THE RADICAL EYE: DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS IN NEW DEAL AMERICA

A dissertation presented by

Kathryn Templeton

to

The English Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

English Literature

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2017
THE RADICAL EYE: DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS IN NEW DEAL AMERICA

by

Kathryn Templeton

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities Northeastern University
March 2017
Focusing on Muriel Rukeyser’s poem *The Book of the Dead*, the New York Photo League’s collaborative body of work known as the Harlem Document, and the life histories writer Ralph Ellison collected while working for the Federal Writers’s Project in Harlem, I chronicle the cultural conversations and working relationships of practitioners of modernist documentary in the 1930’s. Scholars in literary and visual studies have begun to acknowledge documentary modernism as a viable category for analysis; my dissertation contributes to that ongoing conversation. My use of archival and understudied sources, including private correspondence, archival photographs, photo-texts in 1930’s “picture magazines” *Look* and *Fortune*, and Federal Writers’ Project life histories held by the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, distinguishes this dissertation from other studies, as does my interdisciplinary approach to the material. By bringing contemporary visual theory to bear on literary texts and by integrating visual sources into my analysis, I build upon existing studies in documentary modernism, allowing us to better understand the complexity of the documentary response of the 1930’s, particularly as it relates to the circulation of print and visual culture. Finally, I pay close attention to the representation of the lived experiences of African Americans in 1930’s documentary modernism. Using *The Book of the Dead*, the Harlem Document and Ellison’s life histories, I explore how documentary modernism contends with race: rejecting a history of documentary, particularly photography, that relies on an association with evidentiary value to classify, objectify and inscribe negative identities, *The Book of the Dead*, the Harlem Document and Ellison’s life histo-
ries contribute to the production, in print, visual, and, ultimately, American culture at large, of a more positive identity for African Americans.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms”

— Muriel Rukeyser

I was recently told that “no one climbs a mountain alone.” Intended to be taken both literally and figuratively, this advice could not be more apt for writing a dissertation. First, then, I owe a debt of gratitude to my committee, both past and present. Carla Kaplan has helped to guide my skyward trek; without her I would not be where I am today. Carla is a master of metaphors and I always left her office feeling ten times brighter and bigger. Patrick Mullen taught me that I could conquer theory—Marxist theory no less! Kimberly Brown was enormously influential in sparking my visual imagination; she helped me build a vocabulary for writing about photography and encouraged me to pursue an exam and then a dissertation in visual culture when it was still uncharted territory in our department. Victoria Cain joined my committee relatively late in the project; I am indebted to her for her thoughtful feedback on my chapter drafts, and for helping me articulate my larger argument. Alison Nordström has known me since I was a sixteen-year-old intern, working for her at the Southeast Museum of Photography and having to be chided for reading Vonnegut at a Gordon Parks opening. I know better now, and I’m so glad she’s here to see that. I can’t thank her enough for all of her support of Templeton & Templeton over the last twenty years.
My colleagues at Northeastern are too many to name here, and for that I am blessed. My peers have always been the heart of the program at for me, keeping me going through tough climbs. Thanks go to Laura Hartmann-Villalta and Mina Ino Nikolopoulou for reading chapter drafts and providing the support that only dissertation sisters can. Heather MacNeill Falconer’s sense of humor—and first-hand knowledge that there is no such thing as work-life balance when you’re a graduate student and have a young child—kept my sanity in check while I was writing. Melissa Daigle has been a steadfast ally in the Department, always ready to provide advice or answer a question.

I also wish to acknowledge the mentors who were influential during a seminal time in my life, when I was living in London from 2001-2003, and looking homeward with a fresh perspective on American literature and history that would eventually shape my dissertation topic. I am grateful in particular to Kasia Boddy and Danny Karlin, who mentored me at University College London while I was working on my Master’s in English.

