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“HE IS THE STORY THAT ALL WEAK PEOPLE CREATE TO
COMPENSATE FOR THEIR WEAKNESS”: AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITING FOLKLORE IN THE FEDERAL WRITERS’
PROJECT

ABSTRACT

The 1930s, shaped by the hardships brought on by the Great Depression, were also a time when folklore collecting was institutionalized. Anthropologists and ethnographers, who had developed new tools and perspectives to document culture and history in the 1920s, slipped into positions the New Deal had opened for officials and directors in the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), which was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Their aim was to re-write American history to give new self-respect and -understanding to a nation struggling with the effects of dramatic economic changes. They collected narratives of “ordinary people,” wanting to do justice to the diversity of American society. Oral and cultural history methods were at the center of their practice. The FWP also funded local and regional projects devoted to the documentation of Black culture and history, often carried out by units of Black writers, and interviewed about Kathi King is a doctoral candidate in North American Studies at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. The title of her dissertation project is “African American Women Writers and the WPA.” She served as a guest scholar at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and the University of Illinois in 2019 and at the Kansas State University in 2022, and is a member of the American Folklore Society. She works as a project coordinator with the NGO iz3w (short for information center 3rd world) in Freiburg and is among the editors of *Común*, a German publication on urban political interventions. She has contributed the chapter “‘Crime and Juvenile Delinquency - my pet hobby at present’: Margaret Walker and the WPA in Chicago” to Sara Rutkowski, ed., 2022, *Rewriting America: New Essays on the Federal Writers’ Project* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press). Her research interests are African American history, racism and the Black experience, cities from below, and radical history.

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2,300 ex-slaves. African American writers belonged to the group hit hardest by the economic collapse. Among them were three women writers: Margaret Walker, Dorothy West, and Zora Neale Hurston. These women conducted interviews, collected folklore, wrote and edited manuscripts, and used both their time in and material from the FWP for their own fiction. In this way, narratives of Black female subjectivity made it into literature and history, with women writing Black female voices and heroines into the historical narrative of the United States by revising, transforming, and subverting traditional codes and genres. Margaret Walker's folk ballad "Yalluh Hammuh" can be seen as such a venture. It also exemplifies the interplay of personal memory, folklore, and poetry. An examination of the use of oral history and folklore in the New Deal era, with a focus on the voices and roles of African American women, can help us better understand the nexus of "*race*,"¹ *class*, and *gender* within literature, poetry, and historiography.

"The story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness" – African American Women Writing Folklore in the Federal Writers' Project

In the 1930s, the national history of the United States was re-written. This undertaking was authored by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), "an artistic appendage to the tremendous socioeconomic program of the Works Progress Administration [WPA]," as writer Margaret Walker put it. The "needy, but capable writers" (Walker 1988, 68) were "turned loose on the landscape with a government mandate to 'hold up a mirror to America'" (Taylor 2009). They collected interviews, life histories, folklore, and historical records (cf. Felkner 1991, 147). This social experiment was launched by a government which hoped that the ambitious agenda the WPA presented would "both lift the spirits and provide weekly paychecks for thousands of unemployed Americans" (Bascom 2001, 1). The program was proposed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the early spring of 1935 and after it was passed by Congress, it began in the early fall of 1935 (cf. Walker 1988, 86). But how was it possible that one of the most ambitious projects of collecting oral accounts by ordinary Americans was

undertaken during a time when the American economy experienced a dramatic recession? Is it not counter-intuitive to invest in the writing of travel guides and folklore anthologies while people are struggling to survive? As dire as they were, the 1930s were not only a time of struggle, but also of progressive politics, which made possible what is considered “the most expensive program ever launched by any government anywhere in the world.” The Works Progress Administration was “designed to provide meaningful work instead of make-work and charity” (Quinn 2009, 10f). For instance, the country’s infrastructure had fallen into disrepair over the course of the crisis, so federal support for its renovation appeared pragmatic and uncontroversial. Considerably more people were employed in the building trades—but what about the white-collar workers? For them, one of the answers was the Federal Writers’ Project.

THE GENESIS OF THE FWP

This endeavor was made possible by an array of political and social factors: Roosevelt’s idea of work relief, a political and social climate generally inclined towards progressive ideas regarding the significance of culture and the arts, the pluralist composition of American society, the union activity of writers and journalists, and a good helping of path dependency. In the following paragraphs I will elaborate on these factors, while also providing a broad overview of the politico-cultural context of the FWP.

The 1920s, a decade of economic growth and *laissez-faire* policies, ended abruptly with the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929, which marked the beginning of a twelve-year-long economic crisis. 100,000 businesses suddenly failed and unemployment skyrocketed, until it peaked at 24.9 percent in 1933 when Roosevelt was inaugurated. He was famous for his use of radio broadcasting as a means to “speak directly to the people” (Taylor 2008, 91) with his “fire-side chats.” During the Depression, a ten-year-long drought hit the southern and midwestern plains and caused approximately 2.5 million farmers and agricultural workers to leave the dust bowl states. Slums nicknamed “Hoovervilles” cluttered the roadsides across the country. Sarcastically named after the president whom the inhabi-

tants of these shantytowns blamed for their situation, Hoovervilles became the symbol for the Republican failure to deal with the crisis. Unlike his Republican predecessor Herbert Hoover, Roosevelt understood that the gravity of the situation required bold measures. His New Deal policies were modeled after relief and public employment programs he had employed during his time as governor of New York. Now they were applied on a federal level. Of course, FDR's opposition excoriated these projects: believing in rugged individualism and local charity as sufficient means to fight nationwide poverty, they found it an outrageous dissipation to spend so much of the national budget just to give relief and jobs to the unemployed, who were nothing but "bums and loafers" to them (cf. Taylor 2008, 130). While it may seem counter-intuitive, the New Deal fit with president Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic, political, and cultural agenda, as well with contemporaneous debates among intellectuals and labor organizations. In its original conception, the WPA was a measure to alleviate unemployment, not an instrument to document culture and history. It was Roosevelt's—and WPA supervisor Harry Hopkins's—principle that everyone employed by the WPA should work in their original profession, or even receive further training in it. When challenged for his decision to develop work relief projects for artists and intellectuals, Hopkins famously countered: "Hell, they've got to eat just like other people" (Adler 2009). Both Roosevelt and Hopkins were against relief in the form of "make-work" and cash handouts—those methods were thought to be taking too much of a toll on people's spirits. Roosevelt told Congress on January 4, 1935, that

the Federal Government must quit this business of relief. I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash, of market baskets, of a few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves, or picking up papers in the public parks... To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit... We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination. (Roosevelt qtd. in Quinn 2009, 10f)

As for the arts, Roosevelt “believed that the principle of access to the arts was ‘as logical as access to the ballot box or schoolhouse’” (Sklaroff 2009, 28). Though far from uncontroversial, the New Deal fueled a generally favorable climate for the arts. Milton Meltzer, himself a former FWP writer, wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of the WPA arts projects in 1976, titled *Violins & Shovels*. Here he recounts: “Some people asked, Why help the artists? Pay them, instead, to use a shovel or a rake.” The answer from Aubrey Williams, a WPA administrator, was “We don’t think a good musician should be asked to turn second-rate laborer in order that a sewer may be laid for relative permanency rather than a concert given for the momentary pleasure of our people.” Meltzer stresses that this was a revolutionary idea, coming from a public official. In the perception of most Americans in the 1930s, art was not considered “work”: “These activities were luxuries for the rich to toy with, or avocations for people who worked at ‘regular’ jobs.” Nor were the arts considered a part of popular education and culture. It was not in the interest of politicians to change this perception, either. For Meltzer, the Great Depression marks a turning point in the public and political understanding of the arts, “something that we should have known long ago: Art was a necessity, something everybody’s spirit thirsted for” (Metzler 1976, 19).

