DOCUMENTARY MODERNSIM AND THE MODERN STORYTELLER

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ABSTRACT

The Department of English submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of English in the College of Social Science and Humanities Northeastern University
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This project considers select documentary realist photobooks and novels produced in American during the 1930s and 1940s in the context of American literary modernism. Beginning with *Men at Work* by Lewis Hine, I argue that American artists used a hybrid of documentary realist and literary modernist writing techniques to represent the complicated, and sometimes contradictory identity theories about race, labor, and class circulating in American popular discourse during the 1930s. My project also considers the novel *Banjo* by Claude McKay, *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston, and the photobook *Twelve Million Black Voices* by Richard Wright. By looking at these texts, and reading across lines of genre, my larger project attempts to uncover the ways that the term modernism has been used to flatten the historical, social, and cultural attitudes that informed artists during the first half of the twentieth century. I draw heavily from race theory and feminist theory to analyze how the use of a hybrid aesthetic I call documentary modernism allowed authors to articulate complicated and sometimes incomplete stories about race, gender, and class identity against the larger literary historical context of modernism.
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In the second chapter of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928), she asks the reader, “Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year?... Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?” (30). While perusing research on the subject of women and fiction, she finds that by 1928 men had written a great deal on the subject of women. But, as she combed the stacks of the British Museum, she also discovered an absence:

women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time...Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. …Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (Woolf 49-50)

Woolf highlights the omnipresence of women in literature, particularly fiction, but also their utter erasure from history. She wonders, “at what age did she marry; how many children has she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself [?]” (52). In essence Woolf is looking for herself inside the formal, institutionalized canon of literature, and is dismayed at the “odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and then the poets afterwards—a worm winded like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet” (50-51). Woolf argues that who is portrayed in literature, and who gets to do the portraying, is vitally important to the future of meaning making, especially for those who have been historically denied access to
the tools of representation—legal representation and education. Writing about oneself, and cultivating that sense of self through the authorship of letters, diaries, fiction, recipes, photographs, and poetry provides an essential history of women in civilization that Woolf claims in lacking or absent. The lack of such intellectual heritage is related to the lack of economic independence for women during the eighteen century; Woolf questioned how one can locate, or claim, an intellectual heritage as female. We might extend this question to include people of color who have had very few social platforms from which to articulate any autonomous self that was not already marginalized by categories of gender, race, and class. Like the young, female narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, aspiring artists, critics, and scholars today encounter a heritage of literature, art, and other cultural material through collections, readers, and anthologies in the classroom. Anthologies as a genre have been criticized for sparse inclusion of women, or the thin sampling of people of color, especially in American academic criticism of the 1990s.¹ There has since been backlash against this criticism, with arguments in defense of anthologies as a genre that reflects shifting critical attitudes towards tradition and aesthetics.² Who is represented, and who is left out, in literary anthologies matters. The way we celebrate cultural diversity and ideological difference in a canon of cultural artifacts allows teachers and students to model the nuanced readings of audience, context, and authorial intent that modern readers need *today*. These readers must curate meaning and representation in an increasingly text heavy world via the written word and photographic message.³ The ability to represent oneself through interconnected

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¹For more on the canon debate of the 1990s in American academia see Joseph Csicsila *Canons by Consensus* (2016) xvii-xx; and John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993)
²See Paul Lauter’s *Canons and Contexts* (1991) ix-x.
³Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram all use a mixture of images and photographs alongside text to convey individual and collectivist attitudes, political protest, social critique, and cultural commentary.
webs of meaning, or not, carries political and social implications in public spaces. Now, more than ever, it is imperative to develop critical discussions of and pedagogical approaches to teaching literary historical periods like American modernism, because phenomena like mass immigration, racial unrest, and socioeconomic uncertainty continue to characterize our American society in 2016 as much as they did in the 1930s.

I started the project *Documentary Modernism and the Modern Storyteller* by surveying the field of American literary modernism during the first half of the twentieth century. This literary historical period seemed the correct choice for an investigation of the themes of racial difference, transition, immigration, race, and American nationalism. Ever since the 1920s, modernist scholars, artists and literary historians like Harry Levin, Robert Martin Adams, Houston A. Baker Jr., Michael Levenson, Lisa Rado, and Tyrus Miller have offered varying accounts of the historical time period of American modernism, and even more various arguments about which artists count as modernist and why.4

In Harry Levin’s “What Was Modernism” (1960) he looks back over literature produced in the first half of the twentieth century, lamenting the “penitent” novels of the 1940s, and celebrating the experimental, high modernist literature of Ezra Pound and Marcel Proust (612-613). Levin claims that modernism was characterized by a “metamorphic impetus,” which was partially a response to the dawning of the twentieth century, and the horror of modern warfare that unfolded during World War I. He goes on to outline pre-conditions of modernism, both geographical and historical, one of which is mass migration of people either voluntarily or

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4Virginia Woolf claimed that the “change” to a modern sensibility came in, or around 1910. See “Mr Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924); T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921); Harry Levin’s “What Was Modernism?” (1960); Houston A. Baker, Jr’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1985) and Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism; Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Wars* (1999).
involuntarily. Many of the artists Levin discusses at length, including T.S. Eliot, Pound, and James Joyce were expatriates for political, social, or cultural reasons (623). For Levin, modernism was first a social phenomenon precipitated by the sense of newness people felt about the nascent twentieth century. Levin focuses on how writers responded to the social conditions of modernism by making “serious demands upon the minds of their readers,” and he complains that later authors of the 1930s, like John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, relied on “good hearted goons” and “analphabetic gladiators” (627). Looking back wistfully to 1910 as the epicenter of high modernism, Levin despairs at the emergence of the “middlebrows” by the 1940s. The middlebrow, for Levin, is the result of a collaboration between the artist and the bourgeoisie class that embraces “documentary realism” over the introspective modernist novel (625-28). The documentary realism of the 1930s is therefore a reaction to the introspective, intellectualism of the 1920s and 1910s, which were in turn a reaction against nineteenth century Romanticism. Each historical time period, for Levin, produces a cultural trend in reaction to the period preceding.

Levin’s account of modernism is useful in that it is very neat and certain about the spirit of this historical moment, and which artists best experimented with form and intellectual difficulty. However, in an essay of the same title published eighteen years later, Robert Martin Adams doubts the term modernism altogether, while elaborating on how modernism is a literary movement in which the artist is always reacting to the present moment, or a sense of present time. Around 1910, modernists had “a new sense of time as cyclical and repetitive, not sequential and developmental,” which they expressed formally through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, stream of consciousness, and montage (122). Authors like Eliot and Pound used these formal writing techniques to show that the past was pointless and repetitive. In a sense, Adams is
building on Levin’s emphasis that the artist is aware of, and influenced by, the passage of time from one era or generation to the next. However, Adams’s account argues that modernism is heterogeneous, and filled with contradictory approaches towards “the past” and intellectualism (20). Adams stresses that “far from rejecting the past as Futurists demanded, modernism…explored and exploited it” (21). For Levin, the chronology from Romanticism, Impressionism, Cubism, and Primitivism is clear cut and reactionary, but Adams suggests that the term modernism has been used to “cover up” the many cultural trends over a period of time beyond 1925 (33). He invites scholars to “pick [modernism] apart,” particularly to challenge the concept that modernism was a literary time period with only a few exemplar white, male, middle class practitioners.

This call was answered in the 1980 and 1990s by feminist and race scholars, and the discussion of modernisms continues into the present day. In Houston Baker Jr.’s 1985 preface to Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, he argues that modernism, as described by literary historians, was “exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white” (66). A modernist canon of this nature might include authors such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz. In contrast, Baker's account of modernism focuses on the discursive strategies of “the mastery of form” and “the deformation of mastery,” allowing him to expand his account of modernism to include Booker T. Washington, Charles Chestnut, Claude McKay, and Alain Locke; black authors typically only associated with the Harlem Renaissance. By changing the criteria of modernism from mastery to deformation of mastery, Baker offers a revisionist account of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance that acknowledges the achievements of black men and women while highlighting the contradictory characteristics of modernism (66). My project is greatly informed by Baker's argument that
scholars should reevaluate the ways modernist authors might be identified, and canonized, to include more black authors. As a result, many of the primary authors I discuss in my project are black and central to the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s.

Lisa Rado, in the introduction to *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (1994) argues that literary historical scholars in the 1960s, like Levin and Adams, only described male modernist writers. Meanwhile, the contributions of white female modernist writers like Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf were underemphasized, while black female modernists like Gwendolyn Brooks and Zora Neale Hurston were forgotten (4). Rado points out that in the 1990s,

Two very different portraits of the modernist era have emerged: one as conservative, patriarchal, and repressive, the other as radical, feminist, and subversive. Must we choose between them? Or can we find an intermediate or alternative method of feminist critique that might allow us to reconcile those practices? (Rado 8)

My project builds on the efforts of such feminist and race scholars as Rado, Baker Jr., Cheryl Wall, and Carla Kaplan, who have focused on the achievements of black and white women in the context of modernism. I also use a feminist lens to consider how male and female authors represented working class women, and other minority subjects. The authors I examine do not always support a feminist agenda, and I try to analyze the ways that women and work are represented by male and female authors in response to white paternalistic attitudes towards African Americans, immigrants, and women. The time period I look at, from 1929-1941, is considered to be historically late in the modernist period or sometimes described as between the wars modernism.
Tyrs Miller, in *Late Modernism; Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Wars* (1999), also calls for scholars to fatten the ranks of modernist artists by including more women, political activists, and people of different nationalities. In response, my project includes authors Claude McKay, a Jamaican national, and Zora Neale Hurston, who have been widely recognized for their active participation in the Harlem Renaissance, but less recognized for their political activism or aesthetic experimentation. In an attempt to define late modernism from high modernism, Miller highlights the relationship between these two time periods:

If modernist poetics are a mesh of interrelated statements, evaluations, and judgments, then late modernist writing is the product of the pressure of historical circumstances on that mesh, which threatens to fray or break at its weakest points. Late modernism does indeed deform and change the shape and function of that network; yet it also heightens latent strains within it. Like a red-headed child in a family of blonds, the recessive traits of this body of work reveal what lay hidden in modernism's genetic past all along—an unassimilated heritage of the continental avant-gardes; a pariahed corpus of works tainted with satirical, documentary, or argumentative elements... (loc. 254-262)

The texts I have selected include strong elements of both “documentary” and “argumentative elements,” although those features were not always recognized by the contemporary reader. My analysis focuses on the historical circumstances of early to mid-twentieth century America that effected the conditions of labor for artists, such as immigration rates in the first two decades of the twentieth century, black migration, Jim Crow Law and racism in America, and the Great

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5 Recently, scholars have begun to correct this oversight. I will discuss the present scholarship surrounding these authors in each respective chapter.
Depression. I identify artists like Lewis Hine, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, who all produced documentary modernist texts and who used their formal mastery to further social and political critiques of modern American society. Late modernists, compared to high modernists, do not attempt to make the fractured modern world whole again. Instead, “late modernist writing weakens the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts. It reopens the modernist enclosure of form onto the work's social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourse” (loc. 262). Lewis Hine, the subject of my first chapter, makes use of symbolic forms by referencing classic myths in his prose, but he also includes a realist critique of modern industrialization and the conditions of labor that workers endured to build the Empire State building. Documentary modernism, therefore, offers a reorientation of high modernist aspirations to achieve discursive mastery of form. Instead, documentary modernists reject the elitism of that aspiration and pursue more direct engagements with social and political questions of representation that were circulating in popular discourse at the time. Late modernism, and particularly documentary modernism, holds a mirror to 1930s American culture, magnifying the period’s social unrest, political protest, uncertainty, and the need for social activism. Documentary modernist writers, as I present them in my project, made extensive allusion to the folk, the masses, and the working class by incorporating folklore or working class themes in an attempt to correct the perceived bourgeois elitism of high modernist works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). In contrast, Lewis Hine focused his lens on construction workers building the Empire State Building, Hurston reported on the folktales and culture of the rural American South, and Richard Wright explored the history of black labor in America from share cropping in the South to factory work in Chicago.
In my project, I make extensive reference to workers, laborers, and class. My understanding of these terms is informed by Western Marxism, particularly as Antonio Gramsci describes the relationship between the worker and the intellectual in “The Formation of the Intellectuals”, from The Prison Notebooks (1971). For Gramsci, the worker is not one monolithic mass acting upon economic factors alone. Traditional Marxism as put forth by Marx and Engels in Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848) described only the abusive employer and the abused worker (Leitch 761). In contrast, Gramsci’s revisionist Marxism recognizes that workers are not necessarily united or motivated by economic self-interest, because other factors like values, ethics, and culture also influence how workers act. However, workers are still oppressed and need motivation and encouragement to organize and understand the ideas of “traditional intellectuals,” or “the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist, [and] journalists” (Leitch 1141). There is also the “organic intellectual” who rises from a class or social group that is in hostile relation to a dominate class or social group. This organic intellectual acts as an intermediary between the traditional intellectuals and the marginalized groups or classes. Many of the authors I look at in my project could be described as organic intellectuals because they came from working class backgrounds, or belonged to marginalized social groups. The workers they celebrated were also varied and often voiced contradictory aspirations, values, and motivations. Rather than advance a traditional Marxist version of workers unified against the abusive conditions of capitalism, the authors I examine foregrounded the difficulty of unifying a marginalized class or social group to organize against dominate cultural attitudes and social structures.

Late modernist writers looked backwards to the formal mastery of high modernists, and forward to the social realist and non-fiction literature that was gaining popularity in the early
1930s. As a result, my methodological approach to this material makes the New Historical assumption that the artwork, or text, is always connected to the political and social world, indeed a product of the power struggles present in that world. The text is unstable and a contested site of meaning, which scholars can deconstruct to reveal the many cultural trends at work inside a specific historical time period. Although some of the particular identity politics concerning gender, race, and sexuality I invoke come from 1990s American feminist and race scholars, I don’t mean to suggest the artists I look at purposely advanced a post-modernist understanding of these categories. Rather, I see these texts as continuing to compete with contested meanings of labor, race, and womanhood through their present day circulation. These texts are not organically unified pieces of art, or simply reflections of a particular historical moment. They are sites where readers continue to play out questions of representation and identity production. I focus on how particular realist novels and documentary photobooks produced during the 1930s functioned inside the context of other contemporaneous social, cultural, political, and economic events, and cultural productions, particularly high modernist art and literary realism. My methodological approach, is influenced by academic scholars of the 1980s and 1990s like Stephan Greenbalt, who was inspired by the writing of Michel Foucault in the 1970s. Both The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (1977), and Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975) set the standard for how literary critics might “emphasize how history’s contingencies, it’s fluidities in any given moment… reveals the growth of forms of power that continually affect subjects’ lives” (Leitch 2250). The subjects I focus on in my project are minorities, women, and laborers in both urban and rural settings.

New Historicism’s impetus to shed the New Critical emphasis on the text as a unified whole also draws from deconstructionist theorist Paul de Man’s suggestion that “a literary text
simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode” (de Man 1525). Hurston’s *Mules and Men* “denies” the authority of folk outsiders to record and document folklore in rural African American communities, even as she tries to collect fieldwork for her anthropological study in 1928. Likewise, Wright “asserts” his authority to speak for the black laborer by using the pronoun “we” throughout the narrative in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, but this utopian, collectivist “we” is also denied through Wright’s uneven treatment of black women. I privilege a cultural studies methodology to foreground the interconnectedness between historical, social, and political conditions as inseparable from the aesthetics, or formal elements. In other words, historical conditions like mass immigration and migration between 1900-1924, the Great Depression, and Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, informed why some late modernist authors presented realist, working class themes in art, namely through documentary photography and in the literary novel.

Connected, but also separate from the historical, social, and political contexts in which each author produced their work, there existed the literary historical traditions of high modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Artists who were active in those literary movements in the 1920s continued to write through the 1930s and 40s, and each group contained active critics to act as mouthpieces for the movement. W.E.B Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston continued to write reviews of African American art and society, while T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and Matthew Arnold continued to propagate “the best that is known and thought in the world” through modern criticism of form and aesthetics. This critical context, combined with the historical and social contexts I’ve outlined above, encouraged some late modernist authors to experiment with documentary modernism, a hybrid aesthetic that assumed realism and modernism were not antithetical approaches to mimesis, but rather two modes of expression that
existed along a continuum of modernist literary poetics. I am not alone in my investigation of the influence of the documentary genre on modernist authors. Sarah Blair, Jeff Allred, and Joseph Entin have all published book length accounts of late modernism that focus on the emergence of documentary aesthetics in the context of modernism.

My focus on documentary modernism, and my analysis of visual art alongside literature, puts me in conversation with Sarah Blair’s *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (2007). In this study Blair intervenes in the disciplines of American studies, African American studies, photography practice, and the history of photography. Blair confronts the photograph’s nineteenth century legacy as “[it] resonances an aesthetic effect [that] is writ as ‘not democracy’—rather its betrayer and scourge” (Blair 13). She also must confront the abuse of immigrant and minority populations by photography as “a blunt instrument or coercive tool, a merely instrumental source of evidence or an irrelevance to meaningful critical practice” (Blair 13). Blair’s subject of scrutiny and mine differ in important ways. First, the body of visual art she analyzes represents aesthetics “in flux” because public circulation of those images was made possible through newspapers, and photo-magazines. In contrast, the photobooks I analyze by Lewis Hine and Wright represent aesthetics of transition, and were published in a bound collection and organized purposefully by the author. Like Blair, I try to show the history of documentary photography as it moved away from its progressivist, social science origins.

Allred is more interested in the artist as producer, specifically the producer of documentary photo-books in the 1930s and 40s. Like Allred, I am concerned primarily with the artist as producer, drawing of course from the writings of Walter Benjamin during the 1930s concerning photography and literature. Allred’s selection of texts suggests that he is attempting to find the modernist aesthetic in documentary photobooks. I only look at two photobooks, while also including two texts that have been described as realist, or celebratory of American cultural diversity, to suggest how they might be reread in the larger context of literary modernism. Where Allred is interested in finding “documentarians who foreground problems of representation in their work… ‘imaginers of the literal’,” I am more interested in what Marianne Moore has termed “literalists of the imagination,” or authors who sought a “radicalization of literary realism” through their use of modernist aesthetics (Allred 13).

Like the term modernism, the term documentary is much contested by historians and academic scholars, partially due to the changing nature of documentary photography and cinema in the digital age. William Stott’s Documentary Expression and Thirties America (1973) is a good place to start because he provides very extensive definitions of informational documents, human documents, and finally social documents (12-18). Stott is most interested in describing and defining the documentary object itself, and how that thing functions to impart meaning on the reader, or viewer. According to Stott, the informational documents (like a passport, or a driver’s license) “gives information to the intellect,” while human documents “informs the emotions” (12). Social documents, the primary focus of Stott’s book, “increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling; put us in touch with the perennial human spirit, but show it struggling in a particular social context at a particular historical moment” (18). Stott is particularly interested in the driving motives of 1930s and 40s documentary photographers like
James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). However, other visual theorists have continued to expand this discussion of documentary aesthetics in the context of visual and cultural theory to voice caution against the ability of documentary photography to fetishize the pain and suffering of others. In particular, scholars like Susan Sontag and David Levi-Strauss offer a degree of skepticism concerning an image’s ability convey the individual experience of marginalized subjects, particularly in the case of journalistic photography and photographs of war. Sontag resists fetishization, shock photography, and suffering as spectacle for a few privileged voyeurs. She has voiced particular concerns about these types of photographs in a post-9/11 era in her last full work published in 2003. Likewise, Strauss has raised questions about the aestheticization of marginalized subjects for the enjoyment of a first-world elite voyeur in *Behind the Eyes* (2012).

My understanding of documentary and documentary modernism is also informed by Miller’s “Documentary/ Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s” (2002). Miller provides the following definition of documentary, and reveals how documentary and modernism have typically been presented as two opposites reactions to nineteenth-century American naturalism:

In pursuing its goal of representing reality truly, documentary took up the aspirations of nineteenth-century artists, both realist and naturalist…

Documentary, in sum, is frequently thought to represent the furthest development of naturalism in the arts, just as modernism, its aesthetic antipode, is seen as the acme of anti-naturalist impulses. (Miller 226)

Miller claims that exploring possible articulations of documentary modernism is a way to reread the “prescriptive” writings of critic Georg Lukács that offer a “naturalism-modernism
continuum” (Miler 226), as particularly seen in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958), where Lukács writes, “it is possible to speak of the basically naturalistic character of modernist literature...[due to] the presence or absence in a work of art of a ‘hierarchy of significance’ in the situations and characters presented” (Lukács 1226). I do not dismiss that there are implicit and important hierarchies of significance, especially in documentary realism, but this does not necessarily mean “formal categories are of secondary importance” (1226). By looking at documentary photography and documentary modes of writing, like the historical folktale chronicle in Claude McKay’s *Banjo*, government reports aided by Lewis Hine’s photography, and the anthropological research provided by Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, my project builds on Miller’s claim that exploring documentary and modernism as complementary forms within modernist poetics reveal “the ambivalence within documentary poetics” (227). In documentary modernist texts, realist depictions of troubling social conditions are presented in response to modernist narratives that normalize social conditions like racism, sexism and economic uncertainty. Yet, documentary modernists accomplish this through formal techniques often associated with modernism, like fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and experimentation with form.

The primary texts I have selected represent a progressive complication of “documentary” and modernist “storyteller” as overarching themes instead of static tropes or motifs. Different authors in my project present varying levels of success in combining documentary and modernist writing techniques. Where Lewis Hine relies very heavily on a hierarchy of symbols to depict the Empire State building workers as heroes, he was not very successful in representing the modernist fragmentation of perspective, but he did experiment with the documentary form throughout by pairing images and text in ways that sometimes resisted readerly expectations.
Claude McKay makes use of modernist writing techniques like averted gazing, fragmentation, and experimentation with the novel as form, while also chronicling the folk culture of black expatriates living abroad in the 1920s. My definition of “storyteller” comes from Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936). Benjamin has great aspirations for the modern storyteller, stressing the relationship between the artist, his material, and his craft:

In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman’s relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw materials of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way... Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teacher and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime... His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller... (Benjamin 377-378)

In comparison to the novelist, who is “isolated” from his reader and “silent,” Benjamin sees the storyteller as essentially connected to his audience. For Benjamin, the immediacy of storytelling is corporeal. Two authors I look at, McKay and Hurston, include characters who take on the role of storyteller, sharing personal experiences and “reach[ing] back a whole lifetime” to tell stories others have shared with them. For McKay, Hurston and Wright, telling stories about black, working class folk required them to share the “entire life” of black sharecroppers, entertainers, and prostitutes.

Hine and Wright each rely on photography to unite “soul, eye, and hand” in the stories of
American industrial modernization and the story of black labor in America, respectively (Benjamin 377). Hine and Wright were also both aided by the rise of prominent, highly respected newspapers and periodicals that catered to a mass audience’s demand for stories about American labor conditions, documentary photography, and progressivist social change. A shift towards visual content in newspapers and magazines began in the early-twentieth century with photograph-heavy social progressivist magazines like *The Mentor, The Survey Graphic,* and *Charities and Commons.* This trend would continue into the 1940s with Henry Luce’s extremely popular *Look* and *Life* magazines. At the same time, socially minded periodicals focused on the African American urban life and culture that thrived in New York City and Chicago. Such examples include *The Chicago Defender, The Liberator* and *The Crisis.* Over the course of his or her career, each artist I look at in my dissertation published in, or was reviewed by, one of the periodicals listed above. The *Chicago Defender* particularly provided an important platform for black artists and activists discussing black civil liberties through editorials and columns, which encouraged many black readers in the American South to migrate north for urban work and freedom from Jim Crow Law.6 Newspapers, magazines, and popular press also provided a vital space in the early-twentieth century for documentary photographers. Because the image returned a corporeal, embodied testimony to stories of social conditions, for a time, this form of storytelling gained increased popularity with the fractured, modern reader.

Lewis Hine worked predominantly in periodicals from the 1910s up through the 1930s, and he was also a pioneer in his advocacy for rights over his photographic productions.

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Throughout his career, Hine struggled to maintain control over the fruits of his labor. Hine’s photographic assignments often included an element of danger as he attempted to document abhorrent working conditions in coal mines, factories, and mills in the American north. Like many of the documentary photographers of the late 30s and 40s—Dorothea Lange, Marion Post, and Walker Evans—Hine started pairing his documentary photographs with short captions to guide his audience through the photographic messages. Like Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, Hine advocated for the human rights of the individual working inside a modernist collective. In “Lewis Hine: Documenting American Tradition,” I argue that Lewis Hine used his camera and photographs in *Men at Work* (1931) to offer a counter narrative to nativist sentiments, and modernist uncertainty and estrangement. Instead, he describes the “modern man” in a Whitmanian rhapsody and praises the construction workers as “modern heroes all” (Hine 2).

Hine and McKay share a similar perspective in that they were both outsiders to the communities they surveyed. McKay was originally from an affluent family in Clarendon, Jamaica, and his novels chronicle his international sojourns through Harlem, Marseilles, Moscow, and London, among other places. In *Banjo: A Novel Without a Plot* (1929), McKay uses his position as outsider to critique the Harlem Renaissance movement’s emphasis on the middle class. McKay chronicles the storyteller’s articulation of black, minority identities in the chapter “Storytellers,” and primarily through the main character, Banjo. In my analysis of McKay’s *Banjo*, I argue that McKay engages with Harlem Renaissance themes of race, representation, and the color line, while using modernist aesthetics like averted gazing and self-reflexivity. McKay presents many Harlem Renaissance debates in Banjo, but he uses storytelling in the novel to ground the debates about race, civil liberties, and racial violence in the
experiences of working class subjects, like the entertainer, the sailor, or the housekeeper.

Likewise, Zora Neale Hurston also writes about the working class subject, but she creates a “featherbed resistance” between herself and the reader to criticize New Negro distance from folk culture. Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) combines auto-ethnographic research and modernist self-reflectivity to offer a social critique of black southern life as conscripted by white privilege and racism. For Hurston, verbal exchange like folk stories, or ‘shouting,’ allow for the articulation of a strong black female identity, particularly through the characters Big Sweet and Ella Wall. Focusing on Hurston’s attempt to represent the social conditions of a Jim Crow American South, my chapter argues that she celebrates individual difference within the African American community as a way to understand the assumed divide between middle class northern blacks and rural southern blacks. More than any other author I look at in *Documentary Modernism and the Modern Storyteller*, Hurston is optimistic that black men and black women, from all socioeconomic classes, can and should organize as a collective to advocate for black culture and race equality in America.

In contrast, Wright’s vision of black modernization demands a separation from the rural folk culture Hurston celebrated. Although Hurston and Wright did not have a warm relationship in life, they shared much in common: they both migrated from the American South to the North during the early-twentieth century, focused on the folk in their writings, and advocated for a future America in which blacks would enjoy more civil liberties and social opportunities. However, where Hurston positioned strong, black women as central to black community organization and life, Wright viewed black women as too complicit with a system of white patriarchy, even as he acknowledges that black womanhood is central to the story of African American labor in the United States. In *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), Wright advances a
second wave feminist agenda by suggesting that black women should organize politically to advocate social change. However, for Wright, the race cause is always more important than a feminist agenda that puts women’s concerns first. This tension in *Black Voices* is never resolved, and sometimes is magnified by an intertextual argument between the documentary photographs, taken from the FSA archives, and the narrative completely written by Wright.

Hine, McKay, Hurston, and Wright each produce late modernist texts that focus on documentary and argument, while also using modernist writing techniques like self-reflexivity, fragmented perception, averted gazing, and experimental form to represent working class subjects, rather than focusing on the middle class bourgeois like many of their American modernists and Harlem Renaissance contemporaries. By analyzing how the complimentary forms of documentary and modernism were paired in select novels and photobooks from 1929-1941, my project argues that late modernist authors began to scrutinize social and cultural issues like racism, sexism, and capitalism, in contrast to the ways that early-modernism normalized those conditions. Further, my focus gender and race in the context of modernism puts me in conversation with modernist scholars I’ve mentioned above, like Sara Blair and Lisa Rado.

Without anthologies, academic readers, literary histories, and teachers in the humanities, how will future generations learn that social and political change is slow and hard fought, often costing the most for those furthest down the socioeconomic ladder? Today, the Internet offers so many platforms from which individuals can share their stories and personal experiences; everyone is a storyteller, documenting daily life in all its mundanity and peculiarity. It would be tempting to suggest that today we are sages and teachers all, but ours is also a time of ideological polarization and isolation. *Documentary Modernism and the Modern Storyteller* invites readers to trace the contours of documentary realist and literary modernist modes of writing as a way of
rethinking how present day conversations about race, representation, and ideology have slipped back into a dialectical thinking that failed 1930s and 40s American minority communities, and how art might still pause the historical cycle of violence against minority subjects, particularly women and people of color, that characterizes present day American society.
Chapter I
Lewis Hine: Documenting American Transition

On October 21, 1929, the board members of Empire State, Inc. met to review a research survey concerning a mid-rise commercial building to be located at the site of the recently demolished Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. The Renting Supervisor of the New York Central Buildings, H. Hamilton Weber prepared the report and predicted an annual monthly rental income for the building to exceed seven million dollars, with “90 percent to 100 percent rented” occupancy (Flowers 52). Just eight days later on October 29, 1929, the American stock market crashed, forcing the closing of more than 300 banks over a three-year period (Stuckler 410). If the Great Depression of the 1930s is, as economist John Kenneth Galbraith has suggested, “the greatest modern case of boom and bust,” then the construction of the Empire State Building represented the echo of the 1920s boom, sounding throughout lower Manhattan from 1929 to May of 1931. The Empire State Building has been heralded by architectural historian Carol Willis as “one of the best expressions in form of the interplay between zoning and economics” (Willis 179). Besides being an experimental feat of civil engineering and design, the construction of the building itself required the development of new methods for organizing and managing vast numbers of laborers simultaneously. During peak construction more than three thousand workers were on site.