My family and friends deserve a profound measure of thanks, for seeing me through what has been a decade-long endeavor. My husband, Matt Templeton, and my daughter, Ella, have been my anchor and my gravity, respectively, keeping my tethered to reality and to what matters most. My Aunt and Uncle, Janice Redman and Rob Dutoit, provided endless kindness and cups of tea during a writing retreat—and beyond. My Dad, Charles Dutoit, has always been so proud of everything I am and do, and that has helped me see this project to its completion. A huge thank you to my girlfriends who have given me advice, listened when I was frustrated, or just made me laugh when I needed a break from academia: Katie Bennett, Lorena Howard, Maggie Connors, Megan Cronin, and Wendy Withrow, I love you all.
Finally, I am indebted to the practitioners whose work I consider in the following pages, especially Muriel Rukeyser. While I’m not normally superstitious, when I discovered that I was born the day after Rukeyser died, I felt as if fate had set *The Book of the Dead* in my path. A childhood of reciting prayers from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and reading novels, including Zilpha Keatley Snyder’s *The Egypt Game*, suddenly became preparation for this undertaking. Moreover, Rukeyser’s belief in the makeup of the universe—“stories, not atoms”—was the elegant articulation of my belief in the power of stories to illuminate the truths we seek. It is in stories, whether they are told in images or text, that we find our better selves.

Here’s to our better selves.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muriel Rukeyser’s Documentary Aesthetic in <em>The Book of the Dead</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“244,000 Native Sons”: The Photo League’s Harlem Document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Capturing the Idiom”: Ralph Ellison, <em>Invisible Man</em> and the Federal Writers’ Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: CODA 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Radical Eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY 90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

While documentary had existed as a practice since the invention of photography in the mid-1800’s, it wasn’t until the second half of the 1920’s that such practices were even called documentary. The term was coined in 1926, by film critic John Grierson. British-born Grierson first used the term documentary, from the French word for travel films, *documentaire*, to describe filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s *Moana*, an ethnographic film about a Polynesian girl (Gander 3).¹ The growing interest in practicing and theorizing documentary reflected advances in both technology—cameras had become cheaper, lighter, smaller and therefore more portable—and the social sciences, which galvanized and legitimized documentary as a genre for social reform. However, it wasn’t until the 1930’s that documentary became an artistic and cultural phenomenon, when it reached its apex in New Deal America.

The category of documentary in the 1930’s was not limited to photography and film. Rather, documentary was notable for its breadth. The documentary “impulse” in this era included the government-sponsored output of the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information (FSA-OWI); proletarian fiction, including John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*; the Federal Theatre’s Project Living Newspapers; the Federal Writers’ Project Life Histories; the collection of folklore by anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, among others; Pare Lorentz’s government-funded series for the United States Resettlement Administration; the collaboration between Flaherty and Eliot Frelinghuysen, which led to the creation of the 16mm film and its exhibition in schools and universities; and the influence of Sergei Eisenstein, whose films had a profound impact on the development of documentary in the United States, including his *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Flaherty, the director of *Moana*, previously directed *Nanook of the North* (1922) (Gander 3).²

---

1. Grierson was responsible for introducing American audiences to Sergei Eisenstein’s films, “arranging for the first US screening of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)” (Gander 3). Flaherty, the director of *Moana*, previously directed *Nanook of the North* (1922) (Gander 3).
ernment-sponsored film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*; photo-texts such as Margaret-Bourke White and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices*; and works of fiction with a focus on American life and its decline, such as John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A. Trilogy*. Much of the culture produced during this period and labeled (then or now) as documentary was explicitly or implicitly political, either in its direct relationship of patronage to the New Deal (e.g. the FSA-OWI and Federal One, as the Federal Art Projects were collectively known) or its affiliation with the Cultural Front, the cultural arm of the Communist Party’s Popular Front, which manifested in 1934 in alliance with—rather than against, as the Party’s Third Period had been—Roosevelt’s Social Democracy and New Deal reforms.