It was Henry Alsberg—who was appointed national director of the FWP—and his colleagues who pushed the idea that the FWP could document American culture in a way that would implement concepts evolving from debates in the emerging new anthropology and discussions in the arts and sciences of the era. As Jerrold Hirsch puts it, “National FWP officials, under the leadership of Henry Alsberg, aimed to redefine American national identity and culture by embracing the country’s diversity” (Hirsch 2003, 1). The new anthropology which had begun to emerge in the 1920s fueled their desire to find new ways to describe the relationship between culture as an expressive artform and culture as a way of life (Hirsch 2003, 2). Writers were involved in an ongoing discussion which had also begun in the 1920s about what Hirsch phrases “the possibility of creating literature in an urban-industrial world, and the meaning of modernity.” Further on, “[t]hey saw themselves as a larger cultural project” (Hirsch 2003, 2). It is important to note that most leading positions in the FWP were not occupied by people from the literary world. Henry Alsberg—who had

studied law—worked as a journalist, a playwright, and for the WPA precursor the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). A friend of anarchist Emma Goldman, Alsberg had abandoned his more radical stances and became a government official. As a New Deal liberal in his fifties, he knew many people in the New York literary scene (cf. Dolinar 2013, xi). Alsberg also had experience as a humanitarian aid worker: he had visited Soviet Russia several times and became director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which aided famine victims of the Russian Revolution (cf. Sklaroff 2009, 31). Entrepreneur folklorist John Lomax, who had worked for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, was appointed national adviser on folklore by Alsberg. His achievement was broadening the field of what was considered folklore in the project, and encouraging the special consideration of African American folklore, as well as the collection of ex-slave narratives (cf. Kennedy 2017, 3; Stewart 2016, 76). When taking office in June 1936, he compiled a list of everything folklore fieldworkers should be on the lookout for. This list included

wishing seats, wishing wells, proposal rocks, swamps and quicksands with sinister reputations, localities with beneficent qualities, animal behavior and meanings, stories about animals and their relations with people, table service, blessing crops, public punishment, tall tales, drinking toast, graveyard epitaphs, psychics, and witches. (Kennedy 2017, 3)

In 1938, Lomax was succeeded by folklorist Benjamin Botkin, who had taught at the University of Oklahoma and edited the annual anthology *Folk-Say – A Regional Miscellany* (1929–1932). In his perspective, cosmopolitanism and provincialism were neither complementary nor hostile approaches (cf. Brewer 1994, vii; Hirsch 2003, 27). His was a “two-way street” approach to folklore, an “insistence that urban lore was no less significant than the rural, the living no less than the long-dead, and that folk culture had not at all been doomed by the industrial revolution,” as wrote his colleague Stetson Kennedy (2017, 3–4). African American scholar, poet, and critic Sterling Brown was one of the few “literary” people in the highest positions

within the FWP—he was appointed “National Editor on Negro Affairs” (Penkower 1977, 66). Brown urged for accurate representations of African Americans in the project. In a letter to *Opportunity* editor Elmer Anderson, he announced “I am anxious to do a good job here. You know my anxiety to see the record straight on matters concerning Negro history and life” (Sklaroff 2009, 92). Sklaroff describes his field of work as follows:

With two editorial assistants from Howard University, Ulysses Lee and Eugene Holmes, and another editor, Glaucia Roberts, Brown reviewed all copy for the state guides. He also worked on other FWP projects such as the ex-slave narratives and the WPA historical records survey. In addition, he took on the responsibility of attempting to provide African Americans with employment in as many states as possible. (Sklaroff 2009, 92)

Hirsch argues that the FWP leaders advocated a modernized form of Romantic Nationalism. According to him, Romantic Nationalism was built on the idea that there was an organic relationship between individual personality, nationality, and the creative arts. Its followers rejected the conservative notion that high culture could only be of European origin (cf. Hirsch 2003, 20). The transcendentalists and Walt Whitman operated in this tradition and much of the FWP’s writing has been characterized as “Whitmanesque” (Hirsch 2003, 6). The idea that “ordinary people” had something to say, that their culture and lore were a meaningful part of an American identity was central to the work and practices of the FWP. These ideas were already part of contemporary understandings of American culture, but they were radicalized by the project—especially when it came to the question “who is an American?” Almost everybody in the leading ranks of the FWP was committed to the ideals of the new anthropology of the 1920s—especially Franz Boas’s ideas—which must not necessarily be seen as a rebuke of Romantic Nationalism, argues Hirsch: “The particularist romantic nationalist strain in his thought can be seen in his emphasis on a pluralist description of a multiplicity of cultures that had developed in response to specific historical conditions and could not be ranked hierarchically as best or worst” (2003, 5). Boas’s

theory of cultural relativism, Hirsch contends, “lifted anthropology from the racial constraints of nineteenth century evolution theory and placed equal value on all cultures” (Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 10).

This was a rejection of racism, and with it an attack on White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ideas of American identity: “his attack on racist thinking made it possible to consider who was an American in pluralist terms...The universalist strain in Boas’s thought was tied to his rejection of race as a way to understand individual difference. He denied that any group was incapable of being American citizens” (Hirsch 2003, 5). All of them advocated a theory that was centered on the functional and integrative aspects of culture. Botkin espoused anthropologist Paul Radin’s case for “a cultural history in which individual life histories played a central role” (Hirsch 2003, 109). Before FWP officials embraced this anthropological concept of culture—which allowed them to pursue a mode of historiography and a type of historical material they were interested in—it had only been present in the work of a few historians. Up to then, the historical tradition in America had relied heavily on written, archived material—a profession committed to supposed objectivity and empiricism. Hirsch quotes from Caroline Ware’s introduction to *The Cultural Approach to History* (1940), a volume Botkin had also contributed to: “Although the literate parts of the population were always in the minority, these were necessarily regarded as the ‘people’, since it was they concerning whom the historians had direct evidence.” So, they went for what would today be called “oral history.” In the early-to-mid-twentieth century, terminology for this practice and material was diverse. The interviews FWP fieldworkers conducted “went under an assortment of names in the Writers’ Project: life histories, living lore, industrial lore, occupational lore, and narratives. All of these terms were used to describe efforts to document real people telling their own stories in their own words” (Banks 1991, xiii). Oral history methods were central to all of the sub-projects of the FWP: Creative Work, American Guide, Folklore Studies, Slave Narratives, Social Ethnic Studies, and Negro Studies (cf. Brewer 1994, xiv).