The Empire State Inc. board commissioned social activist and documentary photographer Lewis Wickes Hine to photograph the building’s construction over the course of six months in 1930 (Flowers 56). Yet ultimately, what the corporation received from Hine was never used in public relations pamphlets or material. Hine refused to take the building, or the thing itself, as the
thematic focus for his camera’s eye. Instead, Hine’s photographs focus on the riveters and foundry men, the mechanics and bolt boys, who walked the exposed I-beam of the Empire State Building as though navigating an intersection of labor and industrialization, transience and establishment.

Lewis Hine published these images of laborers working on the Empire State Building along with images of workers from other industrial sectors in Men at Work (1931), the only full length photobook of his work published during his lifetime. True to his progressive roots and the “human document” aesthetic he honed over two decades of photographing for the Survey, The National Child Labor Committee, and The Red Cross, Lewis Hine provides a critique of modern industry that threatened to treat men as interchangeable parts. In his photographs, Hine presents complicated worker types that are celebrated and elevated for their labor, not pitied as helpless victims caught under the wheels of industrial modernization. In Men at Work, Hine juxtaposes documentary portraits of laborers, particularly the Empire State riveters, with written narrative that alludes to heroic figures from pulp magazines, Nordic mythology, and African American folk tales. In collecting together such disparate allusions to cultural heroes from across cultural mythologies, Hine offers a photobook that is informed by late nineteenth century progressivism and describes the new, modernist American hero as the skilled laborer. Along the genealogy of documentary photobooks published in the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century, from Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives (1890) to Richard Wright’s Twelve Million Black Voices (1941), Lewis Hine’s Men at Work is groundbreaking in its disavowal of paternalistic attitudes toward the laborer and the empirical study of laborers as

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7 For collections of Hine’s photographs published posthumously, see Brooklyn 1977; Doherty 1981.
“types,” while still being aesthetically conservative by gathering literary and visual allusions from classical art, mythology, and oral story-telling traditions. Predating the documentary photobooks that became all the rage in the mid to late 1930s and 1940s, *Men at Work* is a forerunner in its experimental use of documentary photography as pedagogical narrative, which directly reflects the development of photography as a form of archive and documentation, and the concurrent but separate developments in photography as a form of artistic expression during Hine’s lifetime (1874-1940). Further, Hine’s use of visual images that allude to classic symbols of myth and folklore, like the strong man, suggests an optimistic, early 1920s modernist ambition to achieve mastery of form to unify a fractured modern reader. At the same time, Hine is deeply skeptical about the ability of form alone to account for the human experience, or motivate an uncertain, 1930s depression-era reader. Lewis Hine uses recognizable symbol systems in *Men at Work*, such as the strong man and the cowboy, to create a pedagogical narrative that celebrates the modern laborer and counters the apolitical modernist photographs offered by Alfred Stieglitz or Paul Strand in the first half of the twentieth century.

Even though Hine saw photographs as evidence, “bring[ing] one immediately into close touch with reality,” he also made layered images that could be read as stories through his attention to form (Hine qtd. Trachtenberg, *Reading* 207). Hine often reused photographs from certain assignments for multiple publications—this is also the case with some of the *Men at Work* images. Hine did not see a problem with reusing an image for a different critical effect, or social cause. My reading of Hine in *Men at Work* builds on Alan Trachtenberg’s claim in *Reading American Photographs* (1989) that a Hine photograph “can be a story… of the picture itself, of its making or its character” (Trachtenberg, *Reading* 207). Hine is a storyteller, but his
medium is a mix of visual art, namely documentary photographs and prose, which makes literary allusion to mythological heroes “up in the clouds” like the “modern Thor” (Hine 2, 24). My reading of Hine also emphasizes the ways Hine included a social critique of American industrialization even as he celebrated the individual workers who built the Empire State Building, the ultimate symbol of early-twentieth century industrial modernization and engineering. I argue that Hine’s focus on the individual in his photographs and prose, with attention to form, lighting, and composition, makes him an early practitioner of documentary modernism. Although documentary and modernist aesthetics might seem to be antithetical, recent modernist scholars like Tyrus Miller, Jeff Allred, and Joseph Entin suggest that the two modes are in fact complementary, rather than opposed.8

Hine, like later documentary photographers of the 1940s—Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Margaret Bourke-White—used allusions to classical art forms to help educate the viewer and create empathy in the middle class individual, or the masses. The allusion to “Thor” and Hine’s description of the workers as “heroes all” suggest that he still believed in the ability of art, photography and written prose, to transcend the fractured, modern individual’s experience (2, 24). Hine, however, also added captions and prose around photographs, especially in *Men at Work*, presenting the story of a *photographer* and subject. The self-reflexivity of Hine’s *Men at Work*, and Hine’s understanding of the visual image as it circulated in press journalism anticipates a cultural studies emphasis on the context of mass culture, and an emphasis on form and symbol. Roland Barthes’s theories of the photographic message, image and rhetoric, and modern storytellers, are therefore useful in explaining the stakes of Hine’s *Men at Work*.

8 For more on the documentary modernism, see Allred 11-15; Miller 225-230; Entin 107-109.
Admittedly, Lewis Hine does not assume the same level of physical risk as those workers he photographed, so his outsider status is always already present in the pedagogical narrative of the text, and the distanced, somewhat unanimous celebration of all the workers as “heroes all” (Hine 2). However, Hine’s attention to the urban working class as a marginalized group worthy of respect, and his use of documentary photography as pedagogical narrative rather than a social science tool, anticipated a more politically critical documentary texts I will look at later in my project, Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). While my work in this chapter builds on many of Alain Trachtenberg’s claims about Hine’s visual aesthetic as humanizing, my reading also emphasizes the historical and cultural context of American optimism during the 1920s, followed by the pessimism and uncertainty of the 1930s. Lewis Hine documents this collective shift in American culture just as surely as he depicts the individuals working at General Electric or the Empire State Building.

Lewis Hine’s *Men at Work* opens with a description of how modern machines are dependent on “men of courage, skill, daring and imagination” (Hine ii). Throughout the opening narrative, the relationship between photographer and subject is redefined through the interplay of narrative and image. Hine describes himself as a worker who has “toiled in many industries and associated with thousands of workers” (ii). The workers Hine observed and documented with his camera would create the skyscrapers, dynamos, and engines “upon which the life and happiness of millions of [Americans] depend” (ii). Hine might not have not been a worker in the same industry as the men he photographed, but he was a laborer behind a machine, the camera. Skill, daring, and courage, defined the photographs he produced early in his career, documenting America’s social and economic turbulence, from around 1904 to the late 1930s. Like the laborers
he photographed, Hine’s profession afforded little job security and regulation, while being physically demanding and sometimes hazardous.

So, who is the subject of Hine’s Men at Work, really? The images themselves suggest a simple celebration of industrialization and orderly workers, but the narrative tempers this enthusiasm by suggesting a radical counter-narrative to American nativism, and fears of homogeneity brought about by industrial modernization. In addition, Hine’s use of first person pronoun in the introduction and his explicit description of himself as the artist and laborer, suggests a use of modernist self-reflexivity to upset the readerly expectations as to what constitutes documentary photography. Like the early modernists who attempted to create a transcendent aesthetic by mastery of form and varied symbol systems (like myth and folklore), Hine still openly celebrated the transition into the modernist era. Hine still had reservations about the ways modernist emphasis on form might not fully represent the human elements of the oppressed and marginalized experience, which I highlight in my reading of Men at Work. However, in the grand literary history of modernism, Hine is deeply attached to the use of visual symbol systems borrowed from classic art and myth like the Madonna, or the strongman, Hercules. Hine’s self-portrait closes the collection, with his smiling face confronting the camera straight on. He stands separate from the scene of industrial laborer, but very much a part of a larger story of transition for the American industrial worker in the early-twentieth century. Through the interplay of Hine’s narrative and photographs the story of mid-twentieth century American industrialization unfolds. Aesthetically, Hine practices with great finesse what Walter Benjamin suggests at the end of “A Short History of Photography” (1931), namely that as the “camera will become smaller and smaller, more and more prepared to grasp feeling, secret
images...captions must begin to function, captions which understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature” (25). Specifically, Benjamin places this responsibility of captioning photographs on the photographer: “…isn’t a photographer who can’t read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate?” (25). Hine is an expert at manipulating the photographic message and caption to tell the story of an individual worker, and the collective experience of American industrialization, in a single photograph.

**Honing His Craft: The Early Years**

To understand the aesthetic choices in Hine’s photography in terms of modernism and realism, it is first useful to gloss Hine’s professional development as a photographer leading up to his publication of *Men at Work*. In 1918 Hine began working beyond the confines of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), without the safety net of the Cultural and Ethical School, where he had been teaching photography. Once the NCLC voted to reduce his salary, Hine left and became more of a freelance photographer; he selected the assignments he took on and set an ambitious pace for himself that eventually led him overseas to photograph Red Cross efforts in Paris (Kaplan 9). In a sense, this trip through Europe opened Hine to experiences beyond documenting for the particular, predefined work assignment. It also exposed Hine for the first time to the horrors of modern warfare. Hine developed his skills by working on Ellis Island and at the NCLC, and then he began developing and directing his aesthetic gaze for his own purposes as an artistic producer. Other Hine scholars, such as Kate Sampsell-Willman and Daile 9

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9 See Daile Kaplan’s *Photo Story* (1992) for a concise summary of Hine’s employment history alongside letters from Hine to his many friends and colleagues. Hine taught at the Cultural and Ethical School from 1901-1906. He began freelancing for the National Child Labor Committee in 1906, and increased his involvement with the progressive cause until 1918, when the committee voted to reduce his salary. He worked for the Red Cross to photograph a health and refugee crisis in northern and southwest France. Then in 1919 he photographed the Western front, particularly areas along the German-occupied territories of France and Belgium. (Kaplan xxvi-xxix)
Kaplan have speculated that the trip to Europe was for Hine a type of modernist break, which caused him to lose his optimism and confidence in the possibility of the camera as an agent of social uplift. Then again, maybe his experiences in post-World War I Europe only reinforced the uncertainty he felt about the integrity of the photograph as a medium of education. In a speech Hine gave called “Social Photography; How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift” at the Thirty-Sixth Annual National Conference of Charities and Correction (1909), he speculated on the documentary photograph as a tool for social uplift: “Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph” (Hine 357). Hine recognized the importance of the artist as producer and manipulator of visual rhetoric; the image itself is testimony, but it also has a life in circulation beyond the particular conditions of its original creation.

Over the course of Hine’s lifetime (1874-1940) the use of photography in the media and in high art increased greatly, though it was developed in varying and distinct schools of practice. The Photo Secessionists are often set as a foil for Hine’s early work, most notably in Alan Trachtenberg’s American Photography (1989). This group of photographers included Alfred Stieglitz, and Eduard Steichen, and others who wanted to move photography away from pictorialism, and instead focus on using the camera to represent common objects or images from a new, subjective perspective. Photojournalist progenitor Jacob Riis is commonly discussed alongside Hine in some studies that claim Hine’s aesthetic borrowed from Reiss. However, Willman has qualified this common perception in the first chapter of Lewis Hine the Social Critic (2009). To say that Riis is a progenitor of Hine is to discount the serious differences in the way Riis surveyed his subjects from a distance, and as part of the larger landscape of the modern
world. In comparison, Hine’s relation to his subject is always close, sometimes bordering on familiar, or intimate. Closeness allows Hine to speak alongside and through his subjects to voice social critique.

From a photo-history standpoint, *Men at Work* exemplifies Hine’s particular style of “Hineography,” or “human document”. These terms, often used interchangeably in Hine’s letters to his editor Paul Kellogg, describe the photographer’s aesthetic. The term “Hineography” suggested that Hine, as a producer, saw his own perspective as an essential part of the photographic message. On the other hand, “human document” implies the artist’s understanding of photographs as physical testaments to abstract realities. By calling the documentary photograph “human,” Hine also suggests that the photographs have a life of their own, connected to but also independent from the original circumstances or realities of how and when the image was produced. Hine’s use of extensive narrative in *Men at Work*, and practice of writing his own captions while workings at the *Survey*, demonstrates how Hine used his words, captions, and documentation on individual subjects to control the messages in his images actively.

In one such repeat segment published in *Survey*, titled “Time Exposure by Hine” Lewis Hine reports “bits of testimony for consumers of shrimp and oyster” (663). Below the title, there is a group picture of women and children shucking oysters in a long, littered room. Below the photograph are three ‘testimonies’ concerning the conditions at a Mississippi cannery. One is an excerpt from the New York *Sun*, another is an excerpt from investigator H.H. Jones’s report to

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10 This is the term that Hine often uses to describe his own aesthetic when he talks about his photographs to editor Paul Kellogg. Along with these two terms, Hine is also credited with coining phrases such as “photo story,” “picture serial,” “time exposure,” and “photo mosaics” to describe his own photography (Kaplan 9).
the NCLC, and the first testimony comes from “The Photographer,” Lewis Hine. Hine’s

![Image](image1.png)

Figure 1 (Source: Survey, pg 663 Volume 31)

testimony is the only one heavy with sympathetic, expressionist language that clearly focuses the reader on the interior state of the subject. Adjectives like “weary,” “meager,” “hurried,” “heavy,”

![Image](image2.png)

Figure 2 (Source: Survey, pg 663 Volume 31)

and “little” personify the workers while the padrone, speaking in his own voice, personifies brutality and emotional detachment: “Ef day don’t git up, I go and git ‘em up” The other two sources of testimony provide observation based, fact driven narratives that direct readers to gaze
upon the workers only as a source of proof for further legal action by the NCLC, or as sources of shock and disgust.

Hine’s description of the workers connotes the inner strength and durability of the children who “are at work all day” alongside adults despite the difficult conditions they are forced to endure. These working conditions are deplorable, but Hine does not describe these individuals in terms of numbers, nor does he try to shock the reader by focusing on the physical toil of this labor. Hine’s testimony is the only one that speaks directly to the photograph provided. In the image, young and old crowd around tables strewn with oysters; two young children who are too short to reach stand on boxes. One girl has a bow in her hair and stares straight towards the camera. Another boy, wearing a dark hat and short pants, also turns to confront the camera. Then there is the woman in white in the center of the image who appears to be smiling, or at least smirking, as she goes about her work.

Nowhere is there indication or focus on “little hands sore and bleeding from the action of the acrid juices and the brine” or the noxious “whiff” of foul air that the New York Sun reporter attributed to the cannery scene. Hine’s caption consciously works as a foil to the other two forms of testimony, and shows them to be misleading, or unfocused, next to the clarity of the photograph. We might consider here how Hine demonstrates a “historical reversal” between text and images, which Roland Barthes describes in “The Photographic Message” (1977):

the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to ‘quicken’ it with one or more second-order signified. In other words, and this is an important historical reversal, the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image. (Barthes 25)
This is a danger that Hine acknowledged but also a technique he used to give his photographs a pedagogical narrative, and social relevance. Even in Hine’s early photographs on Ellis Island captions were produced to help guide the audience to a humanizing, empowering reading of immigrants. This was no small task in the early-twentieth century, when nativism and anti-immigrant sentiments were widely held. *Men at Work* is therefore interesting from a literary historical standpoint because the text and images of *Men at Work* do more than simply celebrate the stories of mechanics, railroad works, or builders; *Men at Work* is also the story of sacrifice. It is not just a story told, the images themselves are a product of manual labor and mechanized production. From a visual cultural theorist’s standpoint, Hine’s close identification with his subject, by sharing the danger and uncertainty of their labor conditions, suggests that Hine’s thematic focus and ideology were the product of late-nineteenth century progressivism. However, he is also concerned with developing himself as an experimental artist; an individual responsible only for his particular experiences and an expression of those experiences that is not tied to any particular social responsibility. To this effect, Hine combines documentary photographs of Empire State Building workers with prose that reflects his own experiences as a laborer behind the camera.
This unity of practice and theory, or praxis, is important for Hine, who was a pragmatist and greatly influenced by the Chicago instrumentalists, such as John Dewey and Adolf Meyer. He studied under John Dewey personally in 1900 when he attended Chicago University for a year before transferring to the Cultural Ethical School to begin teaching, under the guidance of Manny Frank (Sampsell 18). The narrative that emerges through Hine’s images and text is often a seamless merge between pragmatic theory and social activist practice. The text tells two stories at once, one for adolescent readers who needed to be educated about maintaining individuality in
an increasingly collectivist American culture, and another for adult readers, who would have been aware of the larger historical context of rapid industrialization mixed with economic uncertainty and despair. To tell these stories formally, Hine uses a straight style of photography in *Men at Work*, more so than when he photographed immigrants on Ellis Island, or with the National Child Labor Committee (Trachtenburg, *Ever the Human* 124-125). In *Men at Work*, Hine’s attention to composition, lighting, and form suggest a modernist documentary aesthetic akin to Eugène Atget and his urban landscape photographs of Europe. Just as Walter Benjamin asked of Atget’s photographs “is not every spot of our cities the scene of a crime,” we might ask of Hine, “Does not the photographer—descendant of augurers and haruspices—uncover guilt in his pictures?” (25). Hine attributes guilt to America’s rapid industrial modernization even as he praises the individual men who are lowest down in the foundation, taking orders, and trying to stay employed. In short, Hine celebrates the mechanic, the machinist, and the railroad worker in Whitmanian fashion, and also despairs at the tragic mortality of these modern heroes. In *Men at Work*, the first section focuses on the foundation men, who “work in a haze of rock dust which they know will shorten their lives” (3). The photograph immediately above this caption is a closely cropped portrait of a worker (see Fig. 3). The rock dust is visible on his eyelashes and cheeks. The overhead lighting on the forehead gives the worker an aura, but also shadows his deep-set eyes, creating a cavernous effect. The aura reaffirms the worker’s hero status, while the darkness around the eyes foreshadows his early, most likely tragic death. Hine also notes that “the man above received an award for craftsmanship” (3). It is significant that the first section of *Men at Work* focuses on those workers with the least visibility, as they are literally at the bottom of the worker hierarchy, and the most at risk for long term illness and premature death because the work. Rather than pity the worker, Hine highlights how the craftsman has been praised for
his work, and expresses this praise visually in the lighting of the subject. Even as he celebrates the worker, however, Hine hints at the injustice in the conditions of labor for this individual who makes his livelihood at the cost of his future health. This sentiment of worry, or uncertainty, intrudes on the narrative periodically and interrupts the pure celebration of workers, and seemingly optimistic attitude towards the relationship between man and industry. Hine conveys a critique of industry by pairing image and text, thereby telling a story to the reader that emphasizes the worker’s experience, and Hine’s experience as a worker.

Lewis Hine stood apart from the rapidly expanding field of documentary photography that connected him with progressivist causes like child labor and immigration. Better than any photojournalist in his time, Hines also demonstrated an understanding of his subjects and the stakes of his experience with the subject. Hine demonstrated in practice what Barthes would declare a quarter century later: “It is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of images—we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of informational structure.” (Barthes 38). We can see Hine’s concern with the interaction of text and image from early in his career when he documented photographs for the NCLC, and again when he published photographs in Charities, Survey and (later) Survey Graphic starting around 1910. Hines is often quoted in the captions, thereby lending his voice to authorize the image. In a sense, he authors and authorizes the image; first he speaks himself as author and creator of these images and keeper of certain experiential knowledge about his subjects, second he speaks the experiences of workers with direct quotations. Hines recognized that as the photographer his insights on people’s lived experiences are both unique and important to help audiences understand marginalized, impoverished subjects. His focus on the subject’s individual
experience and his ability to connect the subject to a larger collective historical and social process reveals the influence of a pragmatist method.\footnote{For more on the defining the pragmatic method, see James 17-24.} At the same time, the expressionism of his photographs and captions admit the image as subjective and corporeal, not scientific and empirical.

Hine’s written captions gain validity with the help of the accompanying photograph, but the photograph also gains unity and purpose as a result of the captions. While Hine also uses the image as a piece of testimony, the writing below the photograph, as demonstrated in the two examples discussed above, presents the image as dialectically related to text. Hine is clearly not attempting to use text with his images to gain an added air of objectivity. David Struass in Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics (2012) is skeptical about the use of text to caption photographs in that the captions in documentary photography suggests “no one took these photographs… No one decided what and when. No one died making them” (Struass 17). Hine demonstrates that just the opposite is possible through the pairing of text and image if the photographer recognizes the way the image can lend authenticity to certain messages and evacuate others.\footnote{From Maren Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950, Cambridge: Cambridge UP (1989) “the essential meaning and importance of his achievement may be in the clarification of reform ideology and process it offers because it partly denies and opposes them even in the act of confirming and publicizing them” (66)} Hine was by no means the only photographer capturing images of the urban and rural poor during the early-twentieth century. In fact, the increasing number of photographers working for social uplift journals like Survey, and later “the Alphabets” government agencies like the FSA, created competing accounts of how Americans should imagine marginalized subjects like the poor, and rural manual laborers. As this chapter will
show, Hine was keenly self-aware of his distinct style of presenting messages of social uplift, and that this style was not always in-vogue with editors to whom he needed to sell his images. As a result, Hine experienced firsthand struggles similar to those people he photographed. He struggled to represent himself and his art while maintaining control over the fruits of his labor—the negatives from his photographs.

**Hines in His Own Words: Man in the Machine**

Hine was frequently poor and at the whims of economic fortune because of his insistence on maintaining the rights over the products of his labor, aka his photographs, and having some control over how those images were used in the popular press. Although many historical and scholarly works about Hine concentrate on his identity as a social critic, a progenitor of documentary photography, or as an aesthetic foil for photographers like Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz, these critics do not focus on Hine’s connection to the wage laborers and workers he photographed, and his sense of himself as fighting a similar battle as them, against “complacency” (Kaplan 30). However, by looking at Hine’s letters collected by Daile Kaplan in *Photo Story* (1992), we begin to see that Hine’s connection to these marginal subjects was not just a performance for the camera. Hine’s letters are littered with references to his financial situation, and more often than not he represents himself as artist-salesman. In these letters, Hine reveals himself as an artist who believes his work is transforming how Americans understand the

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13 Florence Kellogg, *Survey Graphic* editor, stopped taking Hine’s “old-fashioned Hine-ography” photographs for a period in 1935. Note that this is the historical moment when more journals like *Life* and *Look* began publishing work by documentary photographers like Dorothea Lange (Kaplan 70).
dispossessed, while arguing for how the publishing industry should treat artists. Let us consider an excerpt from a letter written in April of 1924, sent to *Survey Graphic* editor Paul Kellogg:

Two really significant aspects of my work have been recognized by this advertising award—the acceptance of the appeal of the common man (in contrast to the white collar and underwear stuff) and the value of the realistic photography (which has for some time been displaced by the fuzzy impressionism of the day). It has taken five years of hard work to make these two tiny dents in their armor of complacency but it has been worth it. (Kaplan 29-30)

Note the binaries Hine sets up in this letter between his aesthetic approach and the “complacency” of the advertising industry which has finally chosen to recognize his approach. The “common man” has gained both “acceptance” and “appeal,” by which he is presumably referencing the subjects of his photographs. However, the tone of the letter alters slightly when he mentions “the value of the realistic photography”; the letter becomes more personal and critical without explicitly naming the opposition against which his work contrasts. The “fuzzy impressionism of the day” most likely is a reference to the experimental aesthetics of Paul Strand and other Photo Secessionists who were very popular in the first half of the twentieth century for their adaptations of high modernist aesthetics to photography. We can speculate, therefore, that the “armor of complacency” is worn both by the publication industry, which does not want to afford a space of privilege and concern for the dispossessed worker, and an artistic community more widely that has taken to isolating itself from a society that treats all artistic productions as a commodity. Throughout Hine’s correspondence with Paul Kellogg, and other editors and directors during the 1920s and 1930s, we see Hine continue to struggle with his dual identity of
artistic producer and laborer during a time in America when it was very rare for photographers to exercise their rights over photographic negatives, or to receive credit lines when their images were used (Kaplan 25).

Perhaps one of the best examples of Hine airing his frustrations about the limited control he had in choosing how and when his photographs were used comes from his widely reproduced, but always abbreviated quote, “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera” (Kaplan 26). However, the full quote shoes Hine’s desire for more control over his images: “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera; & we could run the mag[azine] without you and [Bruno] Lasker (maybe)” (Kaplan 26). Bruno Lasker wrote some of the articles that accompanied Hine’s photographs, and the “you” Hine references is Paul Kellogg. The second half of the sentence suggests Hine’s literary aspirations to tell “the story” in his own images and words, such that he would not be reliant on other people’s handling of his images before they were represented to the public. This reading is partially supported by another letter Paul Kellogg wrote to Hine in November 1922. Paul writes that, “Mr. Lasker tells me that you have been accustomed to write captions for your photographs in Survey and I am, therefore sending the layout for the seven pages of craftsman portraits” (Kaplan 28). If we read the former letter as Hine requesting more control over how “the story” is told, then Paul’s invitation to Hine in this later letter could be evidence of Paul acquiescing to Hine’s not so subtle demand. Certainly the relationships Hine maintained between editors Paul Kellogg, Florence Kellogg, and others in positions of power over his art, were uneven negotiations at best. Earlier in the same year (1922) Paul Kellogg wrote Hine a particularly long letter about how The Literary Digest used a Hine print without credit line, and other issues of copy right in the publishing business at
the time. In the letter, Kellogg is generally sympathetic to Hine, but there is a clear warning in the letter’s conclusion that Hine must learn to sell his work by the publisher’s rules, and not to be too trusting: “[You] Better take up the releasing of pictures from time to time and get it in writing from us” (25). There was good reason for Kellogg’s caution. Hine continued to struggle with government agencies like the FSA and Survey Graphic to maintain control over how the commissioned photographs were circulated and captioned. Roy E. Stryker, director of the Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration, was a great admirer of Hine’s photography and technique, but between 1935 and 1938 Hine wrote to him three times trying to secure work; Stryker could find not Hine “any job…here where I could use your services” (78). The exchange between Stryker and Hine is cordial, but studded with Hine’s frustration about his lack of control over how the negatives were printed. From Kaplan’s Photo Story, the letter dated December 27, 1935 from Hine to Stryker reads:

I have decided to exercise my photographer’s prerogative and supervise the prints made from these negatives. This is a legal right that a photographer has and it is only just. In every case where I have waived that right, I have had good reason to regret it whenever I saw the results that were put out. (Kaplan 75)

Hine scholars have speculated that Hine’s demand for control over how the negatives were printed was the reason Stryker refrained from hiring him for the Resettlement Administration project (Kaplan 73). Kaplan’s collection of Hine’s letters vividly depicts Hine’s reliance on publishers during the 1920s to stave off financial hardship generally, and his more serious financial instability through the mid to late 1930s. Also, there is a suggestion that Hine had to make difficult choices about how to turn his art, and his purposes as a social documenter,
into a profession. Selections from Hine’s letters reveal the slippage between what the publishers wanted from Hine and what Hine wanted to present through his photography. For Hine, the publishers were a critical force that he often had to work with, and sometimes around, to achieve his artistic aims.

