities. But in Louisiana, the director Lyle Saxon, had along with the historian Lawrence Reddick set up a separate Negro Unit, focused on collecting oral testimonies, folklore,
and music and culinary history. These were included in the celebrated New Orleans Guide and Gumbo Ya Ya and a still unpublished The Negro in Louisiana. The office had become a hub for local artists and intellectuals, including poet and folklorist Marcus Bruce Christian, who succeeded Reddick as director of the Negro unit. Though much has been written about the culture of the Louisiana Writers’ Project, it would be worth examining it from a literary perspective and tracing the material and manner of work that its myriad writers went on to produce.

Up north in Idaho, the writer Vardis Fisher headed that state’s efforts to compile the guidebook, and in fact wrote most of it himself after scouring the far reaches of the rough landscape and compiling the history of the pioneers. In addition to popular novels about the Old West, Fisher would go on to write a series of twelve novels collectively entitled Testament of Man, published between 1943 and 1961. A monumentally ambitious and altogether original project that chronicled the history of ancient Western civilization, the series is the result of exhaustive anthropological, literary, historical, and scientific research and fieldwork that Fisher describes within the novels’ narratives. One might consider how Fisher’s extensive and often solitary work for the FWP in Idaho opened the way for such penetrating research, and by extension, how the FWP’s mission to pry open history through a range of disciplinary approaches helped to revitalize the genre of historical fiction in the postwar period, as evidenced by Fisher, Yerby, Walker, and others.

Indeed, genre offers another path into exploring the FWP’s effect on literary developments. My study notably leaves out any discussion about poetry, but within the Project’s most active ranks were some of the nation’s soon-to-be most visible poets, including those already mentioned, Sterling Brown, Walker and Christian, but also May Swenson, Robert
Hayden, Kenneth Patchen, and Kenneth Rexroth. The latter two, who would become important figures in the 50s’ Beat movement, worked in the San Francisco office where, along with Tillie Olsen, they helped compile and write the *WPA Guide to California*. A careful reading of both poets for their patchwork use of voice and their fusion of artistic forms may lead one back to the documentary mode cultivated by the Writers’ Project.

Of course, the FWP invigorated oral history as both a quasi-literary genre championed most visibly by Studs Terkel, and as a methodology favored by New Left historians in the late sixties who were again attempted to build American history from the bottom up. It would also seem likely that the FWP’s documentary methods would contribute to the emerging genre of *creative non-fiction* in postwar, in which writers take on social and cultural issues with a literary voice. After all, this is genre most closely linked to what the Project directly produced in its guidebooks and social-ethnic studies. As I briefly discussed in Chapter One, after the Project folded, some of its writers carried on its mission to chart African American lives and histories in works like Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy’s *They Seek a City* (1945) or Roi Ottley’s *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (1943). But these were short lived, and few were written beyond the forties. In fact, these studies appear dated now, with their guidebook formulations, their excess of anthropological details, and their earnest depictions of daily lives in which the most mundane chores are given gravity. On the surface it might be tempting to claim that the FWP’s unique documentary approach was, ironically, less enduring in documentary writing than it would ultimately be in fiction.

On the other hand, Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941) reveals the persistent value of the FWP’s form. In Chapter Two, I singled Wright out as the federal writer perhaps most commonly associated with the
FWP—he got his start as a writer working in both the Chicago and New York FWP offices and was a mentor to many of the Project’s writers—but least amenable to its use voice and subjectivity in his blockbuster proletarian novel *Native Son*. Less appreciated, however, is his *12 Million Black Voices* published the following year, which is not only among the most pioneering works of creative non-fiction, but also suggests, from today’s vantage point, the FWP’s lasting impact on American documentary writing.