Within a broader scope, these efforts and discourses on the democratization of history and the arts can be seen as a part of the wider global movement from the Left during this era. A significant politico-cultural factor was the strategic program of the Communist Party

of the United States (CPUSA) called the Popular Front, which would later become eponymous for the cultural climate of the 1930s. The CPUSA followed the path of other communist, socialist, and social democratic parties and organizations from the trade union movements around the world, which were organized in the Communist International (Comintern). With an acute awareness that their sectarianism was a precarious position with regard to the rise of fascism in Europe, the Comintern decided to seek coalition with Socialists and Liberals. Their assessment that the fascists had used culture as an effective and successful means for mobilization led them to conclude that culture was an important field within the antifascist struggle (cf. Smethurst 2011, 492). Far from being an abstract strategy, the Popular Front was put into practice by a broad range of politicians, activists, and writers from the radical left. As Hirsch writes:

Many national FWP officials and other liberal New Dealers supported the political and cultural trust of the Popular Front because they valued a cultural politics that showed concern for the lives of ordinary Americans, in particular the poor, the industrial workers, and the racial and ethnic minorities—these are overlapping categories—and opposed fascism at home and abroad. (2003, 3)

With this strategy on the cultural level came broad mobilization for union activity. As a reaction to the exclusion of African Americans and unskilled industrial workers by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was founded in 1935 (cf. Berke 2011, 140). Sklaroff notes that these political movements and developments not only created a climate in which progressive culture and political art could thrive, but that they were also crucial to the political struggle of African Americans:

individuals wove in and out of New Deal programs and Popular Front organizations rather seamlessly, fomenting a proletarian-based cultural renaissance. Thus, the formation of the inclusionary Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), opposition to totalitarianism abroad, and the ambition of the New Deal all fostered an atmosphere conducive for civil right reform. (2009, 25)

Obviously, writers formed their own union organizations: The Writers' Union, the League of American Writers, a successor organization of the John Reed Clubs (JRC), the Unemployed Writers Association—all of them also closely associated with the JRC's, the CPUSA, the Authors Guild, and the Newspaper Guild (cf. Mangione 1972, 245). These organizations helped writers to exert pressure collectively and to pose demands at pre-WPA New Deal Agencies. "CHILDREN NEED BOOKS /WRITERS NEED A BREAK / WE DEMAND PROJECTS" it says on a placard carried by a writer on a photo of the Writers' Unions first picket line from February 25, 1935 (cf. Mangione 1972, 38). A proposal from the Authors Guild to the Civil Works Agency (CWA) on February 1934 for the employment of writers reverberates with ideas later put into practice by the FWP: "'to survey varying aspects of everyday life as it is lived in all parts of the United States' . . . an indefinite number of writers could be assigned to write 'a complete hour-to-hour-account of a single day in the life of a man, woman or child in which a writers lives'" (Mangione 1972, 36).

Lastly, as is common in political institutions, there was a certain amount of path dependency at play—political decisions were made based on prior decisions and past experiences rather than on an assessment of the current situation. Oral history collecting had already taken place under FERA (1933–35), and it was a Black history project that was chosen to be the first one conducted. It was probably Charles S. Johnson, African American sociologist and president of Fisk University, who made collecting ex-slave narratives part of the WPA's efforts. He encouraged staff researcher Ophelia Settle Egypt to interview ex-slaves in Kentucky and Tennessee. One-third of these interviews were published as the *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Account of Negro Ex-Slaves* (1945). Lawrence D. Reddick acted as an assistant to Settle Egypt. When he was teaching at Kentucky State College in 1934, he successfully submitted a proposal to Hopkins, then director of the WPA precursor FERA. There he supervised twelve African American college graduates who conducted 250 interviews with ex-slaves in Indiana and Kentucky from 1934 to 1935—a project which is today considered the New Deal's first take on collecting oral history, and which apparently proved to be a worthwhile venture (cf. Stewart 2016, 63).

“LOOK WITH FRESH EYES”—ORAL HISTORY AND FOLKLORE
COLLECTING IN THE FWP

Examining the manuscripts available at the Library of Congress, it is hard to tell for which program a particular interview was conducted: Creative Work, American Guide, Folklore Studies, Slave Narratives, Social Ethnic Studies, or Negro Studies (cf. Brewer 1994, xiv). In fact, there was a great deal of overlap between these projects. An interviewer might talk to an interviewee to hear about customs or tales, then come back a few days later to record a story from their life. For example, Dorothy West, who worked for the New York City office of the FWP, went to see her partner Marian Minus's mother "Mrs Laura M." to record "Game Songs and Rhymes" in October 1938, and came back in November to note down a story her informant told her about supernatural phenomena in her Harlem apartment (see West 1938a; West and Mrs. Laura M. 1938). Although the first manuscript would classify as straightforward folklore material, the second one's genre-affiliation is messier: is it a folktale, or is it a life history? Both are classified as "Folklore" on the project's forms, and both are filed in the series "Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-39" by the Library of Congress. Ann Banks, editor of *First-Person America* (1991), puts it as such: "In theory, the Folklore Unit dealt with 'a body of lore in relation to the life of a group or community,' while the Social-Ethnic Studies Unit focused on 'the whole life of a group or community' in which folklore was only one aspect. In practice, the distinction between the two ventures was frequently blurred: both stressed the collection of first-person narratives; and both drew on the same pool of FWP fieldworkers" (1991, xv). With the ex-slave narratives, of which the project collected 2,300, it is equally difficult to label the collected material—at the same time, however, the collected material clarifies the role of folklore and tall tales in historiography. On the cover of the 1945 edition of Benjamin Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down – A Folk History of Slavery*, it reads "In their most fascinating anecdotes and folk tales former Negro slaves tell what slavery and emancipation meant to each of them" (Botkin 1994 [1945]). This

quote sums up nicely what oral history is all about: recognition that individual accounts as well as folk tales are important to understand how people felt and made sense of their world. Or, as Banks puts it, they “add the resonance of memory to the formal record of written history” (1991, xxv). In his introduction to the 1994 edition, Jerrold Hirsch exemplifies these ideas: “The personal and communal functions of memory, ways of living and ways of wresting a living from the land, the meaning of slavery and freedom, the struggle to create a family and community life in a world of slavery and racial conflict—these are some of the great themes of this folk history” (1994, ix). Especially when it comes to the functions of memory, oral history material contributes to a historiography of how history in the form of memories and tales was passed down from one generation to the next within a predominantly forcibly illiterate community. Botkin compiled the selection himself from the collection of FWP slave narratives after the project was defunded in 1939 and shut down in 1943 (cf. Brewer 1994, vii). Jerre Mangione, FWP writer and a chronicler of the project, recounts “Struck by the potency of the ex-slave material, Botkin excerpted from ten thousand papers enough selections for an anthology he published in 1945 with the title: *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*” (1972, 256). The book was a literary and commercial success; it had gone into eight printings by 1969. Mangione emphasizes its impact on common perceptions of American history—it made “the public aware that, thanks to the Writers’ Project, a significant facet of the American story had been faithfully recorded in detail and saved from oblivion” (1972, 265). Botkin’s advocacy of the democratization of history is expressed in his preface and introduction, in which he notes that in “the collective tone of many voices speaking as one,” (1994 [1945], xxxiv) the narratives create an effect, namely as “a mixture of fact and fiction, then, colored by the fantasy and idealization of old people recalling the past, the narratives constitute a kind of collective saga of slavery” (1994 [1945], 5). The narratives selected for the collection were chosen using criteria for which Botkin had coined the term “Folk-Say”: “broadly human and imaginative aspects and...oral, literary and narrative folk values” (Botkin 1994, xxxiii). They are at the same time—or in a transition between—oral history *and* folklore, “as they are told again and again” (Hirsch 1994, xv). Botkin’s oft-quoted characterization of

this type of narrative stresses what might be considered their earthy quality: “They have the forthrightness, the 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.”²