Therefore, Hine’s impulse to photograph social conditions and develop themes about labor, American industry, or immigration in his art was sometimes tempered by the need to earn a living by publishing his images. In August of 1922 Hine received a $100 advance from Kellogg for the craftsman series to be run starting October of 1923. After thanking Paul, he comments on the way his pictures will be used by Survey Graphic, “Your plan to use the Series more tentatively in the future suits me exactly. While it has been good fun to get out some of these indefinite assignments, I cannot afford to put in so much time on them and so it will be better to wait for more urgent and definite needs” (Kaplan 27) In short, Hine is happy to get more consistent work for the Craftsman series through the journal, but the word “afford” hangs heavily in the second sentence, especially as it is followed by the adjectives “urgent and definite”. Even while Hine admits his “good fun,” his need to be compensated for his labor, and the uncertainty of that return, is apparent. References to indefinite (sometimes called “irregular”) assignments appear often in correspondence between Paul Kellogg and Hine, often with Hine pleading for more job security. 14 Hine had to be an advocate of his art to publishers like Paul Kellogg even as he tried to change their expectations for what photography should be or do. 15

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14 “Many thanks for the extra 50. I am still in doubt about the advisability of irregular assignment for either Survey or me, unless the financial margin is counted on from the first” (Kaplan 30).
15 Just before Christmas, 1923 “Your letter and check came just in time to tide over a real financial stringency and I am hoping someone will do as much for your Christmas cheer”. Later in the same letter, Hine is selling his work again by pushing his aesthetic:” Also, you ought to waive your overemphasis on the virginity of such material. A good photograph should not depend too much upon the one element of novelty” (Kaplan 29)
Hine’s correspondences reveal how rhetorically laden letters, seemingly casual and brief, can articulate a photographer’s rights and documentary aesthetics. However, these letters also reveal how the project at the Empire State Building deeply affected Hine as both an artist and an empirical documenter of industrialization. From November 25, 1930,

My six months of skyscraping have culminated in a few extra thrills… Growing up with a building, this way, is like the account of the strong boy (was it Hercules?) who began lifting a calf each day and when they both reached maturity he could shoulder the bull… these experiences, with the cooperation the men have given me… a new zest of high adventure and, perhaps, a different note in my interpretation of Industry. (Kaplan 37-38)

This quote from Hine on the *Men at Work* project, reveals a romantic vision of industrialization as deeply connected to imagining a modern hero, and Hine sees himself as part of that story. Hine’s allusion to himself as Hercules, a mythic hero, parallels his presentation of the Empire State Building workers as modern day heroes among men. Although Hine’s romancing of industry could be read as foundationalism, I read this move as a response to popular modernist attitudes towards art and society, particularly nihilism, disillusionment, and the death of the romantic hero. This is also a late modernist strategy to shift cultural focus from bourgeois life and decadence, to folk experience and the common life of the blue collar, manual laborers. The narrator of *Men at Work* is at times romantic, and other times coldly empirical, but this is coupled with images that sometimes contradict or parody the seriousness of the narrator’s observations. The slippage between the narrative, and photographic message was most likely lost on its target audience, adolescent readers. But, like the comic strip genre that was gaining
popularity in press journals during the early-twentieth century, Hine’s series of images address two audiences with two distinct messages through a mix of visual and textual storytelling. The adolescent audience would surmise the immediate subject as industry, and the educational focus on American virtue through allusions to cultural heroes. Meanwhile, an adult audience might recognize the uncertain, weary tone Hine uses to describe the conditions of labor for workers. The aesthetic choices Hine made in selecting and organizing photographs from his work portraits (including his time photographing the Empire State Building, Pennsylvania Railroad Company, and GM) suggest a conscious effort to both document and artistically render the struggles and sacrifices of American industrial laborers. Hine folds his own experience as a worker into this story, thereby abstracting from the particular story of the American laborers featured in *Men at Work* a universal call to the reader: “respect the men who make [modern machines] and manipulate them” (ix). Hine therefore rejected the decadence of modernism even as he aspired to perfect his use of form; Janus-faced, he looks forward to late modernism and backwards to high modernism at the same time.

**Hybrid Aesthetic**

*Men at Work* uses a hybrid aesthetic just like the one identified by Jeff Allred as documentary modernism, which supposes “modernism as a radicalization of literary realism” (Allred 179). He goes on to explain the primary objective of this aesthetic as “the construction of plausible fictions of the real…. In which the real-as-trace is embedded in narrative and thereby exerts a disruptive force” (Allred 179). This description of documentary modernism is particularly useful when considering Hine’s *Men at Work*, but not because the ‘real’ surfaces

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16 For a short explanation of how early comic books rose to popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, see Lopes 11.
through the narrative as ‘trace’. Rather, Hine demonstrates documentary modernism because the narrative often interrupts its own documentary reportage of industry by invoking images of folk heroes like Thor, Anansi, and the cowboy. Hine’s selection of these particular heroes speaks to the folk heritage of an ethnically diverse America. By interrupting the realist narrative that openly admits the danger, sacrifice, and mortality of these men at work, Hine resists readerly expectations and presents the exact type of “force” necessary to convey the message of social uplift. Hine’s layered messages celebrate uncertainty and challenge readers to reconcile both sentiments in themselves; a thoroughly modernist gesture for a documentary photographer. This is a reversal of the type of documentary modernism described by Allred. Instead of the real-as-trace interrupting the narrative, fragments of myth disrupt the realist narrative in Men at Work, which in turn destabilizes the empirical message. The text and images together constantly require the reader to reconsider questions of representations and power in the context of industrialization.

Hine’s narrative becomes darkly skeptical and uncertain towards the end of Men at Work. In closing images, the narrative makes two observations of the supposedly real hazards of being an industrial worker, while suggesting that the danger these men face is not from the machines they create or the acrobatics they practice regularly: “Standing on a few planks in high dangerous places, these men need skill, strength, and courage, ‘Safer up here than it is down below,’ is their idea of the job” (Hine 16). When Hine directly quotes workers, we are led to believe their testimony lends added meaning to the silent testimony of the image. Given the placement of this testimony, however, could Hine be posing and dismissing a common conception about the dangers of working with machines? If the men feel safe in the company of each other, and in
their work, is Hine suggesting that the dangers of being a laborer come from “down below”? Below the workers are the streets of New York city and around America, unemployment lines and other signs of the Depression increased. This quote from the worker shows that Hine is aware of the large economic and historical contexts in which the Empire State Building was built. My argument that Hine demonstrated an awareness of larger historical and cultural events in 1920s America expands and qualifies Trachtenberg’s critique of Men at Work in “Camera Work/ Social Work” (1989):

It the Empire State series focused Hine’s work…it also crystallized a difficulty at the core of social photography—the indeterminate character of social fact itself…There are also the social norms under which labor is performed—norms of ownership and power that shape the particularities of individual labor into a system of relations. Hine’s [Men at Work] represses the norms, makes the system seem either inevitable or unimportant—certainly allows no inkling that the economic forces represented in the Empire State Building are about to collapse and traumatize the nation. (224-25)

I agree that there are difficulties in social photography, one of the most important being the platform of privilege that a white, bourgeois man has in photographing, or surveying, the work of subjects who do not share his advantages of race, class, and gender in early-twentieth century America. However, my reading has demonstrated that Hine attempts to reference those very norms that Trachtenberg rightly identifies as central to their experience as workers.

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17 For more on the increase of urban mortality rates during the Depression, see Stuckler 410-411.
The narrative in *Men at Work* continues to point out social norms when it addresses the young “bolt boy” and an “old bolter” (Hine 21). Hine notes the boy will “will have to take good care of himself, if he is to stay on the job as long as the old bolter,” but then quickly follows with a suggestion that “[the job] isn’t really as dangerous as it looks.” (Hine 21). Here, the danger identified is the passage of time. Hine suggests that even if the boy were to “take good care,” the ability of a worker is dependent upon the fragility of their own bodies working against steel and iron. While this narrative alternates between reportage and subtle critique throughout *Men at Work*, Hine also mobilizes another narrative through his images. This second narrative represents the imaginary, or worker as mythical hero, while calling attention to the limitations of this depiction. When the told narrative makes reference to the “modern Thor,” web spinning “spiders…against the sky,” and the “cowboy of the yard,” the reader must recognize the images and stories as both indexical and iconic at the same time (Hine 9,24). However, the empathy Hine had for the workers further hastens a collapse between icon and index in particular ways that foreshadows the work by cultural theorist Roland Barthes; particularly Barthes’ work in *Camera Lucida* concerning punctum, or arresting cut. In fact, Barthes’s analysis of the photograph is helps explain the way Hine’s images improvise on the double narrative in *Men at Work*, while maintaining a tone of pensiveness.1819

**Fragmented Images**

18 In *Camera Lucida* Barthes writes “Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks. (Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida 38).

19 Roland Barthes presents a structural analysis in most essays of *Image Music Text*, but *Camera Lucida* has been noted for its post-structural approach. It is fitting that Barthes addresses press photography in both texts, which makes him a perfect theorist to demonstrate the shift in how photo-historians have understood the stakes of press photography, or documentary photography.
Because Hine’s photographs make use of both signs and symbols, he closely anticipates Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis of a photograph as a system of symbols and signs in *Image Music Text* (1977). In “The Photographic Message” Barthes presents the “structural anatomy” of the press photograph (15). I have already presented an example of Hine’s images in the press and his use of caption which demonstrates what Barthes calls the “historic reversal” in the relation of text and image (25). However, Hine also presents select images in *Men at Work* with a reoccurring punctum to further fragment the image’s stadium, or subject (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 27). The text of *Men at Work* is divided; sometimes it favors the empiricism of reportage but at other times it uses literary imagery to further highlight the social critic aired in the pedagogical narrative. Likewise, the images in *Men at Work* often reinforce the text. However, there is a reoccurring character, who does not perform in images as a worker (see Fig. 4). He is the other, aware and conscious of himself being photographed and presented as hero. This individual’s playfulness and showmanship disrupt the alternately empirical and sentimental narrative with humor and irreverence. This disruption is not unwelcome, as the images featuring “Frenchie” are some of Hine’s more iconic (Poore n.p.). Visually, and in terms of his character, this subject resembles the 1920s comic strip character Hugo Hercules, a doo-gooder with super-human strength and a strong sense of civic duty (Coogan 78). As much as Hine has been celebrated for pushing the aesthetic and technical development of documentary photography, he also just as often invoked classical visual art forms like sculpture and painting, but with a focus on American popular culture.
This image (Fig. 4) is featured as the cover photograph in the Dover 1977 reproduction of Macmillan’s original 1932 publication (Hine i). The worker looks off to the side, and Hine crops the image to make the audience feel close in proximity to the subject, although in all likelihood Hine was at a lower level of the building photographing upward. When the image is reproduced again inside the photobook, Hine crops the image even closer such that we can very clearly see the smirk on the worker’s face. Formally, the way Hine crops this image is unusual compared to most of the other photographs Hines includes in *Men at Work*. Normally the worker has a serious expression on his face, and they rarely pose for the camera. Hine normally includes more background, and visual depth in his images, to unite the individual worker type with the larger context of American industrialization and homogeneity. This individual, however, stands out
from the collective in his seeming joviality, even eagerness, to be photographed. In his next appearance the subject becomes more assertive in his attitude towards Hine (see, Fig 5). He peers down from the beam and confronts the spectator full-on through the image. Although the caption on the opposite page explains “the connectors opposite are receiving a beam to lay in place,” the image itself only depicts one man working, while the other man (peering down at Hine) is clearly not at work placing a beam. Instead, we might describe this individual, again smirking at the camera, as enjoying the experience of being documented. He is aware and self-conscious of his part in this testimony about men at work. Hine’s narrative clearly suggests the mortality of these workers and the perilousness of their work due to the poor economy, and the hazardous nature of their work. However, reoccurring images of this happy individual suggest there is something more to the worker besides toil and danger. He is the punctum in this collection of images that makes the viewer stop and reconsider the traditional narrative of the worker as either an object of pity or praise. The text also suggests this individual represents an archetypal trickster hero when it describes the “spiders spinning fabric against the sky” in Figure 6. Note that the same man is featured here, and he is again grinning directly at the camera. The man’s trousers have been hiked up to reveal more of his thigh in this shot. His stance, exposed thigh, and grin directed towards the camera suggest together that he is playing against the traditional image of the stoic worker featured elsewhere in the collection. He transforms his cullots into a costume to underline his difference, or nonconformity, among the average laborer. His confrontational gaze indicates he is aware of the camer’s eye upon him, and changes the pathos of the image from reverence and awe, to flirtation and bravado. At a basic level he is asserting his agency as an individual by resisting the viewer’s traditional reading of the somber worker and replacing it with a more intimate, animated portrait. This man is the only one who appears shirtless in all the images.
Although this might not seem striking at first, when we see the final image of him (the only one where he appears in a group), he is clearly the punctum, or arresting cut, in the image (Barthes, 38). He is positioned as the vanishing point in this image, and he seems to be floating above his fellow workers because we can not see the beam underneath him (See, Fig 7). All of the subjects

![Worker gazing down at Hine (6).](image)

in this image (the man with the wide brimmed hat, both the men in white shirts, and the man in the foreground) have been featured in prior photographs in Men at Work, but only the shirtless man in the background appears in four of the twenty images that Hine chose. He becomes the punctum of this collection by working against the viewer’s expectations and the text’s narrative.
He is also evidence of Hine’s back and forth engagement with realism, which also suggests modernist concerns about representation and the relation between audience and producer. The shirtless man is both a sign, denoting the working man and lived experience, and a symbol used by Hine to offer an individualist perspective from inside the worker collective.

Although the images from *Men at Work* have become canonical in their own right as testimony of Hine’s prowess as a documentary photographer, the text itself has not been given much attention by literary critics or historians. By considering Lewis Hine has an artist of images and text, my analysis suggests ways of reading Hine’s *Men at Work* that exposes his subversion.

Figure 6. “…spiders spinning a fabric of steal against the sky” (Hine 10).
of audience expectations through the use of a hybrid of aesthetic approaches in both the
photographs and surrounding text. The photographs at time emphasize the laborer’s work as
serious, solitary, and somber, thereby deploying a progressivist minded imperative for
paternalistic empathy and responsibility on the part of the reader. But then, Hine upsets that
paternalistic relationship by having a reoccurring subject (Frenchie) confront the camera, and the

![Figure 7. A derrick gang (Hine 12)](image)
narrative being constructed about him. Likewise, Hine blends documentary reportage and literary
allusions with classic Western mythology and American culture in the narrative surrounding the
photographs. By emphasizing these aesthetic choices in *Men at Work*, my reading highlights how
Hine links the early documentary projects of Matthew Brady in the antebellum South in the late
nineteenth century, or the urban focused *How the Other Half Lives*, by Jacob Riis, to later documentary projects by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, or Richard Wright, in the mid to late 1930s. In *Reading American Photographs*, Alan Trachtenberg traces a similar genealogy of photographic practitioners, while also emphasizing ways Alfred Stiglitz’s photographs of New York skyscrapers in 1932 were a natural thematic and aesthetic foil to *Men at Work*. He notes that “[Men at Work] celebrates industrial workers as modern heroes… ‘Skyscraper’ here signifies a job, a coordination of many jobs—not a polished shape against the sky, but an object constructed by specific skills and tools. Precisely what Stieglitz’s images do not show” (210). By reading *Men at Work* against the images from Stiglitz “Old New York” series, Trachtenberg stresses Hine’s commitment to social realism and “earlier Deweyan conceptions of aesthetic experience” the emphasized instruction and conflicting social interest, and focuses on Stieglitz as the conveyer of modernist dread, in his images of the New York City skyline. However, in an essay he wrote for *America and Lewis Hine* (1977) Trachtenberg does admit that the work portraits Hine took for *Men at Work* represent more than a simple celebration of laborers and American industry:

In fact, the “work portraits” are the most problematic of Hine’s pictures. Still, they have a significant place within his entire work. They seem contradictory to his earlier work pictures, yet they are not. If one recognizes the battle of cameras that they represent—Hine’s against the management’s—one can see they are still consistent with his enterprise as a polemical social photographer. (134)

Although a nuanced analysis of Hine is somewhat flattened by Trachtenberg’s attention to Alfred Stieglitz in *Reading American Photographs*, we can see that elsewhere he admits that
Hine critiqued American industry, even into the 1930s. However, in both pieces, the context in which Trachtenberg reads Hine’s photographs is historical and cultural, but not biographic. In contrast, my reading of Hine and particularly *Men at Work* takes Hine’s experience as a worker, a laborer behind a machine, as an explicit theme in the narrative. The subject of *Men at Work* is who counts as men at work, and how those folk might constitute a story about themselves. Hine does this from the perspective of a progressivist outsider who renders them as “a cause” for viewers to admire and praise, not sympathize, or pity.

My analysis of text and photographs emphasizes Hine’s aesthetic and formal choices that were sometimes subversive to audience expectations. Hine’s focus on form, particularly self-reflexivity, reflects his treatment by employers as fraught with uncertainty and outright disregard for Hine’s artistic right to control the products of his labor. Hine’s use of self-reflexivity is subtle, but present in *Men at Work*. This text is a progenitor of what Jeff Allred has termed “documentary modernism,” and where Jeff Allred has used this term to analyze “traces of the real” in documentary photobooks like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I will continue to develop this term to demonstrate how authors (rather than strictly photographers) might expand the canon of modernism to include artists who experimented with hybrid aesthetics. It is important to look at the work of artists during the first half of the twentieth century, and how they motivated an American population frightened by economic uncertainty and social unrest, to reimagine the relationship between employee and employer, particularly immigrant workers, children workers, and women workers. The reimagining offered in *Men at Work* is limited to Hine’s particular experience as a white male worker in the booming industry of documentary photography, but there are other artists to consider who also experimented with documentary
modernism. The influence of documentary photography as a genre extends beyond children’s photobooks, magazines, and press journalism. Novelists Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright also invited readers to reconsider possible relationships between employee and employer, besides those offered in the patriarchal white capitalist American society.

Importantly, other artists that I study in my project experienced firsthand what it was like to be a migrant or an immigrant in early-twentieth century America. Immigrant experiences were diverse depending on where the individual came from, and Hine helped immortalize images of Western and Eastern European migrants through his photographs of Ellis Island. At the same time, during the first two decades of the twentieth century many people also immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean, and particularly Jamaica, prior to the 1924 Immigration Act. Claude McKay, Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist, is the focus of my next chapter in part because he talks about the experience of being an internationalist and traveler during this time period, based on his experience of immigrating to the United States from Jamaica, and then traveling around Western and Eastern Europe during the mid to late 1920s. Where Hine was mostly an outsider looking in on the laborer’s experience, or on the immigrant’s struggle, McKay is more of an insider to this community. Subsequent authors I will discuss in later chapters, like Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, migrated from the American South to the American North during the early-twentieth century. They were both part of the Great Migration of black laborers to urban, northern cities to secure factory jobs and escape the brutal legacy of Jim Crow laws in the American South. Hine was a champion of the worker, and a laborer himself, but his race and gender privilege colored his universal praise and presentation of workers as heroes. Authors McKay, Hurston, and Wright are sometimes less optimistic about the ability of the
worker, or the folk, to overcome modernist fragmentation of perspective and experience to unite politically behind any one grand narrative about the worth and redemption of the American working class.
Chapter II
Claude McKay’s Modern Storyteller

According to the U.S. Census Bureau recorders, immigration rates to the United States between the years 1905 and 1914 were the highest ever recorded, with immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America streaming into the country at an average rate of 11.11% per 1,000 U.S populations (U.S Census Bureau 15). In other words, more than 10 million people came to America during this ten-year period. For many newcomers, the realities of racism, nativism, and segregation in America during this time proved to be major barriers to securing work, housing, and other basic services. Their arrival at ports, like Ellis Island, was documented and

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20 Exact number is 10,122,000. (U.S. Census Bureau 15).
immortalized in photographs like the one above, by Lewis Hine in 1908 (see fig 1). But, the immigrants themselves also actively created their own narratives to document their journeys to the United States, and interpret the American culture and society they were expected to assimilate. Festus Claudius "Claude" McKay was one such immigrant, who came to America from Clarendon, Jamaica.

Feeling out of place and unsure, a young McKay sat in the Topeka Public Library in 1912 and began reading W.E.B Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) for the first time. As he would later write in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (1937), “The book, shook me like an earthquake” (McKay 109-110). For Claude McKay, reading *Souls of Black Folk* greatly influenced his decision to leave Kansas State College and move to New York to be closer to the blooming African American social movement that would become the Harlem Renaissance.

After abandoning his studies of agriculture at Kansas State, Claude McKay distinguished himself as an early figure of the Harlem Renaissance through his poetry and fiction. By 1928, he had a best-selling novel *Home to Harlem*, which celebrated the vibrancy and variety of black urban life. Then, a year later, McKay published *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*. Similar in theme to *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo* couples the themes of institutionalized racism and surveillance within a narrative that constantly resists linear interpretation or unity. Yet, summarizing the plot of *Banjo* is deceptively easy. In the opening chapter, the character “Lincoln Agrippa Daily, familiarly known as Banjo” arrives in Marseilles, France with only a banjo, his musical instrument of choice (3). Banjo is an immigrant in Marseilles, just as McKay was an immigrant in the United States, and has to learn the local customs and expectations regarding race and class. In the last chapter, Banjo leaves Marseilles for destinations unknown. In between, Banjo eschews
the importance of national identity, and instead tests the bounds of class, race, and gender through the rambling reflections and tales provided by himself and his fellow “beach boys,” a group of amateur musicians (15). Through the character Banjo, McKay speaks for the prostitutes and pimps, the performers and loafers, not to create a spectacle of depravity, but to humanize and dramatize the validity of their identity as black, queer, or “other.”

Though seemingly plotless and meandering, McKay’s reflective novel on American race politics is an achievement of hybrid documentary modernist aesthetics. He uses a language of imagery, and the modernist writing techniques of montage and averted gazing, as a way to emphasize gender and nationality as more important than class or racial identity alone. McKay provides a chronology of African and African American folktales, framed inside a modernist novel that announced itself as an experiment in form through the title itself, *Banjo, A Story Without a Plot*. Where Lewis Hine, as I show in the previous chapter, used a documentary modernist aesthetic in his photography to explore and critique possible articulations of American modernity, particularly for the individual laborer, McKay applies this aesthetic to the novel to critique available articulations of blackness in the context of modernity and primitivism in modern art. McKay’s presentation of folklore as a complicated exchange between audience and performer contrasts against popular white presentations of folklore, like Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (1881) and Walter Jekyll’s *Jamaican Song and Story* (1904). McKay rejects the ways African culture, and particularly folklore, was fetishized as simplistic, or a testament to the “noble savage” by both white and black artists (Knapp 368).21 By

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21 For more on the history of primitivism in modern art see Knapp 368-69; Robert Goldwater’s *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1966). See Josephine Baker’s Banana Dance performed at Folies Bergère in Paris, France (1927) for a visual example (Banana Dance), and Sanchez 62-65.
pairing Hine and McKay in sequence, my reading emphasizes the important cultural work each is attempting. Hine directs the reader’s attention to the working class subject, while McKay looks at modern subjects that are both working class and black. Their work provides counter narratives to essentialist, exclusionary identity categories like classism, sexism, racism, homophobia, and nationalism expounded in America and around the world. Though Hine’s interest was primarily class and nationalism, McKay, along with many other writers of color during the 1920s and 1930s, also attended to the social problems of racism and sexism in America and abroad. This is not to say that concerns about social mobility are peripheral in McKay’s *Banjo*, but rather McKay is the least confident that class is a reliable basis for collective political organization.

Throughout the novel, McKay focuses on a set of criteria for identity production—namely sexuality and gender—to shift the conversation away from an artist’s responsibility to depict social uplift and race solidarity, and toward an articulation of gender and national identity politics. McKay thereby draws attention to new social conditions of inequality rather than trying to describe a single, unifying identity politics based only on race as offered by Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, or Booker T. Washington. In the chapter “Storytelling,” McKay presents four folktales in procession to describe the history of black folklore as measurable cultural work that depends on a complicated negotiation between audience and performer. In doing so, McKay elevates the status of the storyteller above that of the literary author, and so offers a counter image, or mirror image, to that of the New Negro author. McKay offers the wise fool Banjo as an alternative bard

22 In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois suggests that the best way to help solve “the race problem” or the “problem of the color line” is for African Americans to through education and middle class professionalization. However, Booker T. Washington suggests in *Up from Slavery* that African Americans need to be educated in vocational professions, such as cobbler and blacksmiths, to increase their overall value to the community by obtaining essential skills of labor. Marcus Garvey presents yet another version of African American uplift by advocating the Back to Africa movement. See “Africa for the Africans” and “The Future as I See It” for more on Garvey and the Universal Negro Association in Nathan Irving Huggins’ *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 35-41.
of black experience, who uses dialect and performativity, as a foil to the character Ray, who is educated and emphasizes a Dubsonian version of racial uplift through carefully reasoned monologues. The setting of each tale progresses linearly, until at last the final tale is set in the narrative's present day where Banjo himself is the trickster character.

In Banjo’s modern folk story, presented in the chapter “Storyteller,” he commits the social taboo of accepting a white man’s favor in return for money. Banjo even highlights how they shared “one baid” together. However, when it comes time for Banjo to speak his praise for the white Southern man and his monetary generosity, he instead praises the French people as “the greatest people in the wul’” (127-28). The trick turns further when the Southerner praises “the colored people” as the greatest people in the world. Instead of Banjo presenting himself as a coon at the end of the story, as do other stories in this chapter, the white character is reduced to a form of entertainment for the black subject—the Master has become the coon. This story is interrupted by Banjo’s listening audience, something that does not happen during the other folk tales told in this chapter. The interruptions obscure the similarities between Banjo’s story and the more classic folk tales told by the Senegalese sergeant. Banjo’s story is read as a failure by Goosey because he ends the story saying “nigger” rather than “colored people,” which signals a lack of “respect” to Goosey (128). Goosey interrupts Banjo’s finale by questioning his use of this word, and thereby flattens the joke. In other words, Goosey’s own experiences of hearing the word nigger from white people overpowers his ability to identify with Banjo’s experience of

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23 Ray is also a carry-over character from McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928). In both novels, Ray is a writer who is collecting material for a book on black folklore.

24 One bed.
tricking the white man into being his own coon character; Goosey misses the joke because he
knows the subject matter and themes too well, not because he knows too little.

Banjo recognizes the limitations of his own tale by turning specifically to Ray and asking
“What do you say about my story for a big write-up, pardner?” (Mckay 128). Unlike Ray, who is
trying to collect folk tales for circulation to a larger audience, Banjo represents both a folk
character and a performative storyteller always already aware that his message is not intelligible
to all audiences. We can see Banjo as a folk character inside his own story most clearly, but
McKay also likens Banjo to the animal characters in folklore stories, exhibiting animal noises
like a “growl [in] a low-down defiance” and “a roar of rich laughter” (118). This adds to Banjo’s
claim earlier in this chapter that “I gotta personal piece to tell without any timmings at all and I
don’t care if you publish it in the Book of Life itself and hand it to Big Massa as a prayer” (118).
This claim suggests that Banjo’s story is both a factual one (by publishing it in the Book of Life)
and a story of dreams or fantasy (a prayer). He admits the inability of his storytelling to speak
consistently to any audience regardless of its place of publication.

In Banjo, McKay describes the social conditions that people of color in Europe endured
before 1930. Constant surveillance by authority figures associated with the government affected
minority subjects’ ability to forge local communities, both publicly and privately. Those people
who live in “the Ditch,” as the neighborhood is called, are hostile to outsiders visiting the
neighborhood for spectacle. In this way, the Ditch serves as an analogy for Harlem, which was
also seen as a place of spectacle and survival for African Americans.²⁵ Long sections of Banjo

²⁵ “The Ditch” is a term used to denote the neighborhood where Banjo and his friends live. For a description of the
spectacle outsiders made of Harlem, see Rudolph Fisher’s “The Caucasian Storms Harlem” in Voices of the Harlem
Renaissance, where he describes how “The best of Harlem’s black cabarets have changed their names and turned
are dominated by interior monologues describing such subjects as the characters’ interpretations of racism in America, the responsibilities of the artist to produce a social message, or the acceptable semantic use of the term “nigger.” In other words, the characters spend a great deal of time talking about talking, a practice Henry Louis Gates Jr. has identified as particular to the African American signifying tradition (Gates 12). These sections of the novel are documentary; McKay presents a variety of folk tales that speak to the experiences of African Americans, West Africans, and blacks living as expatriates in Europe during the late 1920s, in order to question the possibility that all local experiences can be reduced to one essential, black culture, as many Harlem Renaissance figures claimed and championed. McKay questioned the Harlem elite by name through character mouthpieces like the black intellectual Ray in Banjo. However, there are also moments in the text when McKay uses averted gazing and non-linear time to resist white readers who might imagine black ghetto life as exotic or exciting.

Throughout the novel, the question of who gets to speak for whom, and when, is often decided with deadly consequences. Men and women of color are the individuals silenced most often in the text—either through physical violence or in moments of averted gazing. In the very first chapter “The Ditch,” Banjo gets in a fight with a woman because she purposely averts her gaze from him: “The girl, seeing Banjo, turned her eyes casually away and went to sit where she could concentrate her charms on the mulatto” (McKay 15). When Banjo confronts the girl, she replies “‘Laissez-moi tranquil, imbecile,’” which sends Banjo into “a rage” (15-16). Banjo rips

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26 Marcus Garvey presents such a version of black nationalism in the Back to Africa movement. Marcus tried to raise money to buy a ship so that African Americans could return to Africa, the ‘homeland’. Such conceptions of black identity suggested that the color of one's skin was the most important signifier of black experience. All other markers of identity, such as gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality, were secondary.

27 Banjo meets the girl when he first arrives in port and had money to spend. He buys the girl a gold watch as a token of his affection.
the watch, a gift he gave her, off her wrist and smashes it on the floor. The girl’s averted gaze is a performance of dismissal, which she then follows with a speech act, an insult. In retribution, Banjo changes the stakes of their confrontation from speech to physical confrontation by smashing the watch. There are serious consequences for this escalation; the girl’s “tout” cuts Banjo on the wrist. This type of scene is repeated throughout the novel. Each time, an insult is issued which undermines a character’s autonomy to perform his or her own identity without essentialism. Through these reoccurring scenes of averted gazing, like the one I just described, McKay rehearses possible articulations to the question of how black artists should be portrayed, and how they, in turn, portray their communities in art. Onlookers, or the audience, to such performances gather to share stories of these experience. Instead of a grand narrative of black experience, McKay’s fragmented stories of individual experience help articulate black identity in complex terms of nationality, and gender, rather than race or class alone.