It is also significant that, while some of its practitioners were African American—Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright are notable standouts—many more of documentary’s *subjects* were African American. To be clear, many of the documentary images taken during the 1930’s were intended to depict those most affected by the Great Depression, and African Americans were disproportionately affected (Massood 92). Shawn Michelle Smith, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” in *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture*, argues that American visual culture “shapes the racialized formation of Ameri-

---

2 The term “impulse” is deliberately chosen for its reference to both an outward (“application of sudden force [. . .] a thrust, a push”) and internal (“incitement or stimulus to action arising from some state of mind or feeling”) force, suggesting the documentarian’s deliberate *act* of photographing, writing, etc. (“Impulse, n.”). It also implies the not always voluntary relationship between the audience and the photograph/text and, by extension, its subject. And, because “impulse” also contains “pulse,” I use the term to suggest the circulation and reproduction of images and texts during the 1930’s. These images continue to resonate and define the 1930’s; the idiomatic expression “finger on the pulse” is therefore also relevant.

3 The rising tide of fascism in Europe precipitated the Popular Front’s emergence and ultimate union with Social Democracy; although some of the work produced by the Cultural Front was not necessarily *pro-* government, it was also not explicitly *anti-*government, either. Its purpose was in advancing a change to the prevailing social relations that led to the Great Depression in the first place.
can identities” as much as it reproduces it (5). While her analysis focuses on an earlier period of American visual culture (1839-1900), Smith’s theory is nonetheless instructive in considering how photographic images, particularly those of African Americans, were produced and consumed in New Deal America. In this vein, Paula Massood, in Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film, demonstrates how photographs and films (both documentary and non-fiction) of young, male African Americans taken and circulated in the 1930’s contributed to the creation of the black gangster, an embodiment of American criminal activity. The subjects of this dissertation, Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead, the New York Photo League’s Harlem Document, and the life histories writer Ralph Ellison collected while working for the Federal Writers’ Project in Harlem, feature African American subjects. However, The Book of the Dead, the Harlem Document and Ellison’s life histories, in exemplifying documentary modernism, I argue, all create positive representations of the lived experiences of African Americans in New Deal America.

**Documentary Modernism: History / Critical Theory**

The emergence of this widespread documentary impulse in the 1930’s has long been of interest to scholars, beginning with literary critic Alfred Kazin’s dismissal of documentary as “inchoate realism” in On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (1942). This early definition persisted until William Stott, historian and author of Documentary Expression and Thirties America (1973), rescued documentary from scholars’ relative neglect. Stott claimed for documentary a privileged place in the artistic output of 1930’s America, arguing that it was the dominant mode of expression. Stott describes the era’s documentary impulse as that which
treats the actual unimagined experience of individuals belonging to a group generally of low economic and social standing in the society (lower than the audience for whom the report is made) and treats this experience in such a way as to try to render it vivid, ‘human,’ and—most often—poignant to the audience. (Stott 62)

Stott’s definition is charged: it assumes, for better or worse, a subordinate relationship between subject and viewer, and that the practitioner of documentary will mediate their experience in such as way as “to render it vivid, ‘human,’ and … poignant” (Stott 62). The emphasis for Stott is on evoking feeling to achieve a particular social outcome for those less fortunate than the practitioner and the document’s intended audience. He also makes a distinction between impersonal, historical documents and personal documents. In the historical documents category he includes Social Security cards and newspapers: “written or printed paper bearing the original, official, or legal form of something, and which can be used to furnish decisive evidence or information” (qtd. in Stott 6). Personal documents are primarily human documents and, while Stott notes that they may contain the information of a historical documents, feeling comes first. It is in this latter category, the personal—or human—document which Stott argues 1930’s documentary belongs. He defines it more specifically as “the presentation or representation of actual fact in a way that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time” (Stott 14; emphasis mine). He also notes that “[t]he heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content” (Stott 14). This capaciousness definition allows Stott to include, in his definition of 1930’s documentary, not only documentary photography but also documentary non-fiction, documentary reportage, informant narratives, documentary fiction and photo-texts. Stott’s study of 1930’s documentary remains a comprehensive and valuable source, even while his recovery of the documentary movement was erroneously reductive. That is, he united it with the Popular Front, a
disservice to both documentary and the Cultural Front in that documentary “became” the product of one political philosophy and the entire output of the Cultural Front was erroneously reduced to documentary.\(^4\)