The ex-slave narratives also serve well to exemplify the FWP’s shortcomings and pitfalls of oral history collecting. Naturally, few of the fieldworkers had received professional training in the methods they employed. This was, however, not necessarily a disadvantage. As recalls Stetson Kennedy, who worked at the side of Zora Neale Hurston for the Florida FWP:

As for the fieldworkers, a majority were housewives with a high school education and a penchant for writing. What the fieldworkers lacked in formal training was more than compensated for by their zealous belief in the importance of the work they were doing. Unlike many an academic collector, they did not have to relate to their informants; they were related: by class, culture, and sometimes kinship. All they had to do was knock on any door, and the rapport was there. (Kennedy 2017, 5)

Neither was the lack of recording equipment; recording machines existed but were huge and heavy. John Lomax had a 315 pound acetate disc recorder sponsored by the Library of Congress that was built into the trunk of his Plymouth Sedan in 1933 and Stetson Kennedy remembers Lomax’s son Alan toting around a five hundred pound device, and sometimes several automobile batteries if there was no electricity (cf. Kennedy 2019; “Lomax Collection” 2020). Kennedy would later head expeditions to different parts of Florida, where such a recording machine was used, a privilege the Florida FWP likely owed to Zora Neale Hurston:

In 1939, the Florida project borrowed a recording machine from the Library of Congress. The fact that Zora Neale Hurston had worked with the machine on a recording expedition with Alan Lomax in 1935 may have been a factor in our being entrusted with the cumbersome device. Nevertheless, we were very glad to have the machine

and Zora. I never heard any discussion which so much as considered sending out an ‘inter-racial’ team. Those were the days when so innocent a gesture as a white man lighting a black woman’s cigarette could get them both lynched. The solution, handed down to me from above, was to send Zora ahead as a sort of ‘talent scout’ to identify informants. (Kennedy 2017, 17)

All ordinary FWP fieldworkers had was paper and pen and their memory. Empirical objectivity was not their main goal, but they did emphasize awareness of the subjectivity of first-person accounts and the processes involved, including the subjectivity of the interviewer. Kennedy remembers:

fieldworkers were admonished “to look with fresh eyes” and to “stick to the precise language of the narrator.” A set of forms was devised to accompany the text of each oral interview, to provide biographical and occupational background data on the informants. A final reference page was required for the listing of name and address of each informant, together with any published sources utilized. (Kennedy 2017, 2)

Those were the instructions of Benjamin Botkin, who stressed the importance of the collection process:

The best results, he wrote, were obtained “when a good informant and a good interviewer got together and the narrative is the process of the *conscious or unconscious collaboration of the two*.” Botkin sought to implement this philosophy through specific instructions to Federal Writers. “Make your informant feel important,” he directed. “Well-conducted interviews serve as social occasions to which informants come to look forward.” (Banks 1991, xvi; emphasis added)

However, this collaboration was often breached when white interviewers interviewed Black informants. This phenomenon has been widely documented for the ex-slave narratives project. It happened especially frequently in the South, where many fieldworkers still looked back nostalgically to the plantation system of the antebellum era. Informants did not feel they could speak freely, and fieldworkers

asked suggestive questions and acted in patronizing ways; African American dialect was transcribed in a way that evoked minstrel images (cf. Stewart 2016, 80). The focus on the perspective of the *ex-slave* and their perception of freedom, which Lomax emphasized—wanting to shed light on a genuinely underrepresented viewpoint—disastrously backfired. Catherine Stewart, who in her 2016 book analyzed the representation of “race” in the FWP, argues:

in order to encompass the continued exploitation of slaves [after slavery] opened the door for employees who were advocates for the “Lost Cause” version of Southern history. Making not slavery, but the *ex-slaves* the object of study allowed for invidious comparisons between the hardships of the Great Depression and the benign paternalism of Southern slavery. (2016, 69)

Meltzer observes similar problems, but also recognizes that the collection process did not necessarily have to go this way:

Lomax instructions to the field insisted upon the importance of recording interviews exactly as given—with no censorship. Lomax had no control over hiring or assignments. The great majority of the interviewers were white. Their biases and methods violated sound interview procedure. The whites, as can be realized from the transcripts, were often patronizing, condescending, and sometimes insulting. The result could be stock responses, evasive answers, or compliant “yassuhs.” Occasionally, white interviewers revealed both sensitivity and insight in their interview technique. In places like Florida, where the interviewer’s were black, the difference in results is evident. Answers were engaged, candid, direct. Deep feelings were openly expressed. (1976, 126)

“CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS COLLABORATION”—AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE FWP

Three African American women writers who were part of this project did not have a problem with creating narratives in a process of “conscious or unconscious collaboration,” as Botkin had in mind—

for them, rapport was easy to build. Not only did they share certain realities with their informants—who frequently also understood the circumstances of being Black in 1930s America—but they also had a genuine interest in documenting the various facets of this experience. Their own working conditions at the FWP highlight how different participation in and employment with the project could look for African American women. Zora Neale Hurston worked for the Florida project from mid-1937 to August 1939, Dorothy West was in the New York City office from 1938 to 1939, and Margaret Walker wrote for the Illinois FWP in Chicago from 1936 to 1939.³ While West and Walker worked in integrated office spaces, Hurston worked from home because the Jacksonville office was white-only.⁴ Despite being a widely published writer at the time of her employment, Hurston received the lowest position available at the FWP: relief writer, making \$67.50 a month. Other writers of her caliber acquired well-paid supervisory or editorial positions in offices north of the Mason-Dixon line, but Hurston had to go through the embarrassing procedure of having her home investigated to certify her eligibility for relief. Her placement is a clear-cut example of the racism Black writers encountered in Southern FWP offices. However, as Pamela Bordelon suggests, she was likely quite happy with the conditions of this remote job: “Being a field writer made it possible for her to live and work out of her own home in Eatonville, a privilege extended to only a handful of writers nationwide. For Hurston this was a far greater prize than editorial status. It enabled her to come and go as she pleased, do her own writing, and merely check in with director [Carita Doggett] Corse in the state office periodically” (cf. Bordelon 1999, 17). Her placement produced repercussions within the federal office. Henry Alsberg wanted to see her in the editor position for the study *The Negro in Florida* and demanded her salary be raised \$150 per month to make up for the additional responsibility.⁵ Bordelon writes:

Alsberg’s liberal recommendation that Hurston be made an editor sent shock waves through Florida’s WPA organization, which controlled the state FWP’s employment and finances. In the Southern scheme of things, blacks were not given supervisory positions, even if they were more capable or better suited. Placing an African American over whites would have violated the unwritten code of the Jim

Crow South and rankled whites on the WPA and its arts projects.
(1999, 16)