The Harlem Scene

In 1898 at the Hampton Negro Conference, Dr. Scarborough asked, how will men and women of color be portrayed in prose, and who will do the portraying:

Let the Negro writer of fiction make his pen and his brain all compelling forces to treat of that which he well knows, best knows, and give it to the world with all the imaginative power possible, with all the magic touch of the artist. Let him portray the Negro’s loves and hates, his hopes and fears, his ambitions, his whole life, in such a way that the world will weep and laugh over the pages, finding the touch

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28 Upon arriving in Marseilles, Banjo meets this girl and treats her to gifts, food, and wine.
that makes all nature kin, forgetting completely that hero and heroine are God’s bronze images, but knowing only that they are men and women with joys and sorrows that belong alike to the whole human family. (Scarborough 68)

W.E.B Du Bois was in attendance at the Hampton Conference and listened to Scarborough’s speech. In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois uses similar themes of racial uplift, triumph over adversity, and the “joys and sorrows” of black experience. McKay was part of the first wave of Harlem Renaissance writers, concerned with treating themes of Negro life “with all the magic touch of the artist,” but, for McKay, that “whole life” included dancing, drinking, fighting, and generally the struggle to survive that people of color faced in early-twentieth century America. McKay depicts joy and sorrow, but also lust, jealousy, shame, and rage. His thematic focus on urban, poor people of color privileged the perspective of marginalized subjects rather than middle class blacks. McKay’s work raised the question of which themes were appropriate for New Negro art. Does an artist’s focus on dialect, folk tales and songs, and the experience of rural black laborers undermine the accomplishments of urban, educated, middle class blacks who demanded equal representation with whites in public spaces and before the law? Or, in what ways might artists be producing black propaganda for racial uplift in American by depicting mostly urban, or affluent, African Americans in prose, while ignoring the large population of southern blacks living in poverty as share croppers under the legacy of Jim Crow? What

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29 Du Bois defined many of the major thematic concerns of the Harlem Renaissance through *Souls of Black Folk*. Meanwhile, Alain Locke would come to define the New Negro aesthetic in “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts” (1925) and “Art or Propaganda” (1928) as imitative of a western, “classical background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery” (Locke 137).

30 Other authors like Rudolph Fisher, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston also explored the debate between art or propaganda, and high and low culture, through the circulating question of which themes were appropriate for New Negro art.
responsibility do African American authors have to deliver social messages of racial uplift or depict conditions of racism or racial inequality in America?

American race theorists like Du Bois and Alain Locke had a vested interest in defining the relationship between theme and aesthetic for New Negro writers. In Banjo, McKay unequivocally satirizes Du Bois’ version of the New Negro, and his emphasis on The Talented Tenth, and Booker T. Washington’s faithful black vocational worker.  

Indeed, during his short tenure at Washington’s Tuskegee University, McKay experienced firsthand that this military style of life was not for him. McKay was also uneasy with Marcus Garvey’s argument that a Pan-African identity should be fostered to better unify and articulate the black experience under institutionalized racism. None of these theories of black identity adequately spoke for McKay, a neo-colonial subject who first experienced American racism in his twenties, and would live through various forms of ideological exclusion as he traveled throughout Europe from 1925-1928.

Possibly as a result of McKay’s non-commitment to these widely recognized credos of the Harlem Renaissance as set out by Du Bois, Locke, and Garvey, Banjo was not as successful commercially as Home to Harlem. Black reviewers harshly received McKay’s careful satire of their ideas spoken through the dialect and diction of uneducated dockworkers. However, critical themes of social unrest are as present in Banjo as they were in McKay’s poems like “If We Must Die,” published in the Liberator in 1919. Although McKay’s poems in The New Negro

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31 The Talented Tenth is Du Bois’s term for the “the Best of this [black] race that they may guide the Mass[es] away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (14). For more on this term, see “The Talented Tenth” in The Negro Problem (1903).
do not use dialect, this particular stylistic technique was popular with many African American writers trying to represent the living conditions of African Americans who were not part of The Talented Tenth. Locke and Du Bois both promoted social uplift for African Americans through cultural productions, particularly literary pieces that depicted middle class blacks and themes of black experience such as racism in America, the color line, and passing. The literary movement from 1919-1929 known as the Harlem Renaissance was particularly focused on how African Americans should be depicted in culture, but the movement’s philosophical emphasis on social reform by slowly changing the existing societal values surrounding race comes from the larger tradition of American pragmatism.

When we read back over “Spiritual Truancy,” we can see Alain Locke describing this ideal, provincial New Negro through his criticism of Claude McKay and his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*. Locke describes McKay as an internationalist, a vagabond, and of “blow[ing] hot and cold with the same breath” (Locke 404). Naturally, McKay could not be the champion of the American Harlem Renaissance that Locke and Du Bois imagined if he was openly critiquing them in prose, while also focusing on black communities outside the United States. McKay executes a philosophy of relative pluralism, but instead of focusing on wholesome themes and a “shared dream” of community, McKay constantly breaks down every

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34 For a primary text on American pragmatism in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century, see John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934). For a discussion on the resurgence of American pragmatism and neo-pragmatism in the late twentieth century, see Alison Kadlec’s “Reconstructing Dewey: The Philosophy of Critical Pragmatism” and Hutchinson 62-77.

35 For more on why Du Bois and Locke envisioned McKay as a failed New Negro writer, and how they wanted him to be a champion of African American interests, see the section “Tight Space” of this chapter.
community he enters until all his experiences of different cultures are rendered in a composite image of racial oppression, both in Europe and in America.

Self-Reflexivity of an Artist

_Banjo_ most clearly illustrates McKay’s careful negotiation between realist and modernist aesthetics. My reading of McKay I focus on his formal experimentation with the novel and his attention to common folk themes and scenes of decadence, which conflicts with themes of racial uplift and _The Talented Tenth_ as described in the Harlem Renaissance literary debate I’ve traced above. In _Banjo_, McKay self-reflexively focuses on the immediacy and fragmentation of experience, but he pairs this with a literary history of folk stories as told by characters in the novel. McKay’s modernist aesthetics articulates the fragmentation of the modernist readers who were buying African American novels. Many readers were exposed to African American texts alongside white imitations of African American cultural productions of the twentieth century, such as vaudeville and minstrel. African American readers were also divided about who qualified as a New Negro artist and what his or her subject matter should be. _Banjo_ repeatedly references race leaders like Washington and Garvey, presupposing that readers have knowledge of the larger context of these debates. McKay is acutely aware of the fragmentation of his reading audience, and how that fragmentation affects the social, economic, and political conditions in which non-white characters (like those described in _Banjo_) live. McKay chafes

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36 See George S. Schuyler’s “The Negro-Art Hokum” for a critical description of the Harlem Renaissance and a case for literature that “shows the impress of nationality rather than race” (311). Published in 1926 in _The Nation_, Schuyler concludes, “The mere mention of the word ‘Negro’ conjures up in the average white American’s mind a composite stereotype of Bert Williams, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Jack Johnson, Florian Slaperry, and the various monstrosities scrawled by the cartoonists” (311).
under the pressure to answer this mandate to serve the race, and demonstrates his rebellion through the self-reflexivity of Banjo. 37

In Banjo, McKay’s main character is a banjo player who, upon meeting a new American companion named Malty, performs a short tune. Malty comments, “‘Yous as good as any real artist,’” to which Banjo quickly replies, “‘I’s is a real artist’” (McKay 8). In this moment Malty and Banjo begin to perform the larger debate concerning what counts as Negro art, therefore connecting the fictional account of these characters to social questions that existed beyond the confines of the text. This debate continues to interrupt the narrative, and Banjo always represents the unaccepted, or nontraditional, folk artist who often goes unrecognized or is harshly criticized, much like McKay himself. McKay was criticized for his use of low, common themes in his prose, so the rehearsal of this argument in a novel about homeless vagabonds is self-reflexive.

By selecting the folk as his primary theme, and not focusing on how they have inner “Truth” and “Beauty,” McKay’s status as a “real artist” is undermined or questioned. By having Banjo assert “‘I’s is a real artist,’” McKay contradicts Harlem elite critics like Du Bois and Locke by not focusing on the best of black accomplishments, but the lowest, struggling black men and women.

Likewise, McKay argues against a presentation of African American history and literary history that marginalizes folk culture. These allusions come through Banjo once again when he announces, “There ain’t a jack man of us that ain’t got a history to him as good as any that evah

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37 At times, it is as if Banjo is a direct challenge to Du Bois’s “Criteria for Negro Art” (1926). In “Criteria for Negro Art,” Du Bois calls for artists to produce works of “Truth” and “Beauty” (para 11). When he describes the criteria of beauty and truth, he is clearly making claims about the themes of Negro art, and not just the aesthetic technique. However, his focus on genres like Romance, tragedy, and poetry suggest that he does not imagine Negro Art using experimental aesthetics or challenging readerly expectations. Du Bois very clearly identifies a Western European literary history, and then suggests the New Negro must carry on that tradition rather than recreating an African American folk culture for a modern audience. McKay did not understand truth or beauty as primary themes for his prose, and he is openly antagonistic to Du Bois’s claim that “all Art is propaganda” (para 29).
was printed. And Ise for one that ain’t got no case against life” (39). This reference to history, and how history is recorded, could be an allusion to Schomburg’s “A Negro Digs up His Past” (1925). This short article describes African American history and the “evidence” of their lineage as collected in museums and libraries (217). Schomburg, like Du Bois, presents an African American history that is authorized by a white, Western European tradition. The achievements of African Americans are assessed by how they contrast or compare to historical achievements of whites. McKay actively speaks against a white heuristic assessment for African American history, literature, and art and instead advocates for a curation of cultural productions based on their presence in collective memory, particularly the memories of working class blacks.

Generally, Banjo’s position on race issues can be described as anti-elitist and disdainful of those who might be described as the Talented-Tenth. Banjo claims that he “ain’t a big-headed nigger, but a white man has got to respect me, for when I address myself to him the vibration of brain magic that I turn loose on him is like an electric shock on the spring of his cranium” (42). This is a moment where Banjo expresses his particular ideas about race relations between blacks and whites, which are set up as contrary to “big-headed” ideas about race that encourage African Americans to passively accept “any insulting cracker of a white man” (42). Banjo’s self-respect is not derived from the white man’s estimation of him, or “big-headed” ideas about race; rather, Banjo’s “address,” or ability to speak his individual perspective, is a “shock” for the white man.

One mode of representation for Banjo is by storytelling, or orating. The other mode, or medium, is when he plays the banjo. Banjo’s playing is often used in the novel to turn situations

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38 Schomburg acted as a financial supporter for McKay during his time in Russia, and even after he returned to America in the 1930s (Cooper 203). In turn, McKay seemed to reserve a certain respect for Schomburg’s criticisms of McKay’s later works (Sinnette 122).
to his advantage. Although Banjo primarily plays for entertainment and not monetary profit, it is common that Banjo is unbothered by white authority figures and celebrated by non-whites when he plays. In this sense, McKay uses Banjo as an idealized folk character in the story, but he also focuses on the real racism and racial conflict in the Ditch. When Banjo says, “I’m just a right-there, right-here baby, yestiday and today and tomorrow and forevah. All right-there right-here for me now,’” he identifies himself as a folk character (33). He is, by his own testament, timeless and at the same time deeply rooted in the experience of the present. He represents a certain removal from his comrades in the Ditch, not unlike the wandering bard or storyteller. Storyteller is therefore a title each man or woman adopts, and in doing so commands a certain level of authority to speak for the community. But, storytelling is also a method of presenting experience that emphasizes social critique and technique, like documentary modernism. Banjo presents the most contemporary, racially charged folk stories in the chapter “Storyteller” as a folk character is his own life story; he performs this trickster folk persona throughout the text. Banjo’s description of himself as an artist, and his relation to his audience, is specific enough to reproduce at length. Banjo’s statement of aesthetic intent appears more than half way through the novel:

If I am a real story-teller, I won’t worry about the difference in complexion of those who listen and those who don’t, I’ll just identify myself with those who are really listening and tell my story. You see, Goosey, a good story, in spite of those who tell it and those who hear it, is like good ore that you might find in any soil—Europe, Asia, Africa, America. The world wants the ore and gets it by a thousand men scrambling and fighting, digging and dying for it. The world gets its story the same way. (115)
Banjo describes himself as a modern storyteller focusing on the individual, a modernist theme. But, then he creates a metaphor for stories being like “good ore,” and suggests that there must be something universal, or international, about man’s need for stories. To suggest that stories serve a social purpose, that they are a raw material fueling man’s other political and cultural activities, presents a compelling case for an aesthetics of realism. Although McKay would probably not concede that all art should be propaganda, like Du Bois does in “Criteria for Negro Art,” he does suggest that stories serve a social need or practical purpose. Through Banjo’s hybrid realist and modernist aesthetics, McKay speaks back to those critics who claimed his themes were lowly, and that the New Negro should primarily be concerned with social uplift. McKay suggests that telling folk stories about a group of people, regardless of their “complexion,” is a project of social service and cultural work.

“Tight Space” and Truancy

And so, [McKay] stands to date, the enfant terrible of the Negro Renaissance, where with a little loyalty and consistency he might have been at least its Villon and perhaps its Voltaire.

—Alain Locke

In *Turning South Again* (2001), Houston Baker Jr. describes how the “tight space” of the South followed him through the years, even after he began residing in geographical locations other than the American South. Baker Jr. uses the term tight space to describe the origins of black modernism: “Black modernism is not only framed by the American South, but also is inextricable—as cognitive and somatic process of performing blackness out of or within tight spaces—from specific institutionalizations of human life below the Mason-Dixon” (loc. 285). Likewise, McKay’s tight space is outlined by experiences he had in the American South, but it
was his experience of coming up from the Caribbean (even further south) that shaped his particular tight space. Despite the many detailed, nuanced reflections McKay shares in *A Long Way from Home*, it was not well received by critics, particularly Alain Locke. Locke’s reaction to McKay’s autobiography, which is at times very candid about McKay’s disillusionment with the Harlem Renaissance movement, exemplifies McKay’s struggle to find a receptive audience for his material that did not fit into the defined canon of African American literature of the time. It is the ultimate irony, therefore, that besides *Home to Harlem* and a few of McKay’s poems showcased in Alain Locke’s *New Negro* and Max Eastman’s *Liberator*, McKay’s contributions remain marginalized even as gender, queer, and cultural studies theories of representation, identity politics, and performativity have called upon scholars to reexamine the criteria by which some artists have been called modernist. My reading of *Banjo* argues the text is a site of contested meaning and a product of the conflicting power structures, both in America and in Europe, that McKay had to navigate as a black expatriate living in France. Although *Banjo* fails to celebrate the American Harlem Renaissance with certainty, the novel itself is greatly informed by his contemporaries’ ideas on identity politics and representation. American race activists and progressivists prescribed realist aesthetics and themes for black artists to further ideologies of social reform and unity in the face of racism, sexism, classism, and warfare in Europe, but McKay also challenges the reader intellectually through heavy use of black dialect, and detailed discussion of race. Generally, authors who failed to further these social activist agendas

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39 In the chapter “He Who Gets Slapped,” McKay recounts a jarring encounter with the color-line in New York City while going out with Max Eastman, friend and editor of the leftist *The Liberator*, to review a play by Leonid Andreyev (McKay ALWFH 144). McKay’s biographer Wayne Cooper suggests this was a significant experience of American racial prejudice for McKay and encouraged McKay’s decision to travel to Russia and Europe, instead of staying in Harlem during the mid-1920s (150).
explicitly were sometimes seriously chastised in print, as was the case with Claude McKay after he published *Banjo* and *A Long Way from Home*.

In a 1937 review of *A Long Way from Home*, Alain Locke lambasted Claude McKay in an essay pointedly titled “Spiritual Truancy.” Locke focuses on McKay’s lack of “loyalty” to the Harlem Renaissance, a claim he supports by citing the “half dozen movements” to which McKay belonged during his travels from Jamaica to the United States, then to England, Russia, France, and finally Africa (404). Locke goes on to lament how “many of us hoped that a prose and verse writer of stellar talent would himself come home, physically and psychologically, to take a warranted and helpful place in the group of ‘New Negro’ writers” (404). Clearly, the “many” Locke identifies here include race leaders and Harlem Renaissance intellectuals like Du Bois. For them, the “Negro” Renaissance is clearly located in a geographical place: America. By suggesting that McKay “come home,” however, Locke is effectively ignoring McKay’s Jamaican origins, and the differences between the competing interpretations of who and what the New Negro writer is supposed to represent. Locke plainly states that “Artists have a right to be individuals, of course, but if their work assumes racial expression and interpretation, they must abide by it” (404). The end of this statement, “they must abide by it,” suggests that an author’s “racial expression” is singular and unchanging. To read this statement literally, there is a singular, essential blackness that the New Negro writer must promote if there is any racial “interpretation” in his work. Therefore, McKay’s tendency to go “hot and cold with the same breath” is evidence of his “spiritual truancy,” or failure to reach his full potential as a New Negro (404).
Throughout the essay, Locke criticizes McKay for being too well traveled during a time that he should have stayed in Harlem, for being too experimental with his aesthetics, too individualistic, and too catering to “faddist Negrophiles” (406). It is particularly ironic that Locke puts so much stress on McKay needing to reside in the United States to produce New Negro writing, considering that McKay immigrated to the U.S. in 1912 and never really stopped being as immigrant with an outsider’s perspective on every country he visited. Locke did not value this outsider perspective, since he believed it was the writer’s duty to “interpret the folk to itself,” something McKay could not do while writing about an international black subject rather than an essentialized American folk subject (406).

Locke’s “Spiritual Truancy” therefore describes the space in which McKay was expected function, but could not because his experience with blackness was influenced by, but not prescribed by, his time in both the Caribbean and the United States. In this sense, Locke’s vision of the New Negro is an image in McKay’s likeness, but also his opposite. Whereas Locke and Du Bois were concerned with African Americans as a collective, McKay was concerned with the black individual and his or her ability to articulate particular folk histories as a way to imagine versions of black modernity that does not only privilege the talented tenth, the faithful Tom, or the primitive. In other words, McKay is focused on the individual’s experience, while Locke is more concerned with creating a collective culture and shared understanding of what it to be a New Negro. McKay was not alone in his ambitions, and in some ways prefigured the work of

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40 Locke’s “faddist Negrophiles” probably include white patrons that filled Harlem jazz joints and cabarets during the late-1920s. Rudolph Fisher references this phenomenon in “The Caucasian Storms Harlem” (1927). See Huggins 74-75.
late Harlem Renaissance writers who took an interest in folk themes of individualist struggle. If Alain Locke represents one set of expectations placed on McKay, and New Negro writers in general, then we might also look at the ways McKay was treated by black critics in popular press, particularly after publishing "Banjo."

**Popular Reception and Critique**

*All my life I have been a troubadour wanderer, nourishing myself mainly on the poetry of existence. And all I offer here is the distilled poetry of my experience.*

—Claude McKay

McKay embraced the identity of “wanderer,” gathering material for his art by living among people of different races and nationalities, sexualities, and classes. His entire life was a sequence of cultural case studies to absorb, test, and critique the socio-cultural landscapes of the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean during the period of 1910-1942. Thematically, Claude McKay documents the history of a particular locale or community through modernist writing techniques such as averted gazing and difficult dialect to draw attention to social issues like racism, prejudice, and nationalism. Modernist difficulty and lowly themes of decadence were criticized by race theorists like Du Bois in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), because the themes seemed to confirm black stereotypes about immorality or laziness. Therefore, when McKay presented frank depictions of urban decadence, like night clubbing, drinking, and sexual promiscuity in "Banjo," it was criticized as a celebration of the worst versions of blackness. By

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41 See, for example, Sterling Brown’s poetry “Slim in Atlanta” (1932), “Slim Lands a Job?” (1932), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Langston Hughes’s *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1953) collected and republished in *The Best of Simple* (1961).

42 This range of years is an approximation of the time that McKay was publicly active in the field of literature, and / or actively pursuing publication. In *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Wayne Cooper notes that McKay’s health deteriorated greatly due to high blood pressure and heart disease. He struggled to find work in the final years of his life (354-356).
mixing lowbrow themes with high modernist aesthetics, his commentary on social relations, particularly in terms of race and history, were dismissed in reviews by black critics.

Instead of reading McKay’s depiction of folk characters as consciously subversive to white readerly expectations, black readers like Aubury Bowser of New York *Amsterdam Press* described *Banjo* as “pure coon-stuff” (1). Ironically, the author even points to a line from *Banjo*, “coon-stuff is the money stuff,” and yet still misses the irony of McKay. “Coon-stuff” is “money stuff” as long as white, or black, readers fail to see how black authors are reclaiming folk material first put into print by white writers. African American folk tales always function with a slippage between what is said by characters, and what is actually understood by white audiences. Cooning evacuates this slippage and suggests the white audience is the target audience, while folk stories like those in *Banjo* recall pre-emancipation methods of resistance and rebellion against white slave owners.43

Bowser’s review, of course, begins to expose the other side of McKay’s double bind as a modern African American artist. Sociologist Anthony Giddens has rightly pointed to institutional reflectivity as a key aspect of modern society. He defines institutional reflectivity as “the regularized use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organization and transformation” (Giddens 20). He goes on to claim that this reflectivity “actually undermines the certainly of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science” (21). McKay is deeply involved in this same reflectivity of modernity, especially when storytelling is

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43 See chapter one in Mel Watkins’s *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (1999). Watkins claims “Trickster tales were among the most popular and commonly expressed varieties of slave folklore and, outside of physical resistance and rebellion, probably represented the most aggressive and cynical view of white America expressed by slaves (70).
concerned. This reading, however, is lost on Dewey Jones of the Chicago Defender, who is more focused on McKay’s choice of mouthpiece:

‘Banjo’ has one thing to recommend it: McKay occasionally lets himself go to the extent of bringing out some sage remark about the race question. This, however, is so imbedded in the muck and slime of the dock wallaper’s life that it is not as effective as it might have been in a different guise. One is not impressed when a group of bums start telling the French government how it can best treat its dark citizens, or how America could improve its race relations because one just is not impressed with the opinions of bums. (Jones A1)

The experiences of those “bums,” and their intimate knowledge of how the “dark citizens” live in France, is demonstrated throughout Banjo. The “sage remark” the critic traces to McKay comes from the mouth of Banjo, and his vagabond friends, to demonstrate the wisdom of folk knowledge. Instead, it was common for critics to interpret McKay’s use of lowly folk characters as a detrimental portrayal of African Americans. The reflexivity of his characters, his use of nonlinear time, and creative documenting of African folk tales is dismissed or goes unrecognized. McKay shows a spectrum of international folk characters in an attempt to make the stock folk character, as presented in white folklore studies, modern and dynamic. Underlying his assumption about the value of folklore is his emphasis on experience and the distanced perspective of an individual. Clearly, McKay’s attention to the race question does not succeed at the level that black readers, especially liberal black readers, wanted. However, the reception of a work by contemporaneous readers is not always an accurate weathervane for how later generations of readers might interpret a text. In the case of McKay and Banjo, like Lewis Hine’s
Men at Work or Zora Neale Hurston’s Mules and Men, the particular hybrid, documentary modernist aesthetic each artist employed tended to alienate readers who wanted a social realist interpretation of American cultural spirit and ultimately perseverance during a time of social, economic, and cultural uncertainty.

Averted Gazing and Readerly Expectations

McKay presents the folksy characters of Banjo and his destitute friends conducting daily activities like begging, arguing, name calling, and sometimes fighting, but his characters are not primitives as was assumed by McKay’s critics. McKay respects the humanity of these characters, and at times averts the audience’s gaze away from scenes of great emotion. This choice is both aesthetic and political. McKay effectively pushes back on white readers’ expectations that Banjo might provide them an essentialist testimony on what it is to be non-white. He accomplishes this task by providing readers with a disconnected montage of images and ideas in place of a realist description of particular black bodies. Although Banjo often focuses on skin color, or people’s bodies, McKay is careful to maintain the humanity of his characters and avert the readers’ gaze from scenes of intimacy or elation. One such example of this comes when Banjo is playing in a café for a large crowd of people. We are told that Banjo is asked to play “Shake That Thing,” a popular African American jazz song. The scene ends with a description, which portrays neither bodies nor the sound of music:

‘Let’s play them that thing first…Play that thing!’ One movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow. Shake that thing! In the face of the shadow of Death. Treacherous hand of murderous Death, lurking in sinister alleys, where the shadows of life dance, nevertheless, to their music of life. Death
over there! Life over here! Shake down Death and forget his commerce, his purpose, his haunting presence in a great shaking orgy. (57)\(^44\)

McKay could have very well provided a long, descriptive paragraph to represent the dancing crowd. Likewise, he could have focused readers on the atmosphere of the café generally to invite readers to project themselves into the scene. However, the passage seems to resist these exact moves and anticipate the expectations of readers who desire such reportage of “low,” exotic decadence. The speaker of this passage is an omniscient narrator, since Banjo only speaks the initial phrase “Let’s play them that thing first.” To describe the dancing crowd as “One movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow” disavows the easy voyeuristic gaze of those readers who were sometimes termed “negrophiles.” The passage also upsets the expectation that a scene of people dancing to jazz music would necessarily be sexualized, graphic, and corporeal. In fact, it is in just those moments that McKay is so careful to retreat from depicting black bodies. Instead, he focuses on death. In this scene we are introduced to the character Death, “his commerce, his purpose, [and] his haunting presence in a great shaking orgy.” Death is the only character we actually see on the dance floor, while all the bodies that make up the “shaking orgy” drop away from view and are replaced by “shadows.” Indeed, when Banjo plays, it seems as if all the bodies of the Ditch disappear and only Death remains “lurking in sinister alleys.” McKay’s choice to reference death this way is central to his role as storyteller. In his essay “Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin considers death in storytelling to be “the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death… it is the

\(^44\) If we were to take this as a revision of the original “Shake That Thing” by “Papa” Charlie Jackson, then the lack of bodily descriptions is even more pronounced. In the original song, bodies shake “like you shake jelly on a plate,” and even the “jelly roll king/ He’s got a hump in his back from shakin’ that thing” McKay improvises other verses of the song, but, in each iteration, he is careful to not describe images of black bodies shaking.
natural history to which his stories refer back” (Benjamin 7). Death, or the threat of emanate death, interrupts scenes of celebration and play, therefore drawing attention to spatiality, rather than temporality, as an important criterion for performativity. Spatiality and performance is also the focus of theorist Eve Sedgwick’s work, *Touching Feeling* (2003). There, Sedgwick summarizes the intervention of her project by noting that, “Although temporal and spatial thinking are never really alternative to each other, I’ve consistently tried in *Touching Feeling* to push back against an occupational tendency to underattend to the rich dimensions of space” (9). Likewise, my reading of the chapter “Carved Carrot” emphasizes how the performativity of gender and sexuality is constituted through the spatial interplay of a larger heteronormative system of meaning making. I argue that McKay is able to document social inequality in the Ditch and use modernist writing techniques to present an international, raced subject who is at once informed by folk culture, and also able to present an individualist, modernist folk story.

In the opening of “Carved Carrot,” Ray sits in a bar with Banjo while some of their friends gather to play music. The scene is supposed to be a culminating moment because, “It was, perhaps, the nearest that Banjo, quite unconscious of it, ever came to an aesthetic realization of his orchestra” (McKay 97). Banjo speaks more than once about his desire to form an all-black orchestra earlier in the text. While this musical celebration goes on in the background, and verses from the song periodically interrupt the narrative description of the bar activity going on around the performers, the narration turns to “the absinthe lady” (98). She is death’s representative in this scene of supposed celebration. Upon finding that “the seamen were limiting themselves to wine and song,” a group of girls, who tried to get money and drinks from the seamen, leave the
bar, but not the “absinthe lady” (98). The lady continues to watch the men from a distance, and eventually is given an “enormous carrot…crudely carved” from her “tout,” who stops by the bar (99). The following scene unfolds:

The girl went back to the rear [of the bar] and thrust the carrot under the nose of the tight-round sailor. He reddened and, crying, “Slut!” cuffed the girl full in the face, and as she fell he drove a kick at her. The girl shrieked…In a moment the girl picked herself up and the patrone’s man, a docker who had come in during the evening, let her out and closed the door again. (99)

In reaction, Ray comments, “‘I woulda choked her to death with these black hands of mine’” (100). Readers are not given much description to piece together the offence, or insult, exchanged in this scene. However, given Ray’s passionate reaction, and the violence done by the sailor, we know something very insulting has been said. The carrot, “crudely carved,” is phallic shaped (99). By thrusting it under his nose, the woman suggests he would like to have the phallic object in his mouth. His violent reaction, and Ray’s threat of violence, is a result of the woman questioning a man’s sexuality, and or virility, in public. The absinthe lady is silenced in more for two reasons: her performance of open sexuality and then for insulting the sailor.