Shortly after Stott, and drawing on Marxist theories of hegemony, John Tagg convincingly argued that photographic projects sponsored by the New Deal as evidence of reform actually served as the reform, distancing its downtrodden subjects from its more well-to-do viewers and thereby consolidating middle-class values. However, more recent scholarship on documentary photographs and texts from the 1930’s have revised Tagg’s theories, instead arguing that the subjects of documentary disrupt the hegemonic narrative constructed through this genre. Countering claims that the bulk of the documentary output of the 1930’s had a normalizing function, which had been the consensus within documentary and visual studies throughout much of the 1980’s and 1990’s, Jeff Allred, in *American Modernism and Documentary Depression*, argues that documentary is a thoroughly modernist practice that uses a disruptive aesthetics of “interruption.” Locating the photo-texts *You Have Seen Their Faces, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *12 Million Black Voices* at this intersection of documentary and modernist practices, his reading also makes use of Barthes’ Operator / Spectator / Spectrum model, privileging the Spectator and Spectrum to allow extended explorations of both the audience and subjects of 1930’s documentary.

Joseph Entin, a literary scholar who also makes use of Marxist theory, makes a similar claim in *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*

\(^4\) Michael Denning, devoting a mere page and a half to documentary as in his groundbreaking 1998 study, *The Cultural Front*, describes it as a “peculiar” response to modernity (119). Understandably so, Denning gives short shrift to documentary in order to disassociate it from the Popular Front, as Stott, writing decades earlier, had done. However, “peculiar” is also a pejorative term, connoting an aberration; it suggests that while documentary is a response to modernity, it is not the normal, or natural, one.
Using Aaron Siskind’s Photo League images of Harlem as one example of “sensational modernism,” he argues that Siskind’s photographs destabilize traditional documentary aesthetics (Entin 31). The photographer’s images, Entin claims, are sensational and therefore disruptive. Thus, claiming documentary as a modernist aesthetic practice opens up space for the practitioners and subjects of documentary to destabilize the production and consumption of photographic images and text that inscribes a specific, and most often negative, identity.

In short, scholars in literary and visual studies have begun to acknowledge documentary modernism as a viable and ripe category for analysis; my dissertation contributes to that ongoing conversation. In it, I explore three different documentary genres—poetry, photography, and life history—in order to illuminate how producers of documentary engaged modernism to explore the economic, political and social tumult of the 1930’s. Focusing on Muriel Rukeyser’s poem *The Book of the Dead*, the New York Photo League’s Harlem Document, and the life histories writer Ralph Ellison collected while working for the Federal Writers’s Project in Harlem, I use formal analysis and archival research to chronicle the cultural conversations and working relationships of practitioners of modernist documentary in the 1930’s. Like scholars before me, my research reveals that documentary emerges in the 1930’s as a profoundly modernist practice.

My use of archival and understudied sources, including private correspondence, archival photographs, photo-texts in 1930’s “picture magazines” *Look* and *Fortune*, and Federal Writers’ Project life histories held by the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, distinguishes this dissertation from other studies, as does my interdisciplinary approach to the material. By bringing contemporary visual theory to bear on literary texts and by integrating visual sources into my analysis, I build upon existing studies in documentary modernism, allowing us to better
understand the complexity of the documentary response of the 1930’s, particularly as it relates to the circulation of print and visual culture.