WPA state offices were more conservative than Writers' offices—there were few chances to upend the Jim Crow order in terms of positions and salaries. It is likely that Corse circumvented the pay raise that would have upset the states headquarters by granting Hurston a monthly travel allowance of \$75, which raised her salary to as much as \$142.50 per month—close to the highest salary for state editors, \$160 (Bordelon 1999, 16). Walker and West had it comparably easier in their offices in the urban North. Walker, who was only 21 and fresh from college, got a position as junior writer at \$85 per month on March 16, 1936. Nine months into her employment, she was admitted into the prized Creative Works section, a position that allowed her to pursue her fiction and poetry full-time. On August 14, 1938, Walker was promoted to the position of senior writer—an event that made it into her diary: “The nicest thing of all was that when I got home I found a nice fat check waiting...the raise I have been wanting so long to \$94” (Walker 1938, 35). Walker’s employment also lasted an unusually long time: over three years. Dorothy West was promoted to the position of Senior Newspaperman at a salary of \$91.10 per month on October 20, 1938, about two months into her employment with the FWP (Cody and FWP 1938, 1). For Walker, the FWP was the beginning of her career as a writer; she had only one published poem when she began, “Daydream” (later titled: “I Want to Write”), which was published by *The Crisis* in 1934 (Walker 1934). Dorothy West had already been part of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, but as yet had only published short stories in magazines, including her own publication *Challenge* (1934–1937).⁶ The FWP was a springboard for their writing careers. Walker’s first poetry collection *For My People* was published in 1943, and West landed a job as a short story writer with the *New York Daily News* in 1939 and published her first novel *The Living is Easy* in 1948. For Hurston, the FWP was a sturdy bridge into academic employment. When Congress voted down federal sponsoring of the arts projects in 1939 and the 18-month-rule was implemented, curbing the maximum time for employment with the WPA, Hurston had already found a position as a drama instructor at North Carolina College in Durham and had received an honorary doc-

torate from her alma mater, Morgan State (cf. Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 46). Although there was a substantial experiential difference at the FWP for Black women below and above the Mason-Dixon line, the program proved to be beneficial for all three of these writers. Even more than it bridged a period of economic calamity, it was a phase of extremely prolific writing activity for all of them, the products of which have not yet been fully uncovered. The encounters, perspectives, and practices the FWP facilitated sparked inspiration and led to experimentation with new forms and genres. These innovations can be characterized as folklore writing, interviews, ethnography, reportage, and documentary.

In *Women, Art and the New Deal* (2015) Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene stress the innovative role of women within the new conceptions and practices of literature facilitated and fostered by the FWP: “Primarily through the lens of documentary, woman artists employed a unique form of interweaving, of their own stories with those of other women whose lives would otherwise not have been considered worthy of artistic rendering” (2015, 2). They use the term “collaborative narrative” for stories that involve “telling together” as well as “telling about.” The term “collaborative narrative” was coined by critic Anne E. Goldman, who uses it to describe extra-literary texts. These types of texts are usually classified as sociology, labor history, or cultural studies, but Goldman emphasizes their literary qualities, which she sees as manifestations of a “desire to speak autobiographically, which is negotiated in narratives that simultaneously write the self and represent the culture(s) within that self takes shape” (1996, x). As examples, Goldman lists African American accounts of midwifery or stories of labor union involvement. Most of the art and literature produced for Federal One⁷ could be classified as the first type of collaborative narrative: “telling together.” As it was practiced in these projects, it led

not to personal stories of the artists’ lives but to sympathetic engagement with other Americans, viewed as worthy of consideration and praise. In the collaborative narratives of the New Deal art projects, such as life histories, slave narratives, and posed photographs and paintings, involving various levels of input between artist and subject, women expressed complex truths about gender. (Adams and

Keene 2015, 2)

Another type of narrative can be characterized as “telling about.” This narrative type portrays fictional characters who share typical experiences with their contemporaries or with people from bygone eras. In this context, Adams and Keene use the term “doubling,” which they borrow from the group therapy form of psychodrama. They argue that woman artists employed fictional characters to typify the Depression experience. Artists created a “telling about” by giving voice to perspectives and experiences (Adams and Keene 2015, 2–3). The way FWP writers included narratives, reportage, and observations collected during their time on the project into their own fiction could be characterized as an example of this narrative type. Adams and Keene add another aspect to this definition of “doubling” to describe the composite character of this type of literature:

[Psychodrama] therapists might access a particularly well-wrought example created by a colleague, a means of echoing impactful stories that could speak to current situations. Along with collaborative narratives involving the artist with individual women, New Deal art fostered similar types of doubling, through sympathetic character studies that allowed artists to access their own creativity, their knowledge of their contemporaries, and the work of others to give voice to Depression experience as well as historical realities and larger truths. (2015, 3)

By putting these narratives on display—in anthologies, as public art, or in their poetry and prose—FWP writers contributed to a discourse that opened gaps and spaces for people to speak about their own experiences and to view their own stories as worth telling. For instance, experiences of unemployment and the failure to care for oneself and one’s family are a subject of shame, but by hearing narratives of other people’s similar plight, an experience one encountered as an individual could become a common problem not related to personal failure, but instead to structural issues. Narratives such as these can offer encouragement to talk about one’s own situation. They can provide consolation and insight, and maybe even fuel change. The effects of engaging with described phenomena, however, cannot be measured

empirically. Social realist portrayals of ordinary people are characteristic of 1930s art, as are collections of oral narratives, but their effect on people's storytelling—and the practices and subjects they employ—remains a matter of speculation.

In literature from the New Deal era, representations of Black women as complex characters are very rare. This is partly due to the underrepresentation of African American women writers (as on the payrolls of the FWP) but is also due to the fact that many of the FWP's planned studies and anthologies never made it into print. Archival rediscoveries show that a fair number of FWP narratives by and about Black women actually do exist. They are snapshots of the Black female experience in 1930s America and shed light on the innovative ways authors made use of the framework the FWP offered them.

Many have observed a special empathy in women's Depression-era writing, in which artists often expressed a sense of a commonality between themselves and the working class (i.e., Washington 1997, xv). FWP writer Betty Burke's words illustrate this sentiment: "We were poor ourselves and these people were, if anything, poorer, so I was very close to them...I understood every word they said with all my heart" (qtd. in Bascom 2001, 16). Collections of FWP writings by Hurston and West have already been published and allow for an inspection of these instances of empathy and collaboration.⁸ An outstanding example for this phenomenon is Dorothy West's piece "A Tale – 'Pluto'" (see West 2001; see also Bascom 2008, xxi; Mitchell and Davis 2005, xiii; Sherrard-Johnson 2012, 119). West used the forms of the Folklore/Life Histories subproject for the story, which, rather than a tale, is a personal anecdote "reported by Dorothy West (Staff Writer)" (West 1938b, 1). It is a laconic yet complex personal story, a self-observation of the writer in an encounter with a poor Black woman and her child in West's Harlem apartment. West had worked as a relief investigator for the WPA before she started with the FWP. She knew all too well the living conditions relief recipients faced and had heard many a pauper's oath—the vow of not owning any financial or material means in Depression-era slang. West's sensitivity and frankness in describing her own callousness in the face of a tragic life story creates a chilling image of what years of economic deprivation can do to the human psyche. Indeed, in her story,

the woman who knocks on West's door has been trying for so long to obtain money for her and her child that her narrative has turned into a "drab recital" (West 1938b, 4); the young boy is so hungry he forgets his curiosity and looks not seven years old, but "an under-sized seventy" (West 1938b, 5); and herself, the writer, who, though wanting to write a story "about poor people, too; A good proletarian short-story," (West 1938b, 4) cannot bear to hear another story about poverty. The woman's story is recounted in "Pluto," but relegated to a single paragraph. As West reflects on the encounter, she also narrates difference through Black female subjectivity: the two women are bound together by the position society puts them in and by the history of Black people in the United States. As an FWP writer, West is still in a more privileged position, but what she can give to the poor women amounts to an improvised breakfast and a quarter that she actually cannot spare. "'Why aren't you on relief?' I asked suspiciously, although in my heart I was disarmed by her southern accent," writes West, encapsulating middle-class snobbishness, her history as a relief investigator, and her Southern roots in a single sentence (1938b, 2). As the woman and the boy leave, the child has mustered enough strength to pick up a collapsible puppet of Pluto, Walt Disney's yellow hound, which stands on West's bookcase. West had wished he would do that from the moment he stepped into her home, but saw he was too hungry to find joy in toys. The boy lets Pluto drop and laughs. West ends the story on a somber note: "I was thinking that it is not right to take a child's joy away and give him hunger. I was thinking that a child's faith is too fine and precious for the dumpheap of poverty. I was thinking that bread should not be bigger than a boy. I thought about those things a lot" (1938b, 6).