This scene resists readerly expectations by only describing the character’s physical movements and providing only snippets of dialog with very little exposition. McKay makes the exact opposite aesthetic choices that we see in the dancing scene, although he arrives at a similar result. Both chapters end in death. A seaman is shot, but we are told the bullets were actually

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45These women are never referred to as prostitutes, but it clear from the way they are described as being in the company of a “tout” (a pimp), that they are selling their company (McKay 98-99).
intended for the “tight-round” sailor who was offered the carrot (100). For this act of violence, “there was not a witness who had seen the murderer nor could tell whence the shots came” (100). This is another form of averted gazing that takes place in *Banjo*. McKay might avert the audience’s gaze as a way to soften the more graphic depictions of sexuality and violence, but he also draws attention to how the white gaze is blind to violence against non-whites like the seaman. Earlier in the book, Malty remarks, upon recounting the frequency of shootings in the Ditch, “Ise nevahbeen asked by the police, ‘What did you miss?’ nor ‘What did you see?’ (55). This is a clear demonstration of how McKay draws readers’ attention to the process of gazing, and later averts the same white gaze that polices the subjects of the Ditch. McKay’s use of averted gaze is only one aesthetic technique, but he uses it most often when discussing death, as well as the larger historical experience of individuals living under conditions of institutionalized racism. By pairing this modernist writing technique with classic storytelling themes like death, McKay offers a documentary modernist account of the social and legal mechanisms of violence in place to keep marginalized subjects, like the absinthe lady, in the Ditch.

**Living Historical Documents**

When folk tales are exchanged inside the narrative of *Banjo*, the theme of death once again reoccurs. The stories told in the chapter “Storytelling” best illustrate both the death of the classic storyteller, as described by Walter Benjamin, and the emergence of the performative modern storyteller. This is where McKay provides the literary history, or documentation, of what became the African American trickster tale. The folk tales in this chapter represent a wide range of classic folktales. Rays starts off the signifying with a fairy tale about trial by fire and water. By opening this tale with “Once upon a time,” we can classify this tale as closer to a fairy tale
rather than a folk tale. There is no clearly identified trickster in this tale. Each character exhibits traits of deception, although readerly sentiment is clearly supposed to be with the daughter character. It is fitting Ray starts the exchange of stories with this tale because it affirms that the folk tale historically predates the experience of slavery, a theme featured in many African American folk stories. No character in this story possesses brute strength that must be defeated through trickery by a weaker, disadvantaged character. Instead, a trick is played on the aunt, but only to restore her to her rightful place in the folk hierarchy where she “will live in this house and garden for the rest of [her] days” (McKay 121). This story is located in an unspecific, unknowable time, and only a general description of landscape characterizes the setting. It is the most traditional, moralistic of all the tales told, and yet it prefaces all the other folk tales told in this chapter. The audience recognizes this initial trope of traditional, moralistic storytelling, yet all the subsequent stories suggest a more complicated relationship with the immediate audience of these tales. In Ray’s story, the experience is the moral that is clearly received by any audience; the ideal of “trial” and “order” cross the cultural lines of Ray’s audience of Senegalese, African American, and Caribbean comrades.

The second tale, told by the Senegalese sergeant, is representative of animal tales made famous by Joel Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (1881), which featured the character Brer Rabbit. The leopard, bear, and elephant are all classic characters in the West African versions of these animal tales, and are often read to represent the white slave owner or oppressor. The monkey and the character “spinner,” also known more classically as the Anasi spider in West Africa and the Caribbean, represents the trickster figure that must use wit, cunning, and social taboos to turn the natural hierarchy on its head. There are three experience
tales told in this chapter, but the one told by the Senegalese is categorized as a “weird tale” and falls flat (McKay 118). The most obvious reason for this tale’s failure is that the audience does not recognize the form and cannot identify with the experience. The basic experience in each successful folk tale is oppression overcome by cunning or manipulation of social taboos, which results in freedom for the oppressed subject. The modern folktale told by Banjo fits this form, but the realism of his final tale also results in a constant skepticism by the audience and an ultimate loss of identification with anyone in the audience except Ray, the modern subject.46

Compared to Ray’s folktale, the Sargent’s story more clearly represents a brute character that must be destroyed to free the mentally and physically weaker characters of the land. It is easy to read this story as a masked tale about black slavery and white oppression, whereas Ray’s story seems to historically predate the experience of slavery both through its universal themes and its placement at the beginning of the chapter. To read the Sargent’s story about black oppression, however, the audience must recognize and identify with these social dynamics. In other words, they must acknowledge the real history of black oppression so that their sympathies are clearly placed with Monkey and “spinner” rather than Leopard. This story is not culturally intelligible for white audiences because the ideal audience, and the point of view of the story, is a black perspective (represented by Monkey). This tale also fails to produce a clear moral character. We are told that Monkey watches Leopard kill many unsuspecting animals before he puts a stop to the carnage (123). There is also “a big feast” of the victimized animals by Monkey and “the other animals” of the jungle (123). This suggestion of cannibalism would likely be unsettling to any audience that understood the animals to represent people. In this sense, the

46 See page 61 for a summary of this folktale.
Sargent’s tale demonstrates the inability of certain audiences to extract meaning from stories of experience.

Bugsy’s story from “down home in Alabam’” is a classic African American John and Old Master tale, although Bugsy mistakenly changes the black character’s name to Sam (most likely signifying on the term Sambo). This is important for readers to recognize because the character in Bugsy’s story does indeed turn out to be a Sambo rather than a John trickster. Like the second tale, this story is formally similar in that there are two tricks performed (a ‘right’ trick and a ‘wrong’ trick); the white Master is punished while the black man is rewarded. Where this tale falls short, however, is that Sam does not achieve his freedom for guessing what is under the pot. In the classic John tale version of this story, the master almost always rewards John with freedom or money. In Bugsy’s version of the tale, Sam’s reward is to remain in his master’s high regard—he remains a slave. Goosey, a black audience member, recognizes this failure by calling the story “a white man’s story” (McKay 125). Readerly expectations and audience make all the difference in the effectiveness of folk stories in this chapter. Animal tales and John tales, composed for black audiences about black experience, precipitate the telling of more stories. But Bugsy’s tale (a “white man’s story”) produces a different kind of folktale to emerge from Banjo—the modern folktale—in which the black man is rewarded and the white man turns into a coon character for black amusement.

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47A Sambo character is like the Tom character, or Tom-Fool, that was featured on stage in vaudeville and minstrel shows in the nineteenth century, and on the radio and television through shows like Amos and Andy during the twentieth century. Mel Watkins in On the Real Side describes the Sambo as the “merry, frivolous, happy-go-lucky” slave, which dominated the public images of blacks for predominantly white viewers (57).
Like the author of *Banjo*, Banjo himself is caught in the bind of needing to speak his folk experience and the possibility that his moral will never find a wholly receptive audience in a modern world where experience has become so diverse. McKay moves readers between experiences of folksy familiarity and total estrangement. Experience is always valued as the source of learning and development, hence why many characters’ names are defined by some prior experience they have had in the Ditch. McKay is resistant to his readers, but not hostile. We might even call it a “feather bed resistance,” much like we see in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935). Like McKay, Hurston had reasons to resist her readers’ expectations, since she was also documenting folk narratives in the Florida Gulf. McKay was more concerned with bending aesthetics of realism and modernism to achieve an overlap between theme and form, but Hurston, as I show in the next chapter, experiments with genre through an interdisciplinary blending of fiction and anthropological study. Like McKay and Hine, Hurston’s project documents human experience, but each author is particular about the terms under which they present, or represent, the knowledge from their experience.

Claude McKay is concerned with the creation of a historical document for the raced Other, particularly as that history pertains to black modernity. McKay’s concern with and acknowledgment of the cultural aesthetic of folklore is evident in most of his novels, but most explicitly in *Banjo*. By stressing themes of the folk, and drawing heavily from the oral and storytelling tradition of folklore, McKay offers a version of blackness that does not align with the intelligenzia of the early Harlem Renaissance. However, by also incorporating modernist aesthetics like self-reflexivity, resistance to form, and non-linear time, McKay also moves the literary folktale away from the traditional format provided by white authors in the late nineteenth
century and early-twentieth century like Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings* (1881) and Walter Jekyll’s *Jamaican Song and Story* (1907). There is a legacy of white writers documenting African folk stories and dialect, which McKay had to confront if he wanted to produce a historical documentation of the same folk stories. In *The Dialect of Modernism* (1998) Michael North dedicates a whole chapter to McKay’s struggle with dialect, and the criticism he faced from race leaders in America like Du Bois and Locke. By making heavy use of black dialect in his characters’ speech, McKay presented a historical document on folk to restore the agency of the storyteller as a cultural laborer that is more important to sustaining collective memory of the minority experience. By using a documentary modernist aesthetic, McKay suggests that folk history is pertinent to the creation of black modernity and that black folk are more important than themes addressing the “Talented Tenth” version of racial uplift.

The larger literary historical context in which McKay is writing (1912-1948) coincides with literary movements of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. The formal difficulty of working between, alongside, and against these two movements exemplifies the challenges a storyteller had to confront, as described in Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” (1936). Benjamin claims that the novel has contributed to the downfall of the storyteller because the novel “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” (3). The modern novel removes the author, but when people exchange stories, “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (5). Benjamin suggests here that there is something corporeal about storytelling. My reading of *Banjo*, which highlights scenes of physical confrontation and identity articulation, supports Benjamin’s claim that disconnect is

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48 Jekyll was also McKay’s first patron and editor while he was still writing *Songs of Jamaica* in 1912.
often the case between storyteller and audience, also I argue that a bond between audience members is often created around the performance itself. By creating a temporary community through the sharing of folk stories and folk music (Banjo’s banjo), McKay suggests that local articulations of blackness, nationality, sexuality, and gender are possible, but limited. The types of communities, and the dialog they exchange around these folk stories and folk music, importantly identifies social concerns for black men and women beyond race themes like passing and the color line. McKay wrote Banjo eight years before Benjamin published “The Storyteller,” yet his style in Banjo is deeply rooted in oral tradition and focuses on themes like the folk, death, and personal experience. McKay exemplifies the first and second group of storytellers Benjamin describes by being both “the storyteller as one who has come from afar…[and] the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions” (2).

McKay is a self-described wanderer, vagabond, or Rebel Sojourn, according to his biographer Wayne Cooper. In this way he often depicts himself in fictional works like Banjo and Home to Harlem as a foreigner or outsider. Although McKay produced what we might technically term novels (Home to Harlem, Banjo, Banana Bottom), he resisted the modernist novel’s erasure of the author in favor of being a storyteller, and therefore acknowledged his folk heritage while also offering a critical account of black urban life.

Scholars who study McKay have recently tried to move beyond classifying him as either a Caribbean ex-colonial, an American Harlem Renaissance urbanite, or a revolutionary Marxist poet. Gary Edward Holcomb’s Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha (2009) exemplifies such scholarly work by recognizing the performativity of McKay’s prose, thereby providing generous re-readings of a text like A Long Way from Home. However, McKay’s particular motivations in
creating a historical document that accounts for non-white experience and culture at a moment of transition for the New Negro still requires more scholarship. My reading here attempts to step in and continue that work, and the work of other recent scholars who have identified hybrid aesthetics in McKay’s *Banjo*. While considering the importance of a text’s critical reception by contemporaneous readers, I also examine McKay’s use of aesthetics and theme to deconstruct his philosophy of race and culture as pluralistic. McKay’s hybrid aesthetic reflects the plurality of his primary theme and subject, the folk. What complicates this theme is McKay’s lived experience in relation to real folk from all over the globe and from many socio-economic backgrounds. In this way, by drawing on his own life experience with major cultural figures of the time, McKay produces works of fiction that also function as historical documentation of social conditions.

Compared to the other authors I discuss in *Documentary Modernism and the Modern Storyteller*, McKay is the most skeptical about class as a unifying identity category for minority subjects, especially black men and women. Death and violence constantly interrupt, or halt, the narrative in *Banjo*, whereas references to death and dying are figurative in Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, and informational in Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices*. Hurston, like McKay is deeply invested in chronicling African American folklore, and the tradition of storytelling. The role of women as storytellers, central to the culture and life of black communities, is central to Hurston’s version of the folk, but for McKay women are typically presented as foils to the central male characters. Hurston’s depiction of the folk was aided by the formal anthropological

fieldwork she did in the American South from 1927-1930, and her exposure to folktales throughout her childhood in Eatonville, Florida. It was not until 1935 that Hurston finally published *Mules and Men*, capitalizing in part on the popular demand for visual and literary art that addressed the American folk, particularly the rural folk away from the city centers where signs of the Great Depression included long unemployment lines and shuttered businesses.
Chapter III
Zora Neale Hurston: From “My People!” to “Those People!”  

There is no such thing as a Negro tale which lacks point. Each tale brims over with humor. The Negro is determined to laugh even if he has to laugh at his own expense. By the same token, he spares nobody else. His world is dissolved in laughter. His “bossman,” his woman, his preacher, his jailer, his God, and himself, all must be baptized in the stream of laughter.

—Zora Neale Hurston

On May 6, 1935, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 7034 into law, thereby creating the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the United States. This government sponsored initiative was the largest organized effort in the country’s history to put millions of unemployed citizens back to work following the New York stock market crash on Black Tuesday in 1929.

50 See Hurston’s autobiography Dust Tracks On the Road (1942) for Hurston’s account of how the folktale refrain changed from “My people! My People!” to “Those People! Those People!” (164).
Upon its creation, the WPA was tasked with the responsibility of the “honest, efficient, speedy, and coordinated execution of the work relief program as a whole… in such a manner as to move from the relief rolls to work…the maximum number of persons in the shortest time possible” (United States 7). The WPA program was expanded on July 27, 1935 to include the Federal Writers Project (FWP), which would eventually employ such notable Harlem literati as Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Claude McKay. These authors, all published figures by the time they came to the FWP, helped create field guides for American cities and towns like New York City, Chicago, and Eatonville, Florida while working for FWP programs in various states. Programs like the WPA and its subsidiaries made a great deal of money available to individual states for historical research and records surveys. From its inception in 1935 until May 31, 1943, the WPA committed more than five hundred million dollars to “research and records” alone (122). These records took the form of guidebooks and pamphlets, typically accompanied by photographs. By the end of 1935, the Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Music Project (FMP), and Federal Theatre Project (FTP) were also added under the umbrella of the WPA. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), under the direction of Roy Striker, was also founded in 1935. Documentary photography produced by FSA photographers like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Marion Post was often featured in popular press magazines like Life and Look. However, years before the documentary genre exploded through a combination of government funded programs and popular press journalism, Zora Neale Hurston experimented

with the documentary mode when she published the anthropological fiction novel *Mules and Men* (1935) with Lippincott Press.

Hurston, now one of the most canonized black women writers in American literature, has been celebrated by many types of scholars including, but not limited to feminists, African American studies scholars, race theorists, modernists, literary biographers, folklorists, and anthropologists. This scholarship began with Alice Walker’s iconic “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1983) and has continued through Hazel Carby’s careful critical analysis in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), and the exhaustive archival research exemplified in Carla Kaplan’s *Zora Neale Hurston: Her Life in Letters* (2003). Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is now one of the most frequently assigned novels for undergraduate students from the African American literary canon, but critical attention to her anthropological studies such as *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) has been comparatively light. However, these very texts most clearly demonstrate a documentary mode common among African American writers. In “History, Fiction, and the Ground between: The Uses of Documentary Mode in Black Literature” (1980), Barbra Foley claims “the documentary mode has thus been employed in Afro-American literature in a variety of ways to convey different varieties of truth—whether private or public, generally representative or historically specific” (397). Looking at texts like *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), *Mumbo-Jumbo* (1972), and *Invisible Man* (1952), Foley identifies a range of ways authors position themselves in relation to documentary forms and their “shared conception of mimesis [that provides] the projection of an unreality that is nonetheless treated as if it were true” (400). Foley does not mention Hurston in her article, but in my analysis of *Mules*
and *Men*, I build upon Foley’s claim that authors use the documentary mode to arouse ‘skepticism about accepted versions of American past’ (402). Hurston is particularly skeptical about the way black rural folk, and especially women, have been marginalized by a pan-African New Negro identity, as espoused by W.E.B Du Bois in ‘The Negro Mind Reaches Out’ (1925).

Hurston’s *Mules and Men* has been recognized as the first anthropological text written by an African American woman, however, Hurston’s implicit social critique of New Negro intellectualism, demonstrated through the narrative framing of folktales, has received insufficient attention. In the tradition of Robert Hemenway, Barbara Johnson, Keith Walters, and Carla Kaplan, I argue that by recognizing the social and political critiques in Hurston’s anthropological works, we give her texts the agency they often were denied during her lifetime. Additionally, by emphasizing the modernist and documentary modes she alternatingly inhabits in *Mules and Men*, I build on Tyrus Miller’s claim that documentary and modernist aesthetics are complimentary, rather than opposed. My overall reading of Hurston’s larger body of work and socio-cultural message, is based on a historical contextualization of the artist based on her letters and prose, both published and unpublished. The social critiques Hurston makes in *Mules and Men* echo concerns about black incarceration, public portrayal of African Americans in art and culture, and black womanhood that are still being voiced through social movements like Black Lives Matter. It is important for scholars to continue examining the history of these social critiques, so we can persuade even the most skeptic individual that eliminating racism, sexism, and other ideologies based on exclusion requires the constant questioning of categories of knowledge, or belief, as possibly inscribed with bias and prejudice.
Hurston’s social criticism of New Negro intellectualism in *Mules and Men* is twofold—first, she takes issue with the essentialist New Negro, “talented-tenth” version of African American history in which *folk* is synonymous with a person lacking formal education, living in rural conditions, and pursuing a living through blue collar, manual labor. In contrast, Hurston’s definition of folk is derived from her social science background. From an anthropological standpoint, a folk is any group of people sharing any local, or specific common knowledge. In Hurston’s letters to her mentor Franz Boas as she prepared the final manuscript of *Mules and Men*, she emphasized her allegiance to an anthropological presentation of folklore. Hurston privileges local knowledge, especially historical knowledge, as essential to the category of folk. As a result, Hurston’s folk do not always share color or creed, but they do share stories of experience. Hurston also takes issue with the New Negro criteria for art that emphasized group and individual accomplishments in either ancient African art, sculpture, painting, and textiles, or the productions of her African American contemporaries like Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, or Claude McKay who wrote in classic Western genres (biography, autobiography, confessional, romance) and forms (especially poetry). Publications like *The New Negro* (1925), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), or *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912) exemplify a realist aesthetic.

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53 See Patrick B. Mullen’s, “Belief and the American Folk” (2000) for more on the definition of folk in American folklore studies, and the continued effort to move beyond of definition of folklore that is based on genre alone. Mullen explains that eighteenth century scientific rationalism tended to present folklore, and the folk, as archaic, backwards, and superstitious, in an attempt to better define “the advent of modernity” (Bauman qtd. in Mullen 120). He also identifies nineteenth and early-twentieth century paradigms of ethnographic research as essentially romantic (120-1). Hurston, a trained social scientist under the tutelage of Franz Boas, is therefore often criticized by folklorists and literary critics for being too romantic in her presentation of black American folk.

54 I discuss this letter in detail later in the chapter. See page 110.

55 In this emphasis on shared experience, I am gesturing towards a description of ‘folk’ for Hurston that goes beyond race lines, which admittedly might be imperfect. My definition of folk, as a descriptive title for a set of people sharing a common knowledge, would explain why Hurston focused her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), around a white community. Every culture has folk, and both *Seraph on the Suwanee*, and *Mules and Men* attempt to showcase the importance of local knowledge in constructing grand narratives about oneself in the present. See footnote 6 for more on folklorists and defining American folk.
and stress a social agenda of racial uplift for black men, particularly through acquisition of class or wealth.\footnote{In Alain Locke’s \textit{New Negro} (1925), there is only one non-fiction contribution by a woman, Elise Johnson McDougald. In her piece, “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” McDougald briefly acknowledges that black women are “struggling on in domestic service,” but the bulk of her address concerns how black women with the social and economic means to become educated are slowly entering the ranks of workers along whites. Her focus is on equality through acquisition and retention of middle class status specifically. This is not to say black women were not also writing about the racial progress being made, specifically through the shedding of folk connections and instead relocating (often physically) to a new class status. Nella Larsen’s \textit{Quicksand} and Jessie Fauset’s \textit{Plum Bum} are exemplary realist novels that depict these forms of racial uplift in urban, elite class settings.} Hurston mocks the superiority of black intellectualism, not to villainize DuBois, Johnson, or her patrons, but to argue that the division of the intellectual and the folk systematically disadvantages the “Negro furthest down,” particularly rural black women and men in the American South (Hurston, \textit{Dust Tracks}, 145). Therefore, the primary prong of her attack concerns the way black bodies, particularly black folk, are confined and policed in the rural American South by white institutions of racism. Particularly, Hurston identifies the workplace and white boss overseers as the mechanisms of surveillance and confinement. Purporting to give readers an anthropological account of African American folklore, instead, Hurston slowly reveals to readers that the real story of the folk, whether it manifests as a Brer Rabbit story, or a John and Old Master tale, is about oppression and confinement with very little opportunity for upward social mobility.\footnote{For a reader on the history of trickster tales, and some classic examples like ones mentioned above, see Mel Watkins \textit{On the Real Side} (1999). Watkins compares the John and Old Master tales with those folktales featured in Joel Chandler Harris’s \textit{Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings} (1881): “Like the animal stories introduced by Harris, the John and Old Master tales reflect the trickster motif. These tales never matched the popularity of the Remus tales for mainstream audience, however; the portrayal of a slave outsmarting his master was simply not acceptable to most non-blacks” (447).} This is not to say that the folk represent only one people, or one cultural type for Hurston. In her own words, “Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest” (Hurston, \textit{Mules} 2). Indeed, Hurston’s presentation of black rural folk is unique. Her rural characters are not so nihilistic as Jean Toomer’s ‘Becky’ in \textit{Cane}, or
disturbed like Jim Trueblood in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Instead, Hurston’s folk in *Mules and Men* emphasize storytelling, lying, woofing, and other forms of folk oration as generative strategies to write non-normative identity in public spaces.

**Fiction, Folklore, and Black Humor**

*Mules and Men* represents Hurston’s first full length work to draw upon her experiences both as a short story fiction writer and cultural anthropologist. For Huston, one of those fieldwork experiences included, “measuring heads in Harlem” (Kaplan Kindle loc. 11065). At the same time, Hurston had developed her fictional prose throughout the early 1920s in New York during the early days of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston’s first short-story, “Spunk” appeared in *Opportunity* and in Alain Locke’s *New Negro* in 1925. Then in 1926 she published another well received short-story, “Sweat” in the short-lived journal, *Fire!!*. From 1927 to 1930, however, Hurston was away from the urban center of the Harlem Renaissance while collecting folklore in the American South and Bahamas. From 1930 to 1935, Hurston underwent a number of personal and professional trials including her falling out with Langston Hughes over their joint collaboration *Mule Bone*, stomach problems, and the loss of Charlotte Osgood Mason’s financial support. By May of 1934, Hurston had convinced Lippincott to publish *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a southern black preacher and his family. *Mules and Men*, however, is Hurston’s first published work where she explicitly blends exploratory first person prose with descriptions from the ethnographic field work she collected from 1927-1930.

Hurston’s legacy as a pioneering anthropologist for black women is still evident today. In 2012, editor of *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*, Irma McClaurin directly addressed Hurston’s experimental crossing of genre as an inspiration to
contemporary black women anthropologists. She described Hurston as “among the first cultural anthropologists to deploy…autoethnography as a form” (McClurin 53). The style of autoethnography pairs the researcher’s exploratory first person narrative with empirical observation of a community. As a documentary mode, contemporary anthropologists describe this style as an “approach [that] challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political and socially-just and socially-conscious act….as a method autoethnography is both process and product” (emphasis mine, Ellis 273).

By using the documentary mode of autoethnography, Hurston distanced herself from the Harlem Renaissance’s emphasis on strict realism, rather than aesthetic experimentation. This allowed Hurston to express the political and social perspective of a black southern woman covertly, in the first person narrative of Mules and Men, while also constantly reassuring skeptical white readers that the text is empirical rather than experimental, informative rather than resistant, and apolitical rather than critical. These reassurances come most obviously through Hurston’s performance of the bookish, uncertain, inexperienced New Negro intellectual narrator. Richard Wright once said of Hurston, as an insult, that her characters “swing in that safe and easy orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears,” but, contrary to Wright, Hurston’s female, intellectual, independent narrator in Mules and Men is neither expected nor “safe” (Wright 23). Real physical violence, verbal violence, or stories of social violence pervade Mules and Men. And although Wright would criticize Hurston (in the

58 McClurin, in reference to the contributors for Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics, says: “None of us would have had the courage to blend genres, cross disciplinary boundaries, or engage our identities as ethnographers/scholars/public intellectuals/poets/writers and Black women in this book, were it not for the foundation laid by Zora in her ethnographies, her novels, her plays, and most significantly, in her life. The renaissance around Hurston has resulted in an unprecedented revival of her works: rereleases, new introductions to long-lost works, publication of correspondence heretofore languishing in the stacks of libraries, and analysis of her political writings” (53).
same review) for “mak[ing] the “white folks” laugh” (Wright 23), Hurston uses that laugh as a form of misdirection, or “feather-bed resistance,” to offer subversive images of rural southern violence and social unrest (Hurston, *Mules 2*). She showcases characters in *Mules and Men* who have a history of incarceration as a way to address the unequal persecution of black men by a racist judicial system, while strong female characters like Big Sweet and Hurston (as character) suggest the limited acceptable versions of black womanhood at that time.\(^{59}\)

**Performance and Parody**

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston presents herself as a bumbling, black intellectual through her interactions with friends in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida and at the subsequent social gathering. As the narrator, Hurston describes to readers, in the first person, the process of her traveling to Eatonville and gathering folklore stories from its inhabitants. In the closing paragraph of the introduction: “So I rounded Park Lake and came speeding down the straight stretch into Eatonville, the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jail-house” (4). By closing the introduction with a description that emphasizes the distance she has to travel to get to her folk, she underlines the New Negro intellectual’s distance from folk knowledge. In the often-cited *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler identifies parody and performativity as integral to the subversion of heteronormative fantasies of stable gender identities. Butler states in the chapter “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” “parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusion can be fostered” (189). *Mules and Men* is the product of an

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\(^{59}\) Hurston presents herself as an active member of this folk community. She is present as a narrator, and she interacts with the other community members, throughout the text. In the next section, you’ll see I describe a few examples of textual evidence where Hurston performs her character role as either anthropologist, or folk member.
educated black women doing the work of collecting African American folklore; work that had historically been done by white men like Joel Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880). The process of recording and reciting black folklore for white entertainment had also been fictionalized by black men like Charles Chesnutt in *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales* (1899). This is the literary historical context that gives Hurston the context for her parody. In the conclusion Butler again returns to the value of parody: “there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects” (199). Hurston demonstrates this same technique of parody, not only to subvert assumptions about gender identity, but also to invite readers to question “authentic,” “original” or “real” presentations of African Americans, particularly those offered by elite intellectuals who saw folk culture as marginal. She provides readers with an exemplary contrast between the New Negro intellectual narrator and the community she visits almost immediately in *Mules and Men*.

Upon arriving in town Hurston is invited to a toe-party in Wood Bridge later that night; Hurston is invited to provide transportation to the party, but she responds with hesitation: “‘But, everybody will be here lookin’ for me. They’ll think Ah’m crazy—tellin’ them to come and then getting’ out and goin’ to Wood Bridge myself. But I certainly would like to go to that toe-party’” (Hurston 9). Calvin Daniels and James Moseley want Zora to drive them to Wood Bridge immediately. In the end, Hurston convinces Calvin to tell one of his tales first, and then she suggests they will all go to Wood Bridge, if no one shows up at Ellis’ house. To this Calvin retorts, “‘Aw, most of ‘em ain’t commin’ nohow. They all ‘bout goin’ to Wood Bridge, too’” (9). This interaction portrays Hurston as a stiff, intellectual outsider in three ways. She seems
inexperienced in her sense of where to gather material, bookish in her instance that the ‘work’ of collecting folklore must be done before celebrating, and self-important in her insistence that the folk come to her in order to share their stories. When Hurston finally arrives at the party she continues to perform as intellectual outsider, ignorant to local customs: “‘Say, what is this toe-party business?’ I asked one of the girls. ‘Good gracious, Zora! Ain’t you never been to a toe-party before?’ ‘Nope. They don’t have ‘em up North where Ah been and Ah just got back today’” (14). Hurston clearly makes the connection between her lack of folk knowledge and her recent occupation in the North, which included being educated in a northern university. Book knowledge, however, does not do Hurston much good, and she comes off as an intellectual who is foolishly invested with a sense of superiority. Hurston presents herself as furthest removed from her folk knowledge at this point in the narrative, and continues to contrast herself with the folk and their customs, sometimes to her detriment. For example, when she is prompted to try a sip of “coon dick” she remarks, “The raw likker known locally as coon dick was too much. The minute it touched my lips, the top of my head flew off” (16). Hurston had personal connections to Eatonville from her childhood; word of her impending arrival and research project reaches the town before she did, so the cost of her fumbling is low. She continues to travel and collect folklore, and although not everyone in the community likes her, she does collect some folktales and observe the “toe-party” custom. However, as the narrative moves to other locales, Hurston’s parody performance of a New Negro intellectual is used to incite scenes of crisis between the community she studies, and the mechanisms of inscription that conscribe black folk in the rural South. In other words, Hurston’s parody of the New Negro womanhood in the rural American South contrasts against another version of womanhood exemplified in the character Big Sweet. Big Sweet holds one type of local, community knowledge that allows her to survive, even thrive,
in the local work camp. Meanwhile, Hurston’s book learning connects her to other institutions of
power and money, which translates into monetary funding and mobility—both social and
geographic.