Joining melodic prose with vivid 1930s photographs taken for the Security Farm Administration under the WPA, Wright depicts the lives blacks in a range of geographical and situational settings. Here and there, the photographs seem to interrupt the text, which elucidates not the specific images but the larger conditions and experiences the images allude to. For example, one photograph shows four women, who are clearly part of a larger civil rights demonstration, carrying signs from different state delegations. One sign reads: “Louisiana Delegation/ Stop Lynching/ Let Real Democracy Prevail.” But Wright does not caption the photo, instead writing below it: “We are the children of the black sharecroppers, the first-born of the city’s tenements. We have tramped down a road three hundred years long. We have been shunted two and fro by cataclysmic social changes” (142).

In some ways, the book can be seen as a variation of the same documentary principle that underlies *They Seek a City*: that the unique experience of a few can account for that of the whole, and that a selection of voices represents many more, as Wright's title makes clear. The historical data is ultimately subsumed by a larger collective identity and expressions of its “inner turbulence.” Though perhaps less ingratiating, Wright's narrative voice echoes Du Bois' in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Like Du Bois, he assumes the position of the interpreter and lyrical spokesperson for blacks' inner turmoil. He writes in his introduction:
We black men and women in America today, as we look back upon scenes of rapine, sacrifice, and death, seem to be children of a devilish aberration, descendants of an interval of nightmare in history, fledglings of a period of amnesia on the part of men who once dreamed a great dream and forgot.” (17)

But Wright also poses his book as *A History*, a documentary of the plight of blacks from slavery to modernity, and as such it shares Bontemps and Conroy’s rhetorical framework, balancing a pedagogical method and a literary style. Like them, Wright fragments his “study,” upsetting the coherence of a logically progressing history with a narrative of experience.

Yet Wright’s use of the first-person plural calls direct attention to the existence of the audience in a way that *They Seek a City* and other FWP-related documentaries seem to avoid. As Jeff Allred points out, Wright’s “we” problematizes the populist “we” of the 1930s (and of the nation’s founding documents) by invoking separation rather than proposing unity between the races; the Negro voice from which and for whom Wright speaks is sharply split from the implied white reader, who is constituted as “you.” The book then “posits a set of antagonistic subject positions: a (white) you whose routine misrecognitions mistake the outer ‘garb’ for the inner self of the other and a (black) we who speaks to readers from the far side of a racial, social, and narrative divide” (552).

In assuming the first-person plural perspective “we,” Wright estranges himself not from his subject, with whom he evidently aligns, but from an implied white reader who becomes the permanent outsider. In the process, as Allred argues, Wright forces *otherness* on this reader. Of course, Wright’s “we” is further entangled by his own position as a black intellectual who stands apart from the folk he is claiming to represent. Nevertheless, it is not the Rooseveltian populist “we the people” that generates the sense of collective identity that the FWP anticipated in its documentary form. Unlike Bontemps and Conroy, Wright names his audience—the mainstream white “you” on the other side of the text—generally the implied target reader of all
FWP documents that sought to correct misconceptions about the marginalized groups of America. In overtly targeting this audience, Wright undercuts the FWP’s desire to simultaneously promote pluralism and national unity, revealing perhaps that this goal was itself always elusive.

At the same time, Wright is able to reimagine the traditional historical narrative and, as its narrator, merge with his subject in the way that Botkin envisioned. His is a more complex variation on the FWP's approach, and one that would anticipate the use of historical text in the postwar era as a polymorphic battleground for cultural and personal identity claims—what we later see in James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldua, and Maxine Hong Kingston, and others who began to explore race and ethnicity through the lens of literary-historical documentary.

And more generally we find the seeds of the FWP’s literary approach to reportage in the New Journalism that would be shaped by Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Gay Talese. As the romantic nationalism of the 1930s died off, so too would the kinds of studies that it helped yield, such as They Seek a City. But the essential elements of the FWP’s documentary form—the primacy of voice, and the consolidation of many individual voices to tell a historical narrative, the expression of other realities, and the mixing of literary and non-fictional genres—remained, becoming embedded into the fabric of modern social documentary.
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