For an anthropologist like Zora Neale Hurston, the FWP did not exactly invite new ideas or practices, but it allowed the writer to practice her craft in relative independence and on a stable yet modest budget. The largest part of her work for the FWP consists of straightforward folklore: conceptual and critical writing on folklore, as well as collected and retold material. Although Hurston only has a few female protagonists or informants in her FWP portfolio, she created one of the most important Black heroines in African American literature during this time: Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1938). Her conceptual writing on folklore for the FWP can be considered an early

example of ethnographic writing by an African American woman. An essay titled “Go Gator and Muddy the Water,” which would become a chapter on folklore and music for the study *The Florida Negro* (in some manuscripts titled *The Negro in Florida*), is probably “one of Hurston’s most complete discussions of the origin of folklore” (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 68). Her distinct tone and wit make it an outstanding document about her conceptualization of folklore: “Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries” (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 68). The oft-quoted first sentence resonates not only with Hurston’s voice and convictions, but also with the idea of cultural relativism, which she acquired studying with Franz Boas at Barnard, as well as with Benjamin Botkin’s ideas, with whom she was also in contact. Among songs and poetry from various sources, Hurston includes tales collected from inmates at “Blue Jay,” one of Florida’s largest prisons. The informants—Bob Davis, Frank White, and “Panama Red” Hooper—had been interviewed by Martin Richardson, a Black FWP writer. Hurston concludes that their tales on Black folk heroes, namely Daddy Mention and Big John DeConquer, were “important in their ability to highlight the prisoners’ feelings about their captivity,” as Bordelon puts it (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 69). Hurston writes:

Big John DeConquer is the culture hero of American Negro folk tales. He is Jason, or Ulysses, of the Greeks; Baldur of the Horse tales; Jack the Giant Killer of European mythology. He is the story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness. He is a projection of the poor and humble into the realms of the mighty. By cunning or by brute might he overcomes the ruling and utterly confounds its strength. He is among men what Brer Rabbit is among animals. In the Old Massa tales he compensates the slave for his futility. He even outwits the Devil, who in Negro mythology is smarter than God. (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 78–79)

Big John DeConquer is the hero of a story cycle that goes back to the times of slavery, with its hero outwitting the slave holders “Ole Massa” and “Ole Miss,” but also the devil. Daddy Mention is a younger

character, a “wonder-working prisoner” and alleged inmate of many Florida prisons (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 83). According to Hurston, many a prisoner claimed to have known him, although nobody could give a definite description. “In fact,” muses Hurston, tongue in cheek, “it is this unusual power of omnipresence that first arouses the suspicions of the listener: was Daddy Mention perhaps a legendary figure?” (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 83). Daddy Mention suffers abuse by the prison overseer Cap’m Smith because the latter becomes insecure due to Daddy Mention’s loose lip. The hero survives three days in “the box,” a tin cage that gets unbearably hot in the sun. As he begins laboring with a wood working gang, Daddy Mention demonstrates his strength by carrying trees and logs too heavy for regular men. Pretending to carry a log to its ordered destination, he walks out of the prison gate unbothered. He escapes the prison, time and again, thanks to his wit, but also due to his strength. Although his comical escapes might even reflect real events, he is a foil for the inmates’ wishes and hopes. By including both Big John DeConquer and Daddy Mention, Hurston’s “Go Gator” also follows Botkin’s suggestion of a two-way street approach: their story worlds are set in the past—Florida’s era of slavery—as well as in the present—the 1930s prison system. Folklore, as documented by Hurston, not only served as cultural memory and expression, but as a way to deal with life in a society that was still deeply marked by the conditions and social relations of slavery.

Margaret Walker’s writing from her FWP years is still dormant in archives. Folk heroes—and heroines—play a major role in it, but Walker also experiments with sociological, documentary, and proletarian realist writing while working alongside the likes of Richard Wright, Horace Cayton, Nelson Algren, and Jack Conroy. She documents the Black female experience in Depression-era Chicago in the unpublished novel *Goose Island*, which she wrote while on her Creative Works assignment. Conscientiously written articles and reports bear witness to her contributions to various FWP projects, from the Illinois Guide to her study *The Negro Press in Chicago*. She also conducted fieldwork to collect folklore, tall tales on which she based at least two of the folk ballads in *For My People*: “Two-Gun Buster and Trigger Slim” and “Yalluh Hammuh.” An FWP manuscript of the latter name serves as intertextual evidence for artistic collaboration:

her crafting a poem based on the oral account of an interviewee.⁹ In its usage of the ballad form, it also provides evidence of women's innovations in and subversion of genre conventions as well as of the desire to tell stories of female subjectivity.¹⁰ Indeed, Walker adds a twist to the murder ballad tradition and creates a female folk-heroine.

The history of the "Yalluh Hammuh" manuscript is mysterious. Unlike Dorothy West's interviews, it is not typed into the forms of the Life Histories/Folklore subproject that include a questionnaire on the interviewee's identity. Cecil Brown claims Walker interviewed an ex-slave woman named Mary Brown, while Sara Rutkowski imagines a masculine narrator. The real identity of the interviewee, however, remains unclear.¹¹ The manuscript bears a scribbled note saying "American Folk Stuff." Even though it looks like the hasty classification of an archivist, it means that Walker's piece should have been included in a prospective but unpublished sequel to the *American Stuff* anthologies.¹² Walker meticulously transcribed the story in the informant's Black vernacular, showing her ear for Southern dialect (she grew up in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) (cf. "Margaret Walker" 2017). The informant—seemingly spontaneous—comes up with a story about their cousin Yalluh Hammuh (probably named after the yellowhammer, the state bird of Alabama): "Is ah evah telled you bout mah cousin, Yallah Hammuh? Well, man dat wuz one moah bad guy. Dat guy so bad de sharef scairt ta go nigh his house" (Walker 1939, 1). Yalluh is a "bad man," an archetypal folk hero very common in African American folklore. With a mix of fascination and horror, "bad men" are presented as witty, strong, and unscrupulous enough to outwit the white man, often policemen. And accordingly, the narrator relates Yalluh's badness to that of other bad men, placing the hero of her story within a tradition: "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."¹³ According to Cecil Brown, this "indicates that the legend of Stagolee as a bad man circulated widely among the illiterate people of the Midwest as well as the South. The usual distinction given Stagolee was not that he was bad, but that he was badder than some other 'bad nigger'" (2004, 149). Brown quotes from an historical article on the concept of the "bad nigger" by H. C. Brearly from 1939. Brearly claims that in "many Negro communities...this emphasis upon heroic deviltry is so marked