**Contemporary Critical Readings of Hurston’s Folk**

Hurston’s narrative reads as the *product* of her anthropological study of rural, southern
folk. At the same time, the narrative reveals the *process* of Hurston unlearning academic
knowledge, as symbolized by her submersion, sometimes literally, into African American folk
cultural practices when she travels to New Orleans later in the novel. Despite Hurston’s
extensive anthropological research in Haiti and the American South, particularly in *Mules and
Men*, literary critics, like Hazel Carby continue to question Hurston’s commitment to depicting
real conditions of inequality and hardship in black life.

In Hazel Carby’s chapter “The Quicksands of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural
Politics,” she describes Hurston’s “ahistorical literary convention” of the folk in comparison to
Nella Larson’s *Quicksand* (164). Carby argues that “Hurston…epitomized the intellectual who
represented ‘the people’ through a reconstruction of ‘the folk’ and avoided the class
confrontation of the Northern cities” (166). In *Mules and Men*, Hurston presents herself as the
northern educated New Negro, sent out to collect folklore for scientific purposes, but she also
mocks this persona throughout the first half of the book. Carby mistakes Hurston’s performance

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60 In the second half of *Mules and Men*, called “Hoodoo,” Hurston the narrator travels to New Orleans and
apprentices with a number of people she calls “hoodoo doctors” (Hurston 213). Hurston clarifies that “Hoodoo, or
Voodoo, as pronounced by whites” is a combination of Christianity and pagan belief systems (213). Hurston
describes her observations of, and participation in, a number of Voodoo traditions while she studies with Voodoo
practitioners. Some of these rites, including the “Pea Vine Candle Drill,” required Hurston to fast and “remain five
days without sexual intercourse” as part of her “initiation” into the Voodoo community (215).
of the New Negro intellectual as genuine rather than subversive and critical. Hurston also snubs both of her closest white benefactors in the introduction of *Mules and Men*—Franz Boas and Charlotte Osgood Mason. Again, her rhetorical resistance to these figures, which frames the larger narrative of the work, is not outwardly hostile. She praises Mason as “The world’s most gallant woman,” but, by even mentioning Osgood’s name in print, Hurston transgresses one of Godmother’s most basic rules (Hurston 4). Carby understands Hurston’s invocation of these figures simply as an attempt to align herself with the northern intellectual. On the contrary, I believe she parades thees white patron in front of her readers to create a moment of contrast between herself and these patrons. Further, Carby claims that Hurston avoided representing the class division in northern cities by setting her novels in the rural South. This supposes that class difference only occurred in northern cities, and not the rural American South. The markers of difference which Hurston the narrator highlights are almost always class-based differences. Her “gray Chevrolets” and a “$12.74 dress from Macy’s” make her “set…aside as different” from the communities she attempts to study (61). The material possessions she displayed, like the Chevy and her dress from Macy’s, are markers of class difference that the folk interpret with suspicion. Although the differences between intellectual knowledge and folk wisdom are often presented to the reader in terms of northern versus southern, urban versus rural, these are not the terms of difference that Hurston’s folk seem to recognize. Hurston draws attention to class difference in Polk County despite setting *Mules and Men* in a southern location. She does this by performing the persona of the black, northern intellectual even as she criticizes the New Negro’s distance

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61 See Kaplan’s, *Miss Anne* (xx) for more on how white women patrons of black artists preferred to be anonymous and distant from the public eye, and how Hurston did not abide by Osgood’s request to remain anonymous.
from folk knowledge. She brings the North to the South, thereby underlining the limited social mobility of those African American laborers who live outside urban centers of commerce.

Carby does identify the difficulty of describing the black experience in the 1920s and into the 1930s: “After World War I and the migration, the role of [black] intellectuals became problematic in two ways: there was no longer a unitary ‘people’ who could be represented, and the variety of intellectual practice—literary, political, and cultural—became increasingly separated” (Carby 165). In an effort to direct the attention of Afro-American and cultural critics to the work of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, Carby casts Hurston as a failed New Negro intellectual who does not reach the same folk she depicts in her fiction and non-fiction because her depictions are too romanticized. Instead, Carby focuses on Larsen’s ability to present “an alienated heroine” through the character of Helga in *Quicksand* (168).

This presentation of Hurston is particularly problematic when we consider the celebration of difference and of locality throughout *Mules and Men*. Through the narrative frame of *Mules and Men*, Hurston parodies the New Negro woman scholar who must negotiate her outsider status as a result of her class and education. Simultaneously, the larger framing of the text, through the “Introduction” by Hurston and the “Preface” by Franz Boas, suggests that Hurston felt like she was estranged from the world of the “talented tenth,” but trying to perform the cultural anthropological training she received at Columbia and Barnard. Hurston plays the bumbling anthropologist to critique New Negro distance from folk knowledge, but she does not simply hold up the folk as “bearers of Afro-American history and preservers of Afro-American culture” (Carby 174). Rather, her depiction of the folk community’s interaction with white mechanisms of surveillance, and scrutiny from black intellectuals like herself, problematizes and
questions any essentialist depiction of the “bearers of Afro-American history,” aka the folk of Polk County. By looking at Hurston’s correspondence in letters, we can see her self-conscious engagement with auto-ethnography and how her work might be received by other cultural anthropologists like her mentor Franz Boas, as well as her publisher Lippincott.

Hurston wrote to Franz Boas in August of 1934 that she was “full of tremors” because she feared he would not write an introduction to *Mules and Men*, because it has “unscientific matter” that Lippincott encouraged her to include, making the text “a very readable book that the average reader can understand” (Kaplan). Later in this letter, Hurston references the “between story conversation” in a seemingly negative tone, but she also reminds Boas that her prose is superior to the “preposterous stuff put out by various persons on various folk-subjects” (Kaplan). Hurston could be referring to any number of questionable anthropological studies carried out by white scientists who sometimes obtained their source material by deceiving the local population or those who reinforced theories of white supremacy. Hurston saw *Mules and Men* as her opportunity to do the double work of writing a work of cultural anthropology and critiquing the grand historical narrative offered by race leaders like Du Bois and Locke. Hurston’s letter to Boas further supports my claim that Hurston was aware of the literary historical context in which *Mules and Men* would function, and thus, offers a parodic critique of this context via the narrative framing of her anthropological field work. Further, the prose of *Mules and Men*

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62 Note here that “average” reads as “white”
64 In Robert Hemenway’s account of Hurston in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977), he recounts that Hurston had a troubled relationship with a co-worker while traveling to collect material for The Florida Negro project, funded by the Florida Federal Writers’ Project in 1938: “[Zora] had grown to dislike [Mary Elizabeth] Barnicle, a college professor from New York University, and their constant squabbling had come to a head over the woman’s desire to photograph an Eatonville lad eating watermelon. Zora objected and elected to stay in Florida to do her own work” (Hemenway 212).
provides numerous examples of Hurston’s tongue-and-cheek sense of the New Negro intellectual’s responsibility towards racial uplift.

When Hurston arrives in “the famed” Polk County, the differences between the folk and Hurston’s outsider persona become greater, and Hurston begins to document the social inequality of the rural South. The narrator despairs that “when I tried to be friendly there was a noticeable disposition to fend me off... here I was figuratively starving to death in the midst of plenty” (60). Hurston does eventually make a friend, and then relates a tale about a woman who “had killed five [men]... [so] the sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely [because] Negro women are punished in these parts for killing men, but only if they exceed the quota” (60). On one level, this seems like a simple, if darkly humorous observation. Hurston seems to flippantly excuse spousal violence and the laxity of law enforcement. In essence, she presents an uncivilized woman. Readers both black and white would have recognized this woman as a mammy stereotype who was a “derisive, domineering,” and shrewd (Watkins 169). Such a character was highly popularized by Hollywood films such as Judge Priest (1934), where “Hattie McDaniel offers a forceful interpretation of the hot-tempered emasculating female opposite Stepin Fetchit” (Watkins 169). Read another way, however, Hurston is acknowledging an absence of black men in southern society. For reasons other than migration to the Northern urban centers, Hurston highlights the absent nuclear family, and the cyclical violence this absence enables. From 1910 to 1920, more than eleven hundred African-Americans were lynched in southern and border states, with most being unjustly accused black men supposedly raping white women (Bakersville, sec. ‘Push Pull’). By invoking the mammy stereotype, Hurston makes readers doubt the validity of that image, since Hurston has also presented herself inauthentically
as a bumbling, New Negro intellectual. Hurston therefore critiques the limited versions of black womanhood to draw attention to the larger problem of violence, both actual physical violence and the threat of violence, as projected into black communities by white anxieties concerning the social, political and cultural organization of African Americans.65

Hurston’s presence immediately elicits anxiety from the crowd at a Pine Mill party: “Not exactly a hush fell about the fire, but a lull came. I stood there awkwardly, knowing that the too-ready laughter and aimless talk was a window-dressing for my benefit” (62). Hurston is the outsider, ousted by her expensive Northern dress and fancy car, so she needs to perform some act to be recognized as something other than an implement of surveillance. Hurston, the narrator, notes that for the “brother in black [a] laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, anger, grief, bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple emotion, or any other of the known or undefined emotions” (62). This phrase echoes Hurston’s claim in “Folklore and Music” (1938), that in African American culture everything “is baptized in laughter” (363). She wrote this unpublished piece three years after Mules and Men for The Florida Negro Project, under the FWP, and it provides important insight into Hurston’s use of parody and performance in Mules and Men. In this phrase from “Folklore and Music,” Hurston describes the folk aesthetic of humor as a way to make a social critique at the expense of oneself. Hurston must perform the very folk humor she critiques and allows others to laugh at her economic class and gender before she is allowed to witness their own folk performances.

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65 For a detailed, historical discussion of African American stereotypes within black entertainment and African American comedy, see Mel Watkin’s On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock (1994).
To demonstrate this self-deprecating humor, Hurston describes her encounter between herself and a local man named Mr. Pitts. Hurston asks Mr. Pitts, “Mr. Pitts, are you havin’ a good time?” and he responds by putting his voice “in a prim falsetto” and stating “Yes, Ma’am. See, dat’s de way tuh talk tuh you” (64). The narrator tells us, “My laughing acceptance of Pitt’s woofing put everyone at his ease,” but she does not give the reader an understanding of why it works (65). Mr. Pitt’s woofing story makes him look generous, sensitive, subservient and considerate towards Hurston, an outsider to his community. At the same time, it makes her look demanding, intolerant, self-important, and, most importantly, transparent. Mr. Pitts is mocking her as a way to celebrate their mutual cultural plurality, not duality. He could read her, and manipulate her question into a joke at her expense, in a way she could not, or would not, manipulate him into yielding his folktales for her anthropological research. In this exact same way, Hurston parodies the New Negro through her performance of narrative outsider. She does not make the New Negro into a villain, or a stock character, rather, she positions herself as a chameleon of cultures and class; she is a Northern voyeur when she travels through the South and a folk ambassador inside the New Negro social circles of New York. This careful narrative positioning, in the body text of *Mules and Men* and the introduction, serves to question the use of race, gender or class identities as a basis for larger social and political change; such organizations are inherently repressive for minority and marginal communities who cannot be represented by any one mainstream identity group. Through the use of themes like folk, transition, identity, womanhood, and marginality, Hurston offers a particularly hopeful vision of how cultural productions, like folk stories, help individuals celebrate the identity categories of gender, race, and class as unstable and fluid.
My larger project compares these different methods of identity articulation during the 1930s through the 1940s in America as presented by authors who blended documentary realist and modernist aesthetics. By reading select photobooks and novels in the historical context of emerging racial identity debates in American, and simultaneous debates about labor and class, my project attempts to identify a range of influences—social, political, economic, and ideological—that encouraged artists to produce aesthetically hybrid texts. My New Historical methodological approach requires that I read across lines of genre, and high and low cultural lines of deviation, to uncover the instability of the term modernism. Only by calling into question the meaning of this term can we hope to unpack essentialist perceptions of race and gender which were historically prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s.

Narratively, Hurston focuses on characters who have been classified as marginal through their interactions with the law and other institutions of racism. She recognizes the difficulty she has being accepted by the folk of Polk County, whom she does not know personally. Hurston makes it clear that the local communities read a “prosperous” social status as synonymous with surveillance apparatus of hostile social institutions, like Jim Crow laws. Hurston relates that, “They all thought I must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind…And since most of them were fugitives from justice or had done plenty time, a detective was just the last thing they felt they needed on that “job” (61). Read one way, Hurston is casually suggesting that most black, rural Southerners are criminals who belong in jail. Read as a documentation of folk experience in the late 1920s, it is clear that Hurston is attempting to acknowledge the unequal persecution of blacks in the American south, which resulted in closed, suspicious black
communities—like the ones documented by Hurston in Polk County. The stories Hurston provides are therefore both the product and process of folk experience, in that they describe the poverty and uncertainly of rural black life, while also focusing on Hurston’s negotiation of her dual identity as both a rural southern native and ambassador from the “talented tenth” (Hemenway 37-38).

**Behind the Curtain**

In the Polk County section of *Mules and Men*, social unrest is also documented in the confrontational showdown between Big Sweet and Ella Wall, and then again with the reoccurring figure of the Foreman and the Overseer. Periodically throughout the early narrative, the Foreman appears briefly, which warrants Hurston’s companions to share tales about how "mean" their former bosses were. When the Foremen sends Hurston’s friends to the sawmill to see if they could use help, Hand Pitts comments “‘Ah done seen meaner men than him,’” which leads into a story about black men who are mistreated by a “road boss” on the “East Coast,” followed by two “Ole Massa” and John tales (69). At the end of the tales “Everyone [started] laughing with their mouths wide open,” and Hurston observes that, “If the foreman had come along right then he would have been good and mad because he could tell their minds were not on work” (72). The way this particular lying session is framed by the Foreman’s appearance and an invocation of his presence at the end suggests that the reader is getting

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66 Race scholars like Houston Baker Jr. have noted that the threat of racial violence and the institutionalization of racism through political, social, and cultural spaces in the American south constituted a particular “tight space” for African Americans. See Baker Jr.’s *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/ Re-Reading Booker T* (2001). 67 The Foreman and the Overseer are never given proper names in the text, whereas most of the folk Hurston encounters are given full first and last names, if not also a suffix. This unnaming puts white bodies under erasure and vividly highlights the individuality of black community members. For white characters, their job title is their persona, and they are purposely depicted as stock characters.
beneath the “feather bed resistance” these workers show their white boss. Through telling folktales, the workers affirm their poor treatment both in the past and in the present. Their stories are mostly John tales, set in slavery times, but the first tale is very firmly set in the real location of “Middle Georgy” (middle Georgia) (69). This exchange of tales foreshadows the real confrontation between Big Sweet and the Overseer in chapter nine. Most notably, this verbal exchange by a group of men testifying to their physical abuse by white bosses produces a cathartic reaction: laughter. This is again similar to the later scene between the Overseer and Big Sweet in which she uses verbal acuity and threats of violence to make her more powerful opponent back down from a physical confrontation.

The showdown between the Ella Wall and Big Sweet is interrupted by “the only thing” that could stop the two women from brawling over the affection of Joe Willard (151). Big Sweet and Ella Wall are poised to start a knife fight in the jook, when the Overseer walks in. The Overseer is portrayed as always watching the folk discreetly, but his effectiveness in bossing Big Sweet is slight. When he demands “‘Gimme that knife you got dere, Big Sweet,’” she quickly replies “‘Naw, suh! Nobody gits mah knife. Ah bought it for dat storm-buzzard over dere and Ah means tuh use it on her, too. As long as uh mule go bareheaded she better not part her lips tuh me. Do Ah’ll kill her, law or no law. Don’t you touch me, white folks!’” (second emphasis mine 152). The Overseer abandons his efforts to disarm Big Sweet and instead simply warns her, “‘Now you behave yo’self, Big Sweet. Ah don’t wanna hafta jail yuh’” (152). With Big Sweet’s victory, she gets to go home with Joe Willard, plus the added recognition that “[She] made dat cracker stand off” (152). In this sense, Hurston might suggest that the verbal threat of violence in the folk community is generative, whereas the physical application of violence as represented
through the Overseer’s “.45” is not (152). In the eyes of her folk, Big Sweets’ talking defeats Ella Wall, and disbands the Overseer from the jook. Hurston suggests that for black women, “Her tongue is all de weapon she got” or needs (30). The verbal confrontation between the women is generative because now the story of Big Sweet and Ella Wall continues on—more verbal play ensues later in the story. The verbal exchanged is silenced by the Overseer’s threat of physical violence with a gun, which is impersonal and imprecise compared to Big Sweet’s knife. To be effective, Big Sweet would require close proximity and purposeful effort to inflict harm on a body; instead, she keeps her distance from Ella and aims her insults expertly. The wit and verbal acuity demonstrated in these confrontations is connected to physical desire—the desire both women have for Joe Williard—but also connected to the ego or ambition each woman has in the local community of the Pine Mill. This confrontation also provides the occasion for more tales about black abuse by white law enforcement, as told by Box-Car. Hurston comments that Box-Car looks “‘like a good boy, but a poor boy,’” and inquires why he has been “‘working on de gang’” (153). The story he tells highlights both the abuse of black, southern men by whites in authority, and Box-Car’s sense of captivity in the south:

Oh, dey put me under arrest one day for vacancy in Bartow. When de judge found out Ah had a job of work. He took and searched me and when he found out Ah had a deck of cards on me, he charged me wid totin’ concealed cards, and attempt to gamble, and gimme three months. Then dey made out another charge ‘ginst me. ‘Cused me of highway shufflin’, and attempt to gamble. You know dese white folks sho hates tuh turn a nigger loose, if ever dey git dey hands on ‘im. And dis
very quarters boss was Cap’n on de gang where Ah wuz. Me and him ain’t never
gointer set hawses. (Hurston 153-54)

Clearly, Box-Car’s tale describes a black man’s experience of being profiled by “white folks” in law enforcement. Even after he has served time, people who represent that white authority and surveillance continue to keep watch over him. The theme of black men being wrongly imprisoned, and sentenced to work gangs also appears again in “The Florida Negro” (1938) when she compares Daddy Mention to the “John” character for present day black men in prison. In the above excerpt, Box Car uses a malapropism when he says “vacancy” instead of “vagrancy.” Malapropisms were a common comedic technique in vaudeville, on the minstrel stage, and in film during the 1920s. Hurston’s use of this technique might have offended upper class black audiences, while appealing to white audiences because the comedic technique of malapropisms was so heavily used on the vaudeville stage, where African American actors and actresses were only allowed to perform as coons, Mammies, Uncle Toms, dandies, or bucks. However, a modernist reading of language and authorial self-reflexivity presents *Mules and Men* as Hurston’s attempt to show how language generates new meanings for old words. Hurston overlaps the meaning of vagrancy and to equate continual displacement with emptiness. Interpreted this way, Box Car’s lexical slip becomes a reaffirmation of African American’s verbal acuity and wit. However, in light of the larger cultural context of black representation in the 1930s, particularly the popularity of vaudeville and minstrels for both white and black
audiences, many reviewers interpreted Hurston’s *Mules and Men* as a tale about black folk for the amusement or benefit of white readers.⁶⁸

**Hurston as Political Intellectual**

The close of the roaring twenties also heralded a dimming of the euphoric spirit that drove the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1930s, the honeymoon between the white patrons and black urban artists was over. The New York stock market crash of 1929 affected the ability of even the wealthiest patrons to support their favorite artists indefinitely. Hurston’s first literary biographer Robert Hemenway claims that when Hurston stopped receiving support from Charlotte Osgood Mason, she “was troubled at suddenly being thrown out from under the Mason umbrella” (161). However, Carla Kaplan’s account of Mason’s relationship with this “god child” describes a much more long-standing, precarious relationship. Kaplan, in her new work *Miss Thomas Caldecot Chubb’s* March review of *Mules and Men* in 1936 in *North American Review* is a notable example for its sense of Hurston’s audience and the author’s easy dismissal of any “ugliness” depicted by the text (Chubb 2). Chubb identifies possible readers for *Mules and Men* as the “southern raconteur,” the “student of folklore,” “[and] he who loves negroes, is amused by him, or burns for his wrongs, or thinks he ought to know his place”(1). All the listed readers are imagined as white. The scientific value of Hurston’s anthropological work only “purports to be sociological according to Chubb, but thankfully this doesn’t “spoil it” for white readers (1). Chubb’s review is overwhelmingly positive, but also derivative of Hurston’s work at every turn. For example, Chubb directs readers to a particular story Hurston retells in *Mules and Men*. The story is the answer to Jim Allen’s attempt to explain the saying “no man kin tell what’s gointer happen when he gits mixed up wid a woman or set straddle of a cow” (Hurston 125). Only, Chubb does not provide any context for the tale except that it is about a “‘book-learnt’ son [who] tie[s] his father to the back of a kicking heifer, to take the hump out of her back” (Chubb 2). Chubb mostly summarizes the tale, and only about 80 words from Hurston’s text are reproduced for the reader. The result is a reading of African American folklore that misses “de inside meanin’ of words” (Hurston 125). Jim Allen frames the cow story by saying folklore stories “all got a hidden meanin’, just like de Bible. Everyone can’t understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained” (125). This framing determines the reader’s focus on the story. Yes, the son who went to college is stumped by the kicking cow, and his father is the butt of some physical comedy, but the take away message is still constructive. The framing allows readers to deduce a moral lesson—life’s most basic challenges are always the most trying, despite one’s intellectualism. Or, you can’t outthink nature—the nature of a kicking cow, or the nature of man and woman. Chubb pilfers Hurston’s serious work of documenting folktale and folk culture, and instead he repurposes the humorous tale for easy white entertainment. It is the difficulty of the text as far as its use of mixed genre and aesthetics, and the difficulty of Hurston’s corrective depiction of African American folk, that causes this misreading.

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⁶⁸ Thomas Caldecot Chubb’s March review of *Mules and Men* in 1936 in *North American Review* is a notable example for its sense of Hurston’s audience and the author’s easy dismissal of any “ugliness” depicted by the text (Chubb 2). Chubb identifies possible readers for *Mules and Men* as the “southern raconteur,” the “student of folklore,” “[and] he who loves negroes, is amused by him, or burns for his wrongs, or thinks he ought to know his place”(1). All the listed readers are imagined as white. The scientific value of Hurston’s anthropological work only “purports to be sociological according to Chubb, but thankfully this doesn’t “spoil it” for white readers (1). Chubb’s review is overwhelmingly positive, but also derivative of Hurston’s work at every turn. For example, Chubb directs readers to a particular story Hurston retells in *Mules and Men*. The story is the answer to Jim Allen’s attempt to explain the saying “no man kin tell what’s gointer happen when he gits mixed up wid a woman or set straddle of a cow” (Hurston 125). Only, Chubb does not provide any context for the tale except that it is about a “‘book-learnt’ son [who] tie[s] his father to the back of a kicking heifer, to take the hump out of her back” (Chubb 2). Chubb mostly summarizes the tale, and only about 80 words from Hurston’s text are reproduced for the reader. The result is a reading of African American folklore that misses “de inside meanin’ of words” (Hurston 125). Jim Allen frames the cow story by saying folklore stories “all got a hidden meanin’, just like de Bible. Everyone can’t understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained” (125). This framing determines the reader’s focus on the story. Yes, the son who went to college is stumped by the kicking cow, and his father is the butt of some physical comedy, but the take away message is still constructive. The framing allows readers to deduce a moral lesson—life’s most basic challenges are always the most trying, despite one’s intellectualism. Or, you can’t outthink nature—the nature of a kicking cow, or the nature of man and woman. Chubb pilfers Hurston’s serious work of documenting folktale and folk culture, and instead he repurposes the humorous tale for easy white entertainment. It is the difficulty of the text as far as its use of mixed genre and aesthetics, and the difficulty of Hurston’s corrective depiction of African American folk, that causes this misreading.
Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Harlem Renaissance (2013), suggests that Hurston often resented the control Mason exercised over her, especially when it came to her creative activities. Certainly, given Hurston’s gumption and charm, it is hard to imagine the severance of her contact with Mason on March 31, 1931 was anything less than a mutual relief for both parties. Hurston might have seen *Mules and Men* as the first project where she could speak back to the many years she spent under Mason’s and Boas’s careful support and control. Throughout the 1930s other black intellectuals, like Richard Wright, also articulated their need for separation from wealthy white patrons by publishing more political and social critiques in many genres (nonfiction, fiction, photobook). Wright published “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) and Hurston published “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1940), both criticizing the lack of literature depicting “the internal life of educated minorities” (Hurston, 951). By examining how the narrative frame in *Mules and Men* presents moments of social critique (targeting white authority and New Negro intellects), my reading of *Mules and Men* demonstrates how Hurston is closer to Richard Wright as a political intellectual in her resistance to white patronage and paternalism. From a literary historical perspective, Hurston’s social realism was less obvert, perhaps because she was more interested in the blending of formal genes. Hurston demonstrates a degree of social realism in *Mules and Men*, but pairs it with a modernist emphasis on self-reflexivity through the narrative framing. The weak reading of *Mules and Men* by 1930’s critics like Thomas Caldecot Chubb demonstrates the uncertainty readers experienced when encountering a text that so thoroughly blurred the lines of genre. This same critical reading of Hurston has persisted in the way literary critics from the 1990s, like Carby, who doubt Hurston’s commitment to social criticism through literature.
In “The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston,” Andrew Delbanco provides an account of how Hurston’s contemporaneous readers, particularly Wright, “missed the essence of [Hurston’s] vision, which was ‘documentary’ and realistic from the point of view of a black woman” (Delbanco 107). He claims that “as long as Hurston remains susceptible to what are essentially political judgments…her literary fortunes will continue to fluctuate with the temper of the times” (107). To illustrate this point, he focuses on Hazel Carby’s claim that Hurston’s romantic presentation of the folk assures white readers that black folk really are happy (107). Delbanco dismisses Carby’s accusation of Hurston playing to white expectations by saying that “her language” is what makes her works recognizable as “American classics” (108). I agree with Delbanco that Hurston’s work should not be judged by the conservative tone of her political nonfiction of the 1940s and 1950s, and my reading of *Mules and Men* likewise focuses on her language, particularly her use of dialect and layered dialogs. However, I do not support his specific claim that “Hurston was most compelling when she wrote about the plight of a black woman as the object of sexual exploitation by white man” (107). This is one aspect of Hurston’s literature that feminist theory has emphasized, but it is not her great redemption in *Mules and Men*. Rather, I want to highlight how Hurston criticized the institutionalization of racial discrimination and essentialism common in America despite her heavy use of folktales, which admittedly provides few explicit condemnations of white authority or racism in America. Hurston is clearly interested in portraying the complex, shifting relationships between members of a black rural community, but, in doing so, she also identifies how white patriarchal racist thinking continues to control back communities.
Hurston is a necessary character in the narrative—she offers herself, the trained academic, as a keeper of folktales when she says in the first chapter of *Mules and Men*, “[old-time tales] …are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late…Before everybody forgets all of em’” (Hurston 8). One of the folk, George Thomas, assures Hurston “No danger of that. That’s all some people is good for—set ‘round and lie and murder groceries” (8). Hurston, as anthropological scholar, has a sense of how folktales should be preserved and described through factual documentation. George’s description of the same process, the proliferation of folk culture, is based on an assessment of human nature, which gives the factual documentation meaning. In this exchange, we see Hurston negotiating a complex, interdependent relationship between the black intellectual and the folk that suggests both types of knowledge—knowledge of process and product—are imperative to meaning making.69

Authors like Hurston and Claude McKay feared the pilfering of African American culture, especially folk stories, through popular white entertainment mediums like the minstrel stage, vaudeville, and film. In “Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy,*” Jay Melching’s emphasis on the failure of folklore in intercultural settings indirectly supports my reading of folklore in *Mules and Men* as a way to emphasize difference. For Hurston, and in McKay’s *Banjo*, the differences (racial, socio-economic, and gender) between speakers and audience members creates a space of silence, or disconnect, between language and meaning; not

69 Through Carby’s focus on texts that are urban and focused on issues of class, sexuality, and gender, she claims to be correcting the tendency of literary historians to present the Harlem Renaissance as homogenously concerned with only race. She claims that “to a large extent” the Harlem Renaissance is a creation of literary historians, although she doesn’t develop this claim further in *Reconstructing Womanhood*. I agree with Carby that a presentation of the Harlem Renaissance as a literary canon with its primary concern being race, or “the race problem” flattens the great range of themes, aesthetic techniques, and special interests that artists championed during the first half of the twentieth century. However, since Carby is not doing a thematic reading, but a feminist reading, I think she too readily accepts “the folk” Hurston presents as quaint and idealized.
all listeners arrive at the same meaning upon hearing the same story. In contemporaneous review of *Mules and Men* (in journals with mostly white readership), some of the tales are reprinted incompletely. Some reviews, like that of H.I. Brock published in the New York *Times*, simply dismissed Hurston’s writing as simplistic or novice, where others ironically attempt to explain the humor of the tale, only to misidentify the punchline. In this space of disconnect, according to Melching, Wright locates the possibility for brutality, Jim Crow, and social death. In this same space, Hurston locates a means of protecting, even preserving, autonomy for African American folklore inside the wider field of American literature. In this sense, Hurston’s project is greatly informed by the hopes that drove the Harlem Renaissance; that if African Americans made great contributions to American culture and art, they would be recognized for their humanity and right to equality.