Finally, I pay close attention to the representation of the lived experiences of African Americans in 1930’s documentary modernism. Using *The Book of the Dead*, the Harlem Document and Ellison’s life histories, I explore how documentary modernism contends with race: rejecting a history of documentary, particularly photography, that relies on an association with evidentiary value to classify, objectify and inscribe negative identities, *The Book of the Dead*, the Harlem Document and Ellison’s life histories contribute to the production, in print, visual, and, ultimately, American culture at large, of a more positive identity for African Americans.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter Two, “Muriel Rukeyser’s Documentary Aesthetic in *The Book of the Dead,*” analyzes Rukeyser’s poem along with the poet’s archival correspondence and photographs taken by her friend, documentary filmmaker and photographer Nancy Naumburg, at the site of the Hawk’s Nest industrial disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, the setting for and subject of *The Book of the Dead*. The Hawk’s Nest incident remains the worst industrial accident in American history. In 1927, a subsidiary of Union Carbide & Coal contracted with a local Virginia company to hire workers to construct a tunnel at the base of Gauley Mountain through a vein of nearly pure silica (Spangler). The workers, the majority of whom were African American, were not given adequate protection as stipulated by the U.S. Bureau of Mines; as a result, hundreds, if not thousands, died from silicosis, a lung disease. The disaster and initial cover up by Union Carbide garnered national media attention and eventually an investigation by the U.S. House Committee on Labor in 1936.
Rukeyser elegantly and elegiacally pays tribute to the lives of the workers in *The Book of the Dead* using a documentary mode that fuses historical documents including testimony, transcripts and stock quotes with a narrative perspective that embodies a photographic way of seeing (i.e. “the camera eye”). My analysis of Rukeyser’s poem uses archival sources, including Naumburg’s photographs, as well as Ruksyer’s personal correspondence. In this chapter, I argue that Rukseyer’s deft use of documentary techniques with a self-consciously modernist aesthetic allows her to sympathetically treat and ultimately universalize African American miners’ deaths at the hands of a large American corporation.

Chapter Three, “‘244,000 Native Sons’: The Photo League’s Harlem Document,” considers the history of the Photo League and extant images from the Harlem Document, a joint project between members of the New York Photo League and Matthew Carter, an African American journalist posing as a sociologist. This collaborative project resulted in seven exhibitions in the late thirties and at least two publications, photo-text essays in *Fortune* and *Look* in 1939 and 1940, respectively. The planned book, however, was never published. An analysis of “244,000 Native Sons” and “Harlem,” an additional photo-essay published in *Fortune* in 1939 featuring Harlem Document photographs by League members and text by Carter, reveals that the text and photographs often work at cross purposes, contradicting one another. The photographs taken by League members, I argue, embody a modernist documentary aesthetic in that they sacrifice neither social content nor aesthetic value. The result is photographic images that preserve the dignity and lived experiences of their African American subjects even when the accompanying text seems to undermine it.
In Chapter Four, “‘Capturing the idiom’: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man and the Federal Writers’ Project,” I explore how Ellison gained firsthand experience of the documentary aesthetic that defined the 1930’s when he joined the New York City branch of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1938. Ellison described his experience interviewing residents of Harlem for the FWP’s folklore project as one which allowed him to develop “a technique of transcribing that captured the idiom” of African American speech—a technique which gives Invisible Man much of its resonance (Mangione 256; qtd. in Banks xx). And although scholars have explored the significance of the Federal Writers’ Project on Ellison’s literary career, they have largely overlooked the life histories he submitted as part of his work for the folklore project, and their subsequent influence on Invisible Man. Ellison’s experience working for the FWP immersed him in a modernist documentary aesthetic that allowed him to perfect a technique for capturing the idiom of African American speech. Thanks to the experience of interviewing informants and collecting their stories, I argue, Ellison came to deploy documentary as a tool to create a visually rich discursive universe of African American experience.
CHAPTER TWO

Muriel Rukeyser’s Documentary Aesthetic in The Book of the Dead

In contrast to her contemporaries, such as Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, Muriel Rukeyser remains an obscure figure in Modernist studies. Partially recovered by feminist critics in the late 1970’s—Adrienne Rich called her “the mother of us all”—she produced diverse works, ranging from an early unpublished novel, to a handful of biographies on sundry public figures, to five decades worth of poetry. She was a prolific author throughout her life, active until her death in February 1980. Rukeyser is best known for her poetry, particularly The Book of the Dead.

Little has been published about Muriel Rukeyser’s early life. She was born in New York in 1913 to Lawrence and Myra Lyons Rukeyser. Her father was a wealthy industrialist who later fell on difficult financial times. Rukeyser attended the Ethical Culture School and Fieldston School from 1921-1930, and Vassar from 1930 until her graduation in June 1932. At Vassar, she was on the staff of the left-leaning Student Review and began to write for New Masses and other leftist publications and send poetry out to such publications as The New Republic. (Rich xii; Kertesz 391). In New York City, Rukeyser attended Columbia University in the summers of 1931 and 1932, studying “anthroplogy, [the] short story, and psychology