that the very word bad often loses its original significance and may be used as an epithet of honor.” According to Brearly, it was up to the speaker to convey the meaning of their ascription in their pronunciation of “bad”: “If a black wanted to use the word with its usual meaning, he pronounced it as described in the dictionary, but if he wished to describe ‘a local hero, he calls him ‘ba-ad.’ the more he prolongs the a, the greater is his homage” (Brearly qtd. in Brown 2004, 149). According to Brown, what he calls the “‘bad nigger’ trope” was not used by Harlem Renaissance Writers except for Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes. The Black writers of the Renaissance were wary of folklore’s associations with “ignorant, backward, superstitious ex-slaves,” which embarrassed the aspiring middle-class writers of the movement. Brown notes that even in Hurston’s fiction, which relied heavily on folklore, there was but one rebellious character who came close to the archetype: High John DeConquer, who already appeared in *Mules and Men* (1935), selling his soul to the devil. Brown refers to Walker as the first African American writer who, after years, dared to write a poem about Stagolee (actually, she wrote two, mentioning him in “Yalluh Hammuh” and also in “Bad-Man Stagolee,” which is part of her collection *For My People*). Unlike in earlier Stagolee renditions, and different from the standpoints from which tall tales and legends are told, “[h]er voice is not that of an eyewitness, but of the community, at some distance in time” (cf. Brown 2004, 197).

As the story goes, the two bad men Yalluh Hammuh and Pick-Ankle Slim get into a barroom brawl over a woman and in the end one of them has to die—in this case Pick-Ankle Slim. Yalluh proved that he was the baddest man in town: “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” (Walker 1939, 5). The story of Yalluh Hammuh is a story about men—the woman, who remains nameless in the folktale, is but an object to be rivaled over. This is part of the tradition Walker referred to, but which she also subverted. As Nancy Berke notes:

Black folktale culture is decidedly masculine in outlook. Maintaining masculine heroes such as Stagolee and John Henry has been traditionally important in resisting a white racist culture, one determined if not to destroy, at least to stereotype black men through

emasculatation. The emergence of a folk figure such as Kissie Lee [a folk heroine—and “bad woman”—from another poem in *For My People*] challenges the existing framework in which the bad male folk heroes appear representative. (2011, 149)

The same is true for May, the heroine introduced in Walker’s ballad rendition of the folk tale.¹⁴ Judging from the foreboding expressed in its first and second stanza, it appears to be a murder ballad, a traditional form of oral culture/folklore, but it lacks a murder and a murderer. Walker does not adhere to the typical stance of horror and fascination in “bad men,” but instead describes a man whose high spirits get him into trouble. She makes the woman the hero of the story and Yalluh Hammuh’s unexpected antagonist. The first five stanzas describe the bad man character from the FWP narrative, but in a comical way. The sixth stanza presents a twist: Yalluh does not find his adversary in his rival Pick-Ankle, but in the latter’s girlfriend May. Here Walker changes the original story and subverts the reader’s expectations: “But Yalluh Hammuh met his match / One Saddy night, they say, / He come in town an’ run into / Pick-Ankle’s gal named May.” And in the last stanza, when one might expect to see one of the rivals dead, (Yalluh draws his gun in the tenth stanza) it is just Yalluh who gets robbed: “The lights went out and womens screamed / And then they fit away. / When Yalluh Hammuh come to hisself / May was gone with his pay.”¹⁵ Walker’s May, like her character Kissie Lee in the ballad of the same name, is the heroine of a new “folklore of women,” as Adams and Keene call it (2015, 124). In their subchapter *Rewriting the Folk Hero*, Adams and Keene argue that women sought to depict “the worst of torture, and especially of sexual violence, but also emphasize moments in which women triumphed” (2015, 121). They suggest that here the memories of interviewees and the priorities of New Deal artists coincided. These collaborations exhibited, sometimes more and sometimes less realistically, the ability of women to bear hardships and to defend themselves and others. They articulate a shared desire, the power of which “moved women to revise narrative as they searched for gaps through which to enter history,” as also noted by Paula Rabinowitz, who characterizes this desire as “utopian.” As such, it has the prospect to “eliminate the hierarchies implicit within dualisms [male/female, black/white] and, in so doing,

demands new narrative forms” (Rabinowitz 1991, x and 180–81). In the 1930s, new narrative forms were established and subsequently fostered by the FWP. These narratives were able to accommodate desires to supplant typical narrative forms: in the genre of documentary, in collaborative narratives, and in instances of “doubling” created by interviewees and New Deal artists, as well as in the revision of traditional codes for men and women and the transformations of literary traditions such as the figure of the folk hero. “Yalluh Hammuh” can also serve as an example of how oral history/folklore from the FWP made it into the written poetry from this era. Walker, as the first Black woman ever, won the *Yale University Younger Poets Award* for her collection. This also indicates that poetry containing strong motifs of African American folklore was considered valuable by an institution of “high culture”—something quite unprecedented for 1942. The success of *For My People* exemplifies the significance the Writers’ Project for this author—in this program, Walker benefitted from time, support, and inspiration. Indeed, it enabled her to write and prepare her first collection of poetry for publication.

CONCLUSION

As a general conclusion, I argue that the FWP not only facilitated the democratization of history by enabling women and men to add their personal accounts to a national historiography, but also that it was especially beneficial for Black women writers. It elevated folklore and oral culture—and thus the culture of ordinary people—as a valuable aspect of American life. Thereby, it challenged the notion that only high culture should be considered important for the cultural identity of a nation—especially for a country as multicultural as the United States. The FWP opened a gap for Black women to participate in the debate about folklore’s role in American national identity, even if Hurston’s article “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” did not make it into print. As a work relief program, the FWP provided not only money for writers and the opportunity to practice their craft, but also training in methods for studying oral history and materials. This had a beneficial effect for African American women authors: although Black women as a social group had been quite present and recognized

as writers and organizers in the literary and political movements of the 1920s, it took the FWP for them to take part *again* in literary, poetic, and political discussions during the 1930s.¹⁶ Black women artists created collaborative narratives, told together with their interviewees, as envisaged by the FWP. They documented both their own Depression experiences, as well as those of others, and in doing so created a multi-modal, polyphonic portrait of this era. But they also subverted and transformed traditionally male genres and created heroines—giving women a place and a voice in history and literature and therefore providing them an active role in it. They took what they were given but made something much bigger and more radical out of it.

What should not go unmentioned, however, is that the FWP, as beneficial as it was, did have its downsides. While the negative aspects of this program have been elaborated in other studies, I will sketch the main reasons for this criticism here. As in all projects of the WPA, racism and sexism in hiring were a tremendous problem, as was workplace sexism and wage discrimination (cf. Rose 2009, 10). This was especially true—and has been documented in FWP offices in the South—in Florida, for instance, where Hurston worked (cf. Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 15). On a larger scale, the arts projects, with their goal of a just representation of African Americans, could also be seen as a distraction from or appeasement for demands for change in the legislative, political, and economic system—from the filibustered anti-lynching bill FDR failed to push through to Jim Crow laws and practices, housing discrimination, and economic disenfranchisement (i.e., Sklaroff 2009, 1). As a whole, the FWP could be considered the beginning of institutionalized culturalization of political discourse, a discourse that is centered on issues of representation to the detriment of issues of structural change. Indeed, Caren Irr suggests what could be regarded as one of the larger-scale effects of the FWP on how we see the world today: “The Depression of the 1930s stimulated an emphasis on culture and politics as sites of struggle that expanded exponentially in the postwar years, to the virtual exclusion of the economy as site of officially recognized contest—at least in the United States” (Irr 1998, 242). Irr wrote these words in the late 1990s, when economic questions, or rather labor issues and the questioning of capitalism as the only viable economic system, had very little legitimacy in mainstream discourse. Today, a few crises later and in the midst

of a pandemic, calls for a rejuvenated New Deal have reached center stage again, while labor and housing struggles have also become more visible. A reconsideration should take into account the wealth of historical material and art that was produced thanks to the WPA, as this does speak to today's situation. It should also include, however, the instances in which FDR's policies failed, and how the pressure of social movements brought on decisions that put new policies into place—movements that relied heavily on culture, but which framed their goals in other areas, too.