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70 H.I. Brock’s review in the New York *Times* similarly accepts Hurston’s folktales, but dismisses the frame, or context, of these tales. Brock identifies Hurston’s return to the South, and her attempts to document voodoo religious practices, as a “very curious personal adventure” (4). In the last sentence of the review, however, he clearly disavows any serious interest in a “personal” story about an educated black woman: “That adventure, however, carries to this reviewer no such conviction of solid interest and value as the collection of competitive ‘lies’ from the treasury of Afro-American folklore” (4). Meanwhile, reviewers of *Mules and Men* in historically black newspapers also take Hurston’s “volume of Negro folklore” at face value (Moon 9). Henry Lee Moon’s review in the New York *Amsterdam News* notes that Hurston “makes no attempt to analyze these stories scientifically. She merely presents them for what they are: highly entertaining tales of an unsophisticated people” (9). This author, like the two previous reviewers, also misread Hurston’s depiction of the folk as simplistic. Moon’s review of Hurston is offered in tandem with a review of W.E.B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction*, which the author praises for its “scholarship” (9). He also acknowledges that “Dr. DuBois’ interpretation of the events of that period is not warranted by the facts which he himself presented” (9). These two comments, about “unsophisticated people” and his criticism of DuBois’ interpretation of reconstruction, suggest the reviewer is unsatisfied with depictions of the South that downplay the abhorrent social conditions there for African Americans.

71 In the Forward to *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke explains the idea that African American cultural productions are essential to the continued development of a unique “Negro-American culture” (xxvi). Locke identifies new uniquely American cultural productions as a goal common to both whites and blacks: “America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting” (xxvi).
Towards Documentary Modernism

While considering Richard Wright’s contribution to social realist aesthetic in *Black Boy*, Jay Melching provides an interesting question for those who defend the ability of folklore to articulate the nature of minority representation in a hostile, intercultural setting: “What does the folklorist find in looking at a race riot…?” (291). Admittedly, *Mules and Men* does not do a very good job of answering Melching’s query concerning folklorists and race riots. *Mules and Men* is more interested in the social, political, religious, and economical differences inside the black community, and celebrating these differences. At the same time, my reading also proves that Hurston is unable, and unwilling, to obscure how white authority frames, or conscribes, social conditions in the black community. Hurston’s larger canon of work does provide more explicit examples of using the documentary mode to voice intellectual critique, like the piece entitled “The Ocoee Riots” (1938). Written for the Florida Federal Writers Project, but unpublished, Hurston provides an account of an event that took place in Ocoee, Florida on November 2, 1920—Election Day in the presidential race between Warren G. Harding and James M. Cox. She begins the account by stating the full date and immediately citing “witnesses both white and Negro” (Hurston 897). Her retelling of this historical event, although making use of journalistic language, is not free from dramatic, emotional flourish:

Terrible rumors were about. Two of the three churches had been burned. The whole Negro settlement was being assaulted. It was cried that Langmaid, a Negro carpenter, had been beaten and castrated…At any rate, no Negro except July Perry had maintained his former address. So night dusted down on Ocoee, with the mobs seeking blood and ashes and July Perry standing his lone watch over his
rights to life and property…It was around dawn when [the mob] found him weak and helpless in his hiding place and he was removed to the jail in Orlando. It was after sun-up when the mob stormed the jail and dragged him out and tied him to the back of a car and killed him and left his body swinging to a telephone post beside the highway. That was the end of what happened in Ocoee on Election Day, 1920. (899, 901)

Hurston focuses on violent, gruesomely physical confrontations between whites and blacks as a result of “rumor,” or indirect conversation. There are many moments in the report, however, when we hear Hurston speculate what might have happened if there had been an exchange of words between the white mob and July Perry: “Perhaps if the mob had not been so sure that Mose was there, that it was unnecessary to ask, all might have been different. They might have called out to [July Perry] and he might have assured them by word of mouth or invited them in to see for themselves” (900). Even in this retelling of a historical event that ends in obvious tragedy and loss of life, Hurston asks that readers to rethink the possibilities of how interracial relations might work without resorting to physical violence, turning instead to the generative power of speaking, listening, and the telling of stories. She questions the inevitability of violent confrontation between white and black communities, even after it is historical fact. However, she does this without dismissing the sacrifice of those who have died as a result of, as she suggests, a lack of understanding on the part of both communities. July Perry does not know the mob is actually after Mose Norman, and the mob does not know Mose Norman is not at Perry’s house.
For those like Carby who criticize Hurston for romanticizing the American south, this account is a clear example to the contrary. In an answer to Melching’s question, a folklorist sees the failure of language and communication when she looks at a race riot, and the possibility that through an *oral, individual* exchange of knowledge physical violence might be avoided. She does not see the inevitability of race or class violence as a way to correct social injustice in the south. This is logical given Hurston’s celebration of the differences between and among the folk (including the white folk) that she studied. In many ways, her vision of how white and black communities might share their seemingly conflicting objectives and knowledge bases to produce understanding, mimics her use of documentary and performative modes to produce meaning in *Mules and Men*. My reading of *Mules and Men*, therefore builds upon Tyrus Miller’s claim that the aesthetics of the documentary genre—with an emphasis on time, progression, factuality, and empiricism—and modernist aesthetic genre—with an emphasis on difficulty, self-reflexivity, and alienation—are complementary rather than contrary (Miller 227). It also answers Barbra Foley’s call-to-action that scholars turn more often to Afro-American literature as a “stimulating testing ground for some of [literary study’s] most crucial theoretical questions” (Foley 402). By suggesting aesthetic modes such as modernism were paired with other aesthetic modes, like the documentary, I call into question the distinction between these aesthetic techniques as the basis for the creation of literary historical canon. My larger project continues to describe a modernist era that was characterized by aesthetic blending rather than high modernist essentialism as a way to articulate social questions about gender roles and racial identity. By looking at texts as contested sites of meaning, offering various accounts of labor, blackness, and womanhood, I’ve reread select documentary realist novels and photobooks in the context of modernism as a social phenomenon and literary movement. By rereading these texts through a feminist and race theory
lens, I emphasize the important stakes of minority and working class authors reviving the documentary realist aesthetic in the context of literary modernism. Documentary realism returned the reader’s focus to topics of popular discourse, particularly social and political issues of race and identity, which had been trivialized or under emphasized in the experimental, introspective works of high modernist authors.

The stakes of expanding critical understanding of modernism to be used and referenced in academic circles, conferences, and publisher boardrooms does not at first seem like an effort much connected to the original social activism of women and people of color that inspired the cultural productions of the 1920s and 1930s in America. How does one teach literary history without exclusion? Maybe the better question, the one my larger project attempts to answer, is how we can present a literary history while remaining attuned to the historical, social, political, and economic contexts in which a text like *Mules and Men* existed, and continues to circulate. Since the 1990s in America, the polarization of political ideologies and attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, and wealth distribution has increased. From Obama Care, to gay marriage, Black Lives Matter, and Occupy, the 2000s have been a period of social unrest polarizing ideologies in America. More than ever, it is essential that humanities scholars champion a critical mode of inclusion, across genres and levels of high and low art, from artist of every color and creed, as a corrective gesture against the rampant essentialism that presently defines the way Americans see other Americans and the way we are perceived abroad.
Chapter IV

Richard Wright and Twelve Million Ways of Seeing in Twelve Million Black Voices

In the early 1940’s documentary photography was majorly in vogue in popular culture, academic circles and most importantly, the publishing industry. Now considered canonical examples of the genre, works such as You Have Seen Their Faces (1937), American Exodus (1939), and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), were all published within five years of each other. Also in 1941, amidst slightly more conflicted critical reception, Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam published another photobook, Twelve Million Black Voices (1941). Black Voices historically reimagines American modernization through images and text. The text and images combine to offer a historical narrative of African American labor from slavery to the present wage worker, while also identifying political and social activism as the labor of future black generations. Comprised of just over 140 pages, Black Voices includes more than eighty black and white photographs that Wright and Rosskam selected from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) files. None of the photographs were created specifically for Wright’s project (Wright xx). A few notable photographers represented here include Dorothea Lange, Marion Post, Russell Lee and Jack Delano, among others. The collection opens with a short, two-page preface by Wright to explain his purposeful exclusion of middle class blacks from his narrative about black labor. Wright argues that “they are omitted in an effort to simplify a depiction of a

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72 A few publishers active in producing documentary photobooks at this time include Modern Age Books Inc., Reynal & Hitchcock, Houghton Mifflin and Viking Press. Look and Life magazine also featured documentary photographers, like Hart Preston’s six-page spread “244,000 Native Son” in Look, May 1940. The Museum of Modern Art also featured exhibitions of documentary photography, including Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War in May of 1942.

73 This is a paraphrase of Wright’s claim from the introduction of Black Voices. However, Wright biographer Hazel Rowley points out that Wright and Russell Lee spent two weeks in Chicago’s South Side urban sprawl in April of 1941. In a sense, those images were created for Black Voices to make up for the FSA’s focus on rural life in the South (Rowley 249).
complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization” (xx). In total, *Black Voices* is split into four titled sections: “Strange Birth,” “Inheritors of Slavery,” “Death on the City Pavements,” and “Men in the Making.” Occasionally, a series of photographs appear with only a short accompanying phrase, but typically Wright’s prose dominates. Photographs are sparsely used in the first two sections of the book, with the prose sometimes spanning for multiple pages without interruption. In the two later sections, Wright interrupts the text more often with photographs of tenement houses, factories, images of street life, and racial violence.

Wright’s journalist writing style, along with the photographic contributions from over a half dozen FSA photographers, provide a historical account of African American modernization and, by extension, the modernization of America from an agricultural economy to an industrialized nation. Wright’s historical reimagining serves three purposes: a) to offer a visual historical narrative of labor in America as divided by both race and gender b) to appropriate the tools of surveillance and science once used to affirm social and racial hierarchies against non-whites, and c) to upset the presentation of journalism and documentary photography as objective or stable in meaning. In addition, through the pairing of FSA photographs and narrative text, *Black Voices* offers depictions of black women laborers that suggest they were doubly burdened by discriminatory practices against African Americans and women. *Black Voices* is the only major documentary book with explicit themes of black laborers published during the height of documentary photography’s vogue and, as such, offers an important depiction of black womanhood.74 I argue that Wright’s description of black womanhood anticipates second wave

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74 Lewis Hine also took photographs of black women workers in the late 1930s, but these images were never published in their own collection until *Women at Work* was released posthumously in 1981.
feminism, particularly Simone De Beauvoir’s theories of the existential burdens of the female sex, coupled with his own understanding of the burden of racism in America.\textsuperscript{75} The double discrimination against black women received much less critical attention at the time, as women race activists during the early-twentieth century saw their political and social allegiance to either the race question or the women’s rights question as conflicting. Sojourner Truth noted as much in 1867 when she spoke as a guest at the American Equal Rights Association and proclaimed, “There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before [emancipation]” (Truth 64-65). Elise Johnson McDougald advocated for race allegiance when she published “The Take of Negro Womanhood” in Alain Locke’s \textit{New Negro} (1925) and stated, “On the whole the Negro woman’s feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place” (McDougald 380-81).\textsuperscript{76} For this reason, it is doubly important that Wright includes representations of black women in \textit{Black Voices}; he figuratively makes room for the subjectivity of black womanhood inside the grand narrative of black labor in America.

Over the last ten years, Sara Blair, Jeff Allred, and Michael Denning have produced scholarship on Wright’s work, and particularly his relation to photography and Popular Front

\textsuperscript{75} I’m evoking Simone De Beauvoir’s \textit{The Second Sex} (1949). For more on Wright’s feminism, see “Womanizing Richard Wright: Constructing the Black Feminine in The Outsider” (2012) by Floyd W. Hayes, III, discussed later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{New Negro}, arguably the definitive anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, only included one non-fiction contribution explicitly addressing black womanhood. Audre Lorde has spoken at length about the under representation of black women in feminist academic studies, but her story could be traced back to late nineteenth century feminist activists like Sojourner Truth. Recent critical scholars, particularly feminist and race scholar Carla Kaplan have presented scholarship that focuses particularly on the contributions of women writer, critics, and activists during the Harlem Renaissance period. See Kaplan xvii-xxxi and Lorde 331-335.
culture. Sara Blair’s *Harlem Crossroads* analyzes Wright’s use of photography to “bespeak the multiple valences of documentary imagery, variously committed to fact-finding, allegory, lyricism, and formalist expression” (Blair 69). And while Denning mostly confines his discussions of Wright and the Popular Front to publications like *Native Son* (1940) and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1938), Blair suggests that the influence of photography upon Wright’s writings continues to be severely underemphasized by literary critics and historians. This claim is verified by articles like “Killing the Documentarian” (2013) by Benjamin Balthaser, in which Balthaser reads *Black Voices* as proof that Wright was deeply opposed to documentary practices, particularly when the camera was pointed at poor, urban African Americans. Such a reading ignores the associations Wright had with documentary photography, even before the publication of *Black Voices.*77 In addition, while contemporary cultural studies have focused either on Wright’s experimental writing aesthetics alone, there has been little scholarly attention to how the Wright pairs documentary photographs and historical narrative to disrupted popular narratives about the American farmer, factory worker, or migrant laborer as a group unified by class. This narrative can be located in *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), *American Exodus* (1939), and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) because each text takes labor as the essential theme of the photographic study, while Wright’s narrative in *Black Voices* assumes the theme of the history of black labor explicitly. At the same time, Wright critiques the documentary genre for its accessory to journalistic and scientific accounts of black workers as peripheral, or at worst parasitic, to the economy in America. In its place, Wright depicts a nation struggling against

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77 In Sara Blair’s chapter on Wright, she notes that in 1938 Wright began working in association with the Federal Arts and Federal Writer’s Projects to create the *WPA Guide to New York City* (1939). Wright contributed to the “Negro Harlem” section along with another noted African American author, Claude McKay (66). Clearly, although Wright did not approve of documentary photographs that dismissed the humanity of poor, urban subjects, he also saw the medium of photography as generative in meaning making, even more than text alone.
itself, on the verge of a great transition away from mindless collectivism, and towards conscious individualism, or “rugged personality” (Wright qtd. in Denny 24).

My reading argues that *Twelve Million Black Voices* experimentally pairs dramatic storytelling and documentary photography to disrupt popular narratives of modernization and national unity. By offering this analysis, I add to three areas of current critical study: American visual and cultural studies, modernist studies, and Cultural Front studies. Like Jeff Allred in his chapter on Richard Wright in *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2010), I argue for the pedagogical impulse in Wright’s form of modernism, but my emphasis is more on the moments in *Twelve Million Black Voices* when the pedagogical message, or takeaway, breaks down. This breakdown is also an opening up of the images, and often happens when the text (written by Wright) and the photographs (taken from more than a half dozen FSA photographs) do not reinforce each other. When this happens, text and image together, in tension, offer a range of readings and meanings. The result is a story of African American labor opened up to include workers of different races, classes, and genders.

During the 1930s, novels like Pearl S Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931) and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) offered narratives of agricultural laborers as a way to celebrate the human spirit, but *Twelve Million Black Voices* does not romanticize the worker’s relation to the land. Instead, Wright uses his journalistic writing style to bluntly describe the “peculiar practice” of black labor, particularly for women (Wright 14). However, the images interrupt Wright’s somewhat melodramatic retelling of American modernization for the African American laborers. Even Wright’s grand narrative of a black collective struggle to modernize is destabilized occasionally by accompanying photographs. Sometimes this interruption is disquieting, like the one lynching photograph on page 45. However, many others are uplifting,
even hopeful, in a way that starkly contrasts with Wright’s constant emphasis on struggle, setbacks, and abuse—particularly when the subject turns to women or children. *Black Voices* is Wright’s answer to a question he posed in “Blueprint for Negro Writing”: “Shall the Negro writing be for the Negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negro’s humanity?” (397).

**Labor and the Other of the Other**

![Figure 4 Mother and Children, Chicago, Ill. 1940. by Russell Lee.](image)

Towards the end of the second section of *Black Voices*, Wright turns the subject again to women, children, and urban living conditions for struggling black families. These images are dominated by women. Wright’s description of the situation is desperate: “The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands, and even children behind to shift as best they can” (109).
The accompanying photograph, another Russell Lee image, depicts a slightly different story (See Figure 1). Instead of the kitchenette, there is a photograph of a bedroom. The trappings of poverty and want haunt the edges of this image. Note the pillow cover ripped in multiple places, and the thread bare blanket corner beside the little girl. The focus on this image, however, is not on the poverty and abandonment Wright lauds so vehemently. The mother in this image commands the viewer’s focus through her direct gaze, a gaze echoed by her two young charges. In their expressions there is open interest, as seen in the little girl in the flower dress. She leans towards the photographer with one shoulder dipped towards the bottom left corner of the frame. The boy is more reclined, almost relaxed in his mother’s embrace. His heavy lidded eyes and slight, whisper thin eyebrows are raised in passing interest that edges on apathy. Cheek to forehead with his mother, he is secure in his mother’s embrace. The mother, meanwhile, demonstrates her own brand of contentment by pressing her lips into a slight smile. The image does not make us question Wright’s claim that urban black life is framed in poverty and want, with little opportunity for advancement during the Depression era. However, this image does make the reader acknowledge the normalcy of the subjects placed in this position; the image does not shock, and it does not ask for white paternalism. The melodrama of Wright’s text is evacuated under the gaze of this brazenly self-confident mother and her children who meet the camera’s gaze head on, rather than being passive subject in their own documentation. These subjects demonstrate autonomy from their surroundings—they are more than the sum of their tattered bedding, although Wright does little to acknowledge this himself in the prose. Too often in the text Wright presents a story of collective identity as a result of the mechanism of labor and material wealth flowing through a capitalist system, which no one individual could hope to
affect. The photographs, as in the case I just described, function to fill in the missing narrative about individual triumph, strength and bravery in the face of adversity.

So much of *Black Voices* focuses on the struggle of African American men and women to transition from an agricultural centered life to an urban life that the individuality of his subjects is always in danger of being essentialized by voyeuristic white readers. And whereas Wright was praised for his “unadorned language bursting forth like whiplashes,” there are moments when this “hard style” results in pairings of image and text that do not always read in a straight relationship between sign and signifier (Gomez 133). This misdirection seems deliberate in that
the pairing of unexpected image with text brings multiple, sometimes conflicting messages about what black labor looks like, and how those labor identities are constructed not only by racial prejudice, but also by gender roles. In Wright’s text, women are primary subjects in more than one third of the photographs. Most are like the image I just discussed, which place women in the context of mother or caregiver. Other images of women highlight the isolation of their labor—like the “black maid” on the stairs, or the young girl churning butter (see fig. 2). Richard Wright’s treatment of black womanhood has not been a subject of scholarly debate as much as Wright’s aesthetics as an author or his allegiance to a (mostly) male genealogy of documentary photography like Jacob Riis or Walker Evans. In an effort to present a historical narrative of African American labor in America, Wright explicitly represents the subjectivity of black womanhood, and identifies the three types of labor available to them: the service industry, manual labor, or domestic work.

More generally, Wright’s narrative describes the modernization of black labor from the farm to the factory. Also implicit in his narrative is the Great Black Migration that took place between 1916 and 1923. Black share croppers in the South heard of the high wages and relaxes Jim Crow laws in northern cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago. These stories were carried by word of mouth, but most importantly by periodicals like The Chicago Defender, a black weekly magazine. As a boy growing up in Mississippi, Wright delivered copies of the paper as one of his after school jobs. His biographer, Hazel Rowley notes that Wright would “talk incessantly about the North” as a place of greater social freedom for blacks based on the news stories he would read in the Defender each week (32). It stands to reason that Wright’s journalistic writing style was shaped at an early age by his exposure to this periodical, even before he moved to Chicago himself. The harsh criticism Wright delivers about the state of
tenement housing and kitchenettes on the Chicago south side also suggests a journalistic, reportage impetus to uncover the truth, or guilt.

Wright’s “hard style” reads as masculine detachment from the female subject when he describes the transportation of slave men and women during middle passage:

The slave ships, equipped for long voyages, were floating brothels for the slave traders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bound by heavy chains, we gazed impassively upon the lecherous crew members as they vented their pent-up bestiality of their starved sex lives upon our sisters and wives. This was a peculiar practice which, as the years flowed past, grew into a clandestine but well-established institution which the owner of cotton and tobacco plantations upheld, and which today, in large measure, accounts for the widespread mulatto population in the United States. (Wright 14)

Wright describes the viewer’s gaze as impassive, which could speak to either a long history of silent onlookers during the particular “peculiar practice” of slavery and the continued passivity of American society towards violence against women. There are no images paired near this particular section of the text. Indeed, Wright describes the most violent historical acts against black people (middle passage, slavery, the seventeenth and eighteen centuries) in text alone. The first images that depict the post-emancipation worker feature a maid, an industrial worker, stevedores, and entertainers. Through images, Wright immediately establishes that the main industries for African American work, especially right after emancipation, were limited to service, domestic work, or manual labor. Again the images and the text push against one another to qualify Wright’s empirical distance from his subject. Wright imagines a utopia were all black
worker unite inside a larger collective. The text itself offers an exemplar version of this collectivism right before a stretch of full-page images from page 18-23:

This dual attitude, compounded of a love of gold and God, was the beginning of America’s paternalistic code towards her black maid, her black industrial worker, her black stevedore, her black dancer, her black waiter, her black sharecropper; it was a code of cruelty, of brutal kindness, of genial despotism, a code which has survived, grown, spread, and congealed into a national tradition that dominates, in small or large measure, all black and white relations throughout the nation until this day. (Wright 18)

The parallelism in this sentence suggests that black women and men together struggle with the legacy of white paternalism, but the images themselves testify that women have struggled longer and with fewer gains than their male counterparts.

The photograph of the stevedores is an example of how Wright depicts the conditions of black men’s labor (See fig. 3). The caption n below this photograph describes the subjects as “black stevedores” (Wright 20). Visual and cultural critic Allen Sekulla recalls this image as “compelling” in an interview with John Kuo Wei Tchen in 2002 (163). 78 Sekulla notes that Wright’s story of African American modernization from agricultural workers to urban laborers is Marxist insomuch that it suggests African Americans, migrating from one site of labor in the South to another in the North, were “a revolutionary vanguard.” (163). Implicit in this reading is the assumption that black men wanted to organize because they all suffered similar

78 Sekulla attributes this image to Aaron Siskind, although in the Dover 1977 edition of Twelve Million Black Voices, the photograph credit is given to Russell Lee. Sekulla goes on to claim that Wright and Roskam used many images from Siskind and the Film and Photograph League (FPL). Interestingly, neither Siskind nor the FPL are credited in the present edition of Black Voices.
discrimination on the job, held the same manual skills and capacities as their fellow workers, and they worked in groups together rather than in isolation. Indeed, in the light of a Marxist, revolutionary context, the image might take on a more explicitly political meaning. All the men are focused on the central subject with his arm raised. Although the caption placed next to this image only identifies the men by their labor, the image itself speaks to their potential for collective assembly and action. The very next image in the text depicts women working, and their conditions of labor are noticeably different from the men (see fig. 4). In addition, the accompanying text attempts to eschew these differences instead of focusing on the obvious color line and limiting gender roles that divide rather than unite subjects in this image. The caption
below this image once again focuses the reader on the subject’s labor by stating “black dancer” (21).

The caption indicates a singular dancer, although the image clearly depicts a group of women performing. At the same time, the singular form is appropriate here since the women, although dancing in a group, each dance separately. Their bodies are not all doing the same movement, and each woman has her gaze focused at varying points around the room. Even as they move as one body, they are each separate in their labor. Their bodies are again divorced from each other under the competing gazes inside the image. The white women and men watch the women from beyond the banister, symbolically representing the color line between black performers and white spectators. The black men playing instruments in the band likewise watch the women from a platform, lifted above the women in performing in the foreground.

Meanwhile, another black man peers down on the scene from the balcony; another layer of the
color line is symbolized. The black men and women are separated under the white gaze, but the
woman occupies a privileged space (center stage), while the men are regulated to the
background, or dark corners. Although Wright takes four pages of images to depict how
conditions of racism and slavery have equally suppressed rural and urban black workers, we can
see in this image that the conditions of black labor are not exactly equal across the gender line.
The women read as spectacle not only because of their gender and sex, but because of their race
too. Wright attacks the white patriarchy in this image while he argues against racial inequality in
the narrative.

Recently, literary critics like Floyd Hayes and Cheryl Higashida have argued recently for
a reading of Richard Wright’s work through a feminist theory lens to account for how black men
saw the struggle for women’s rights, as well as to attend to black women’s roles in mobilizing
cultural front sentiments through the 1940s. Hayes argues that Wright’s experience growing up
in the American South was first informed by patriarchal thinking: “in the male-centered social
order, women often are depicted as possessing no histories, agendas, or community of their
own…Wright was a captive of this male-dominated system of being, thinking and writing” (52).
The larger argument in Hayes’s essay, however, suggests that black male critics should join
black female critics in critically reading Wright’s work. This is his interpretation of black
feminist critic bell hook’s call to overthrow the “white supremacist patriarchal Western cultural
neocolonial thinking” that has historically divided the interests of civil rights and women’s right
groups (hooks 44). Hooks advocates for a global feminism that includes men, black women, gays
and lesbians, and cisgendered people. My critical intervention builds on hooks’s idea of

79 See Higashida (p. 32-35) for more on Harlem Renaissance artists’ impact on Communist theory from 1922
through the 1940s.
visionary feminism: “Radical visionary feminism encourages all of us to courageously examine
our lives from the standpoint of gender, race, and class so that we can accurately understand our
position within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (116). Using a feminist and
visual cultural theory lens, my reading in this chapter identifies the short comings of Wright’s
articulation of black womanhood in prose and argues that the photographs in Black Voices
present a more independent, modern black women evolving into a politically active subject.

A Story of Laboring

In the first section of Black Voices, photographs of black women depict the three primary
types of labor available to them: domestic work (cleaning, housekeeping, laundry, child rearing),
manual labor (field work), or entertainment (performers, dancers). The last mentioned of these,
as I described above, provide an example of how black women workers were doubly scrutinized
for their race and gender as a spectacle. Wright identifies this type of labor in the first section,
“Our Strange Birth,” which describes the history of the slave trade in Africa, middle passage, and
auction of slaves in America. By the end of this section, the second type of labor is introduced to
on page twenty-three through the picture captioned “the black sharecropper” (23). In this
photograph, a man and woman dressed in overalls and a wrinkled dress are seen standing
shoulder to shoulder, looking downward. By photographing them from a low angle the
photographer, Jack Delano, emphasizes the shadows on their faces. The man’s eyes are
completely obscured by his hat, while the woman’s blank stare and downturned mouth are
clearly centered in the image. There are two people in this image, but the angle of the
photograph, and the accompanying caption, suggest only one subject: the woman. It is difficult
to distinguish where the man ends and the woman begins in this image, as their hands and
shoulders overlap. The woman sharecropper provides a distinct visual contrast from the black
maid, or the black women dancing, depicted just pages before. Throughout *Black Voices*, black women engaged in manual labor are depicted as sacrificing the bourgeois window-dressings of womanhood, such as tailored dresses, high heels, or fashionable hair, so that they can work equally alongside their men. In this sense Wright seems to suggest a limited version of second wave feminism. The women in this section appear alongside their men, both depicted as struggling for their mutual survival. They are equal partners in this process, except the woman is always doubly circumscribed by her gender as well as race.