NOTES

¹ Writing "race" in quotation marks is a reference to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who uses them to signify the constructedness of the concept: "Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of the 'white race' or 'the black race,' 'the Jewish race' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors...Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which, more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine 'difference' in sex simply do not hold when applied to 'race.' Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to will this sense of natural difference into our formulation" (Gates, Jr. 1985, 5). Or, for a similar argument, see Gilroy 2002 as quoted in Storey 2009, 167.

² Botkin 1928, quoted in Mangione 1972, 265. Mangione locates this quote in Botkin's Preface for *Lay My Burden Down*. This has been re-quoted by several other scholars, i.e., Adams and Keene 2015, 38. The quote, however, cannot be found in the 1994 edition of *Lay My Burden Down* I have access to. Kennedy states that it is actually from *Folk-Say. A Regional Miscellany* (cf. Kennedy 2017, 3–4).

³ cf. Warren 2006, 561. These three are usually named when discussing Black women writers who worked for the FWP. There were, however, at least four more. Two of them are still remembered today, namely dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham and Era Bell Thompson, who would later become editor of *Ebony* (Thompson, to be precise, did not work for the FWP but instead occupied a clerical position for the WPA). Two others remain a mystery: Kitty (De La) Chapelle, who, like Dunham and Walker, worked for the Illinois FWP, and Vivian Morris, who worked for the NYC FWP. The total number of African Americans on the FWP is unknown. Only Illinois, New York, and Louisiana had substantial Black Units—the Illinois FWP leading with 23 Black writers employed. It can be suggested that African Americans were underrepresented on the FWP, with the number of Black women amounting to a mere handful. For a list of African American writers on the Illinois FWP, see Bone and Courage 2011, 237.

⁴ To maintain segregation, the Florida FWP's "Negro Writers' Unit" had its offices in

the Clara White Mission, a soup kitchen and shelter housed in the old Globe Theater, half a mile away from the white state office and close to the Black Jacksonville neighborhood Sugar Hill. cf. Stewart 2016, 178.

⁵ The study never made it into print. A xerox copy of the FWP manuscript *The Negro in Florida, 1528-1940* can be found at the George A. Smathers Library in Gainesville, FL. A reconstructed version was published by Gary W. McDonough in 1993. See McDonough 1993.

⁶ Her most anthologized story from this period is “The Typewriter,” published in 1926 by *Opportunity*, the magazine of the National Urban League. West won the publication’s writing contest with this submission, which she shared with Zora Neale Hurston. She would later live in Hurston’s Harlem apartment with her cousin Helene Johnson. See Sherrard-Johnson 2012, 60 and West 1926.

⁷ Federal One was the first federally sponsored project of the WPA, hence the name (August 2nd, 1935). It comprised the Federal Arts Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers’ Project. See Taylor 2008, 184.

⁸ See Bascom 2008; Bordelon and Hurston 2001; West 2005. The greatest wealth of FWP material that qualifies as oral narratives told and collected by African American women can be found in Dorothy West’s FWP portfolio: of 17 rediscovered FWP manuscripts, ten consist of, or include, interviews with Black women. As for Hurston, only fragments of her FWP interviews have survived. Her field notes from an expedition to a Florida turpentine camp include the words of Ethel Robinson, a “jook woman.” The bigger part of Hurston’s FWP manuscripts consists of prose: short and medium length articles that include pieces of oral narratives. She sometimes names her informants, but not consistently. The same is true for Margaret Walker’s FWP manuscripts. What has survived of her folklore and narrative collecting either has the character of field notes, is included in longer manuscripts, or it is an edited version which includes no information on her informants. Other manuscripts have the character of reports or surveys and although they list women as informants, they cannot be classified as folklore, narrative, or life history.

⁹ Margaret Walker, 1939, “Yalluh Hammuh,” series MSS55715, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division; an earlier version, dated 1937, should have been included in West’s *New Challenge*. See Margaret Walker, 1937, “Yalluh Hammuh,” Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁰ As suggested by Paula Rabinowitz (1991, 11) and Hazel V. Carby (1987, 6).

¹¹ Two manuscripts of this tale exist, one dated 1937 and the other 1939. The latter is stored in the Library of Congress. This version indicates that Brown probably mixed things up: another folder in the archival box that holds the Yalluh Hammuh manuscript at the Library of Congress says “Mary P. Brown,” who was another FWP writer. There is no indication whatsoever that Walker collected ex-slave narratives at the FWP. cf. Brown 2004, 148 and Rutkowski 2015, 77–78.

¹² Hints for the existence of such a collection can be found in online archive catalogs, which, however, seem to only hold state-specific folklore material (i.e., Vermont, Mon-

tana, Louisiana). Stetson Kennedy mentions a meeting on the planned anthology in his memoir (2017, 4). Thomas Barden notes an article in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1939) in which national folklore director Ben Botkin announces plans for a publication named *American Folk Stuff: A National Collection of Folk and Local Tales* (1992, 27).

¹³ See Walker 1939. The story of Stagolee is one often retold in folk culture. It is based on a real-life character: “On Christmas Day, 1895, a local pimp named ‘Stack’ Lee Shelton walked into a St. Louis bar wearing pointed shoes, a box-back coat, and his soon-to-be infamous milk-white John B. Stetson hat. Stack joined his friend Billy Lyons for a drink. Their conversation settled on politics, and soon it grew hostile: Lyons was a levee hand and, like his brother-in-law—one of the richest black men in St. Louis at the time—a supporter of the Republican party. Stack had aligned himself with the local black Democrats. The details of their argument aren’t known, but at some point Lyons snatched the Stetson off Stack’s head. Stack demanded it back, and when Lyons refused, shot him dead” (Kloc 2018).

¹⁴ The poem is written in the ballad meter: alternating by line, there are iambic tetrameters and iambic trimeters. The stanza form is a ballad stanza with four verses. The second and fourth lines rhyme, forming an ABCB pattern. It has eleven stanzas.

¹⁵ See Walker 1990. The poem also allows the conclusion that the robbery was a scheme planned by May and Pick-Ankle. This interpretation would certainly diminish May’s status as a folk-heroine within the poem. In comparison to the original tale, however, she still has a name and is not relegated to the status of a passive object, but to that of a partner in crime.

¹⁶ As suggested by Smethurst, “African-American women poets are noticeably absent from the various groups of writers associated with the Left until, at least, the establishment of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1935. This stands in contrast to the New Negro Renaissance, where black women, though suffering from various sorts of discrimination, were clearly important as writers and organizers, and were recognized as such.” (1999, 9). cf. Smethurst 1999, 58.

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