We can also look at the photograph of the woman standing in line for work, surrounded by men, in the second section entitled “Inheritors of Slavery.” In this case the woman is again seen standing alongside men, but she is wearing a burlap sack as a skirt, paired with a straw hat and an oversized shirt. The composition of this image is similar to “the black maid,” seen in the first section, but here the woman stands on her own two feet, rather than kneeling. The placement of this image later in the historical narrative of black labor suggests the slightest progress, if not for black workers overall, then for black women particularly. She is represented equally alongside the black male worker, but also as more economically disadvantaged. In other words, it is only at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder that black women and men labor together equally for survival. Wright describes this process of division by gender through a distinctly male context, which again echoes second wave feminists’ attempts to gain social and political representation in an inherently patriarchal society.80

80 By second wave feminism, I include the tradition of women’s rights activists from Mary Wollstonecraft to Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth, along with men like John Stuart Mill and W.E.B Du Bois who wrote favorably about society’s responsibility to protect women’s rights. Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and later Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which described the historical oppression of women in Western culture, are important to understanding Wright’s black womanhood in *Black Voices*. 
Because of their forced intimacy with the Lords of the Land, many of our women, after they were too old to work, were allowed to remain in the salve cabins to tend generations of black children. They enjoyed a status denied us men, being called “Mammy”; and through the years they became symbols of motherhood, retaining in their withered bodies the burden of our folk wisdom, reigning as arbiters in our domestic affairs until we men were freed and had moved to cities where cash-paying jobs enabled us to become the heads of our own families. (Wright 37)

This description of a black woman’s “status” as mother, and the matriarchal hierarchy it produced for “generations of black children,” has a bitter tone (37). Particularly the phrase “reigning…arbiters” suggests that women unfairly gained a limited agency through their “forced intimacy” with white men (37). This division of labor by gender, however, is ultimately the black woman’s burden once “men were freed” and migrated to cities to earn money (37). Despite Wright’s celebration of the agency of black men over black mothers, his prose does identify black women as dangerously at the mercy of both white and black men as a result of their sex. In other words, the black woman is first and last “a womb, an ovary” (Beauvoir 21). Wright’s limited depiction of womanhood is understandable here, given that the overall narrative traces the development of African American workers from slavery up to the early 1940s. At this early point in the narrative, Wright’s presentation of black men and women laboring primarily for the survival of the next generation borrows from naturalist and social Darwinist attitudes popular during the mid-twentieth century. By focusing on survival in the first sections of Black Voices, Wright sets up a Naturalist evolution of African American labor. It is not unthinkable that

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81 I make allusion here to the general way students of naturalism and social Darwinism applied evolutionary theory to directly draw conclusion about human nature and society. See exemplars Henry David Thoreau’s Walden (1854) or John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath (1939).
Darwin’s theories from *On the Origin of Species* (1859), concerning the “reoccurring struggle for existence” by individual species, would appeal to Wright as he wrote *Black Voices*. Indeed, the narrative presents the progress of black laborers through a series of evolutionary steps—from simple survival to self-advocacy for civil rights and protection under the law. These attitudes also prefigure Simone de Beauvoir’s claim in *The Second Sex* that “when surveying the steps of the animal ladder…life becomes more individual; at the bottom it concentrates on the maintenance of the species, and at the top it puts its energies into single individuals” (Beauvoir 31). As Wright’s narrative continues, this very process of individualization for black workers plays out, albeit more slowly for black women than black men.
Depictions of black women’s labor are prominently featured in the second section of *Black Voices* where Wright describes the historical period of slavery, black emancipation, and Reconstruction. The penultimate section of *Black Voices* “Death on the City Pavement” offers the final type of black female labor identified by Wright. This section is dominated by images of women, particularly mother figures, in domestic settings with children. Here, “woman is her body…but her body is something other than her,” as her working identity is inseparable from her biological ability to reproduce (Beauvoir 41). At the same time, Wright stresses the erasure of the father figure from the family unit in this section when he states that the folk historically have “barely managed to live in family groups” (94). This lack of nuclear families is just one residual effect of the institution of slavery that Wright identifies as a disadvantage for the next generation of African Americans who tried to migrate from the fields of the South to the cities of the North. Indeed, in figure 5, the father is separated from the wife by a gaping doorway (93). The cropping of the image along the left slices across the middle of the man’s body, and leaves only his disconnected torso and a closed fist (See figure 5). Likewise, there are two other portraits of mother and child in this section, but the father figure is conspicuously absent (see fig. 6). The labor of motherhood defines a woman by her sex, and so the workload is unequally assigned to her. The isolation of this labor for black women is stressed through the images and the text as dangerous and detrimental to their humanity. In one instance Wright explicitly addresses black women laborers as “triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts [of the northern cities]” (131).

In the Black belts of the northern cities, our women are the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives…Because their orbit of life is narrow—from their kitchenette to the white folk’s kitchen and back home again—they love
the church more than do our men, who find a large measure of the expression of
their lives in the mills and factories. Surrounding our black women are many
almost insuperable barriers: they are black, they are women, they are workers.
(131)

This is one of the few places that Wright directly acknowledges the different divisions of labor
by race and by gender. Despite his acknowledgment that black women are “triply anchored,”
Wright reduces black women to perpetual victims when he calls them “the most circumscribed
and tragic objects” (131). Nowhere in the narrative is Wright more pessimistic about the agency
of black women. Another discussion of black women workers, and the early age they start
working, is presented as a comparison strictly between white and black “girls” and white and
black working “mothers” (135). In another example, there is a two-page spread (132-33) of photographs depicting two separate black women, in different kitchens, preparing food for a child. In one image, a black woman stands in a kitchenette while the black child stares suspiciously back at the viewer. In the other image, a black woman, noticeably older, stands in a modern kitchen feeding a white child. This image clearly echoes Wright’s prose describing the “orbit” of a black woman’s life, but the image also demonstrates the isolationism of this work. There is a glaring lack of any expression on the faces of either woman; none of “the large measure of expression,” that Wright claims black men find in their working environments, is found here (131).

At this point in Wright’s narrative it is doubtful what future he imagines for black workers, particularly black women. For Wright, all labor a black woman performs leaves her isolated and fractioned by her race, gender and class. In the last section of Black Voices, however, Wright suggests that all black workers, including black women workers, can exhibit their own forms of expression through organized, public protests. Black women are not explicitly identified in the prose of the last section, but they dominant the second to last photograph of the section (see fig. 7). Here, in an imaged credited to the Associated Press (AP), four black women hold anti-lynching protest signs while they march in front of the White House (141). It is significant that this image was chosen for Black Voices, as it one of only two images in whole collection that did not come from the FSA files or Russell Lee during his time on the Chicago south side. I argue that Wright selected this image deliberately to visually signal the great importance of black female political activism as essential to achieving race equality in America. In the photograph the protest signs each woman carries indicate they came from both northern and southern states (Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Kentucky). The woman second
from the left looks to be older than the other women who march with her, which suggests a larger network of women coming together (generationally and geographically) to collectively express their concerns about race relations in America. This is the only image in *Black Voices* of black women collectively organizing to enact political and social change. Offered as it is in the final section “Men in the Making,” it is particularly important to note that Wright does not directly single out black women workers in the text. Instead, the nearest thing to a caption appearing under this image reads, “We are the children of black share croppers, the first-born of city tenements” (142). For Wright, the anchors that triply weighted down black mothers in city tenements seem to dissipate for their children. Indeed, the next generation is politically active, organized, and expressive, far beyond the confines of their local church or the narrow “orbit” from kitchen to kitchen. Through this transformation, which happens in only eleven pages, the black woman is no longer defined by her biological sex and reproduction, but rather through her
political and social agency. Wright clearly identifies the socially active black woman as key to achieving race equality in America, rather than suggesting black women should first be champions of gender equality. The women in the protest photograph hold anti-lynching signs, demonstrating their explicit allegiance to racial equality. Even as Wright attempts to include black woman workers into his narrative, he is mostly blind to the need for continued gender reform in America. This is particularly ironic given that he identifies the labor of motherhood as limiting for young black women and a barrier to her participation in larger political and social spheres of influence. The seeds of the second wave feminist movement, with a focus on women’s reproductive rights and professionalization outside the domestic space, were already present when *Black Voices* was published in 1941.

The fight for reproductive rights and birth control contraceptives were political issues being fought in America as early as the 1920s (Valenza 45). In 1940, Margaret Sanger launched the “Negro Project” through the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) in Harlem. Recommendations concerning black women’s reproductive rights were voiced by W.E.B Du Bois in a 1932 issue of the *Birth Control Review*, which greatly influenced Sanger’s proposal for the “Negro Project” in 1938 (45). Sanger’s social and political agenda for black women seeking contraceptives was also echoed by other prominent black intellectuals like Elmer A. Carter, editor of *Opportunity*, and the well-respected surgeon Charles H. Gavin in 1932 publications of *Birth Control Review*. Wright’s *Black Voices* echoes the concerns of this women’s rights movement in that he depicts black women as doubly burdened by the labors of motherhood, because she (unlike middle and upper class white women) cannot choose the conditions of her

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82 I am not suggesting that these women were not inherently women’s rights activists, too. I am not insinuating that these categories were mutually exclusive, but they were hierarchical in relation.
labor. Just as Zora Neale Hurston incorporates a story of black male incarceration into the folk tales of *Mules and Men*, so does Wright incorporate the story of black female disenfranchisement from wider social and political spheres of activity where she is desperately needed. Wright weaves the particular story of black women’s labor into the larger story of black labor and modernization through his use of documentary photography and text. Particularly, it is the collaborative nature of this project—Wright’s reliance on Rosskam and numerous FSA photographers—that results in a grand narrative that is always on the edge of disillusion.

**The Democratic Medium**

In its theme, focus, and hybrid aesthetics, *Black Voices* stands out from other photobooks and documentaries published between 1930 and 1945. Publications such as Walker Evan’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Dorothea Lange’s *American Exodus*, and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* each present similar themes and focus on labor in the American West and South, particularly white American labor. In each of these texts, the photographs are unified in their authority quite literally, because each collection was authored by a single photographer. Wright’s choice to use images from multiple highly recognizable FSA photographers was self-serving for publication purposes (they were easily accessible and the photographs were already established in popular press), but it was also an aesthetic choice that allowed Wright to speak back to a history of documentary surveillance of blacks by white onlookers.

By 1941 America’s attention was focused internally, even on the brink of World War II, as a result of The Great Depression’s continued grip on the nation. Popular culture and press journalism were focused on America’s recovery through the New Deal programs, such as the Security Farm Administration (SFA). The SFA created cultural outreach programs, including
teams of photographers, hired by Roy Striker, to document the Depression in both urban and rural areas around America from the mid-1930s to the late-1940s. Many of these images were circulated in popular press, like *Look*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazine, and quickly made photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Russell Lee household names. The most iconic images from the archive of SFA images at The Library of Congress, like Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, focus on the enduring human spirit of Americans suffering drought and poverty in the rural Midwest and Southwest. However, the SFA also deployed photographers, like Russell Lee, to urban centers to capture the squalor and poverty African Americans were suffering in tenement housing in Chicago. Both Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee have been recognized for their portraits of women during this time, and particularly their photographs of poor mothers and families. It is not unsurprising then that *Black Voices* draws heavily from the portfolios of both these photographers, particularly Russell Lee. Lee’s photographs often include important background or contextual elements around the subject, thereby allowing readers to see the conditions of motherhood and not just the subject in isolation. This is not to say the intelligibility of the photographs in *Black Voices* is always clear, as my reading has shown. The general popularity of documentary photography, and photobooks in particular, aided greatly in the popular success of *Black Voices*, despite its sometimes experimental pairing of documentary image and melodramatic text.

Context is sometimes experiential, but other times it is historical. When reading photographs, contemporary cultural theorists remind us that the process is always subjective, and experiential. Quoting Virginia Woolf in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag notes, “‘the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling.’ This sleight of
hand allows photographs to be both objective record and faithful testimony” (Sontag 26). In the case of *Black Voices*, the context was immediate for most readers—labor rights, governmental aid, and public outreach were common topics of the Depression era in the United States. There was also strong interest in literature that dramatized race relations in America, as was demonstrated by the popularity of Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940. The medium of documentary storytelling, and the themes of workers and race relations, all come together in *Black Voices*. Wright assumes a reader that is versed in both the contexts of race relations, or black uplift, and race as it relates to class; he assumes a friendly, male reader. The images and text combine to tell a passionate story of transition, not a historical document or testimony of fact. A review of *Black Voices* published in *Journal of Southern History* in 1942 opens with the following observation, “Historians will not receive this book enthusiastically because it does not give that facts on the ‘other side.’ Social anthropologists and sociologists will not recommend it highly because they are…not interested in any ‘side’” (Thompson 287). Despite this critic’s comments, *Black Voices* survives as a historical testament to a transitional period for African American laborers, especially black women. It is also an artistic production, reflecting Wright’s personal agenda of improving race and class relations at the expense of explicit reforms in women’s rights, which were desperately needed by black women in particular.

Recent literary and cultural scholars, like Jeff Allred, have spent considerable time defining how Wright outlines a history of documentary practices in *Black Voices* by focusing on the composition of particular photographs, as well as his experimental use of the third person “we” throughout the prose. Joe Woller, in “The Voice of the Masses in Farm Security

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83 In fact, *Native Son* (1940) was so popular that it was quickly turned into a theatrical production.
84 I am paraphrasing Jeff Allred’s introduction to *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2012), which I summarize and discuss at length in other chapters.
Administration Document,” also analyzed *Black Voices*, alongside *You have Seen Their Faces*, to argue that Wright creates a raced and classed “we,” but also at times reaffirms the separation between “you/us/we” (345). Still others, like Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*, have looked at *Black Voices* particularly for its reflections of cultural front politics and the particular intersections of race and class themes. But, there has not been much attention to the formal arrangement, the careful pairing of image and text, and image with image. *Black Voices*, as I have argued, does not always emphasize the same agenda in the prose and the images. The two are thematically close, but looking at the particular organization of certain images, particularly the two-page spreads, demonstrates the visual experimentalism of this project. Photo Director Edwin Rosskam’s careful arrangement of the photographs in *Black Voices*, as much as Wright’s prose, allows readers to see how gender, race, and class affect the conditions of labor in America. The photographs also present individuals inside the grand narrative, which offsets the collectivist “we” that Wright uses throughout the text to minimize the rhetorical separation between subject and audience. However, Wright’s experience with photography was limited and on a smaller scale. Edwin Rosskam’s contributions were key in presenting Wright’s grand themes of black modernization and the particular “rugged personality” of individual black workers, especially women (Wright qtd. in Denny 24).

Wright’s account of the five cultural divisions of the WPA suggest the ambitious imperative of *Black Voices*, which was a product of numerous people working in those programs: “We created the five cultural divisions of the WPA—five art projects—to keep alive the past, and to link both the past and the present with the future. These projects are trying to keep alive in the hearts of youth the dream of a free and equal mankind” (Wright qtd. in Denny 24). Rosskam demonstrates equal zeal in his involvement with the FSA, and his inspiration for
“putting words and pictures together” in a longer work (Rosskam). In an oral history interview with the American Archives of Art in August of 1965, Rosskam makes reference to Lewis Hine’s only full collection, *Men at Work*:

Well, of course, there had been no previous to this, to the best of my knowledge, no single project that was supported on a major scale, especially by government, that encouraged photographers in this way. I don't know—I did know at that time that the Hines collection had been made and a couple of other collections, but whether they were supported by any organization, I really don't know. I doubt it. The photographers themselves did this. So here was an opportunity to kind of put to use visual material as a language, and that was at that time, my interest.

(Rosskam)

Rosskam has a sense of the photographs themselves speaking, separate from accompanying texts. This suggests that he, like many photo editors of the early to mid-twentieth century, appreciated the aesthetics of an image with an immediately intelligible message. Later excerpts from the same interview demonstrate the high value Rosskam, in retrospect, put on the FSA photographs as historical documentation of generations and the constant flux of the interpretational meaning of those images: “there is no way of telling, no way, what photograph would come alive when…the historical view is so different from the contemporary view, and at the time that the picture is made it is impossible to foresee what the historical view is going to be” (Rosskam). Rosskam’s reflection on when a photograph “would come alive” echoes Sontag’s ideas about the photograph’s “sleight of hand” to act as personal testimony and factual documentation (26). Rosskam demonstrates a concern with the history and intelligibility of photographs, particularly as it relates to meaning making in the photobook projects he directed.
By his own admission, photographs in 1940 were still “something kind of new and startling and exciting,” and yet *Black Voices* is also experimental in that it paired Wright’s “passionate” narrative with the well-recognized documentary aesthetic of Russell Lee, Marion Post, Dorothea Lange, and others (Rosskam). Each one of these photographers, of course, also had his or her own style of documentary photography, which Wright’s prose unites by highlighting common themes in the images like labor, black struggle, poverty, and urbanization. Rosskam recalled that he could always identify Marion Post’s prints without looking at the back for her name “because the men were always leering at the camera!” (Rosskam). Lee’s prints have a distinct “stark quality” as a result of his use of the flash indoors to reveal the minutia of everyday domestic spaces (Rosskam). Sometimes the contrast between documentary styles is emphasized by the arrangement of the photographs in double page spreads in *Black Voices*. This contrast, and careful pairing of images, allows the very language of photographs to develop alongside the prose by Wright. The images and text together offer a more specific look at the conditions of black woman’s labor, particularly the way that their work has been constricted by racial and gender hierarchies.

Unlike a journalistic photo story, like those carried in *Life* or *Look* in the 1940s, the arrangement of photographs in *Black Voices* does not suggest the invisibility of other surrounding images. Indeed, these images often offer their own subtle narrative, which ironically offsets the collectivist narrative offered by Wright. Instead of offering an essentialist view of black life, or fetishizing images of poverty and violence, the images testify to the conditions of labor for black women as well as black men. Direct references to black women as

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85 In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag particularly remarks on this practice by *Look* and *Life* magazine in the late 1930s into the 1940s. She states, “The double spread—with each use of the camera implying the invisibility of the other—seems not just bizarre but curiously dated now” (33).
workers are few in *Black Voices*, but the images make up for this somewhat limited gender narrative in the prose. Take, for example, the two images that fill pages 110-111 (see Fig. 6). On the left, the woman and her three children are framed by laundry hanging overhead and a window to their left. Lee’s use of flash here lights up the far back wall behind the older boy and we can see the box of Oxydol laundry detergent sitting on a radiator beside the kitchenette. The flash also reflects heavily on each of their faces, creating almost a glowing effect. The image on the right, also using a flash, depicts a solitary black man, also sitting by a window in a one-room apartment next to a kitchenette. In the right hand photograph, the flash bounces off the window glass behind the man; the resulting effect lights the subject from behind so that his facial features are crisp, but the room is in shadow. Paired as they are, these two images by different photographers have a number of compositional similarities. The subjects are placed in similar settings. The subjects are walled in by the kitchenette on one side, a bed on the other, and a dark gaping window behind them. Both windows are draped in gauzy curtains. The privacy of their domestic space is nuanced by familiar domestic objects: laundry, a kettle, curtains. We could read the pairing of these images as a statement that the conditions of life for these two families are separate, but equal. On the other hand, the division of the mother and children from the man implies a broken, or separated, family unit. Wright’s text echoes the message connoted through the arrangement of images: “more of our girls have bastard babies than the girls in any other section of the city” (Wright 110). The prose ties together these two images such that an assumed narrative about a solitary man and an abandoned woman with her children is created. Wright does not have to reference the images directly, because readers can arrive at their own narrative by just looking at the photographs in conversation with each other. Wright’s passionate narrative is not superfluous by any means; rather, the two discourses (one in prose, and the other in
images) symbiotically feed off one another to offer an account of black labor in America that also considers the domestic space as site of oppression for women.86

Such moments in Black Voices where images and text reinforce each other through the aesthetic choices of framing, lighting, and tone demonstrate how the particular story of black modernization, for Wright, could not be told in one voice or through one perspective. In fact, it is the aesthetic difference between photographs and the collectivist, masculine “we” speaking in the prose that results in a narrative that acknowledges a legacy of black labor generally, and black women’s labor particularly. As I have argued, Wright’s prose traces three types of labor available to black women over the course of history, and there is little to no change in the roles available to black women from the beginning to the end of the narrative. In the prose, women are depicted as victims of their sex, from middle passage up to the present day. The narrow “orbit” Wright identifies suggests that black women have not had the same social mobility as black men, which is historically accurate. However, in the last section of Black Voices, where Wright provides the image of women marching in protest, there is no direct reference to women in Wright’s prose itself. There are clear moments of progress for black men in Wright’s narrative, but Wright’s sense of black women’s progress is sublimated by his focus on race and class unity among workers. The story of black women’s labor is told more through the images taken by white and black men and women, rather than the prose conceived by Wright alone. This suggests that Wright’s text, despite the narrative use of “we,” presents a primarily black, male perspective of African American labor. The two discourses, of photographic meaning and literary meaning, rely on each other heavily to tell a story of black American laborers that have been divided from

86 Wright’s presentation of women as victims of their sex is still problematic. There are only brief glimpses of the autonomous, politically active woman in Black Voices, and she is not always acknowledged as an active subject in Wright’s prose.
a larger, struggling labor force, and ultimately divided against itself by gender lines. By making perspectival difference an essential element of *Black Voices*, the viewer is forced to conclude a relativistic relationship between race, class, and gender. This is dangerous because by this rationale black women’s continued oppression is naturalized while the rights of African Americans generally, and men especially, are treated as more important. In other words, there is no singularly true, authentic, or essential depiction of black workers possible; there is only the partial and the temporary, since each photograph in *Black Voices* represents only a fraction of the larger SFA files produced as a result of WPA programs. Wright is always just on the edge of admitting that the “complex movement” of black urbanization is complicated not only because of racial bias by a dominate white culture; a patriarchy of black and white men doubly burdens black women workers in their efforts to move beyond labor that defines them as objects of pleasure or reproduction (xx). The historical narrative offered by Wright depicts black women as victims of middle-passage sailors and white slave owners, and so he always equates a women’s sexual activity (or exclusivity) to her value as an individual. Wright says of southern plantations: “there were slave breeding farms. Slaves were valuable” (14). Here, as we have seen in other places in Wright’s narrative, a black woman’s ability to produce more laborers for white plantations assures her a place in the worker hierarchy above the black man, who can only offer the labor of his own body. The cost black women pay for this “status” as the Mammy of “generations” of black slaves, however, goes unrecognized by Wright (37). Rather, he clearly states that black urbanization only begins once black men are allowed outside of the feudal, plantation hierarchy and able to earn cash working in cities (37). This is why Wright’s sense of black women’s role in the African American urbanization in America is so unclear in the last section, and why the documentary photographs of women throughout *Black Voices* offer such an
important balance to Wright’s pessimistic narrative. Despite the toppling of the feudal system, and the matriarchal family unit Wright describes, black women’s value as workers stays the same. She is still restrained to the domestic sphere, and she still lacks the ability to control the conditions of that labor through reproductive rights, hence the “bastard babies” mentioned in Wright’s narrative on page 110. Clearly, the black women’s lack of reproductive rights, and their resulting victimization, is presented by Wright as an intrinsic condition of black womanhood throughout American history.

**The Stakes of Gazing**

Do images of suffering, including war photography and journalistic photography of poverty, always already reify the unequal conditions of labor and survival for these subjects? Does Wright enter a conversation with the documentary images taken by white photographers of black labor, or does the text always sublimate the image? By suggesting that Wright’s prose and the documentary photographs rely on each other to create meaning, celebrating the differences in perspective rather than insisting on essentialism, I modify Roland Barthes’ description of the relationship between image and text as “parasitic” (25). I am not alone in modifying this term; investigation into the relationship between image and text was greatly popular in the late 1980s into the 90s by literary critics and art historians like Jonathan Berger, W.J.T Mitchell, Michael Fried, and others. These types of investigations remain important now as our culture continues to describe itself through increasingly complex webs of visual and verbal discourse communities like photographic journalism, documentary films, and photobooks. In Mitchell’s “Word and Image” (1996), he describes the relationship between words and images as defined by the false dichotomy scholars have created to curate “institutions of the visual” and “institutions of the verbal” as separate:
The domains of word and image are like two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange, and other forms of intercourse. The word/image relation is not a master method for dissolving these borders or for maintaining them as eternally fixed boundaries; it is the name of a problem and a problematic—a description of the irregular, heterogeneous, and often improvised boundaries between "institutions of the visible" (visual arts, visual media, practices of display and spectation) and "institutions of the verbal" (literature, language, discourse, practices of speech and writing, audition and reading). (Mitchell 49)

In Wright’s *Black Voices*, the problematic image/text relation echoes the uncertain, “irregular” relationships between black and white workers, and among black women and men (49). Instead of using images and text to “maintain eternally fixed boundaries” between the image and text, *Black Voices* constantly shifts the “boundaries” between the visual and the verbal (49). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the final section of *Black Voices*, which contains only two images. Every other section of *Black Voices* provides photographs followed by some excerpt of Wright’s larger narrative of black modernization. These captions are echoes of Wright’s text, not a modification to describe the image directly or give other historical and social context. The photographs are forced into a relationship of meaning with Wright’s larger text, but one that is always temporary and unstable. At any time, readers can turn to the final pages of the collection to see the photographer’s name and the physical location of the photograph as document. Therefore, a majority of the images in *Black Voices* act as historical documents and artistic illustrations of Wright’s grand narrative concerning African American modernization. That is, except for those last few images at the end, which have no explicit connection to Wright’s
utopian narrative of laborers uniting across boundaries of race and geography. The final images in *Black Voices* offer an imagined future for black women, rather than a historical narrative of their existence. The picture of black women marching in front of the White House goes unattributed to a particular photographer—this further suggesting that Wright’s narrative, as much as the physical photographic documents collected by SFA photographers, offer an imagined future for the black civil rights movement—and evokes an ongoing women’s rights movement in which women activists and scholars play such a major role.

The reading I have offered follows the corrective impulse of contemporary visual cultural theorists. Particularly, scholars like Susan Sontag and David Levi-Strauss offer a degree of skepticism concerning an image’s ability to conceal and obscure individual experience and marginalized subjects. Critics like Sontag resists fetishization, shock photography, and suffering as spectacle for a few privileged voyeurs. Sontag has voiced particular concerns about these types of photographs in a post 9/11 era in her last full work published in 2003. Likewise, Strauss has raised questions about the aestheticization of marginalized subjects for the enjoyment of a first-world elite voyeur in *Behind the Eyes* (2012). By suggesting that Wright’s prose and the documentary photographs rely on each other to create meaning, my reading suggests that *Black Voices* celebrates differences in perspective rather than insisting on essentialism. I am not without criticism for Wright’s depiction of difference, as he does stress an agenda of race and class over gender reforms in the narrative. Wright’s focus on an agenda of race and class is in part a product of the photographic medium’s long association with methods of surveillance and repression by a white patriarchy. From the eugenics studies with composite photography by Francis Galton, to D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the institutionalization of racism has been an essentially visual project.
In part, Wright’s over emphasis of the utopian ‘we’ next to his clear discomfort with black women as modern, politicalized subjects, proved that black women needed an active role in creating the fiction, and non-fiction that portrayed them. The black, politically active women in the photographs destabilize Wright's utopian 'we', partially by revealing that the race cause is being emphasized at the expense of a feminist agenda. The signs the women hold describe racial violence, and persecution through Jim Crown laws. Wright is understandably uneasy with revealing this schism, because he could not predict how future generations might bridge this divide. In fact, scholars, artists, activists, and politicians are still trying to imagine a bridge between feminist priorities like women's health, equal pay, and sexual harassment, and issues of race like black incarceration rates and police profiling. Although Wright's literary legacy is noticeably unkind to women characters, and the photographs in Black Voices throw Wright's particular unease with the strong black woman into stark relief. The chorus of photographers represented in Black Voices document vivid, politically active black women struggling against the history of double oppression in the United States—being both woman and black. Black female scholars have criticized Wright, and rightly so, for depicting black women as either Mammies or victims of capitalist, patriarchal racism. My reading of Wright here in no way disagrees with the objections those scholars like Sherley Anne Williams have made against Wright's harsh representation of black women. At the same time, the social realist, confrontational themes in many of his novels, like Black Boy and Native Son reflected the deep frustration and anger many people in the black community were feeling in the 1940s on the eve of World War II. With the public's attention on another war, the cultural focus in America shifted

away from themes of protest. The social and racial issues Wright, Huston, and even Hine raised in the first half of the twentieth century did not go away. Instead, rising anger over segregation and women's rights gave rise to the civil rights and women's rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The angry, masculine action hero female that rose to popularity in Blaxploitation films like *SuperFly* (1972), *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) are examples of how the black woman continued to gain a voice in the popular imagination of black viewers as both a central advocator for black civil liberties, and women's right.  

The Blaxploitation films of the 1970s are contested texts, representing complex and interconnected cultural attitudes about blackness, womanhood, sex, gender, and liberation, against a backdrop of social unrest and anger, particularly in response to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Like the documentary realist photobooks and novels I have described in the context of literary modernism, Blaxploitation films are best understood through careful historical contextualization with an emphasis on social and political systems of power that, in part, produced those texts. By emphasizing a New Historical connectedness between text and context, with a focus on historical conditions like World War I, the Great Depression, immigration, and black migration to urban centers, my project has described a version of modernism that emphasized identity creation and representation for working class subjects, and particularly black women. This type of project is important because I not only look at black women who were artists, but also how black women were represented by men. In doing so, this project builds upon modernist scholars Lisa Rado’s suggestion that academics should not

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88 For more on the history of Blaxploitation films and representations of black womanhood, see Isaac Julien’s documentary *Baadassss Cinema—A Bold Look at 70’s Blaxploitation Films* (2002); see Mark Hartley’s documentary *Machete Maidens Unleashed* (2010) for more on Blaxploitation films made in the Philippines during the 1970s (starring Pam Grier).
continue to scrutinize modernist writers for their articulation of either a feminist, subversive agenda, or a patriarchal, conservative agenda. Rather scholars should try to imagine how these two approaches overlapped and informed one another during the particular historical moment we call modernism.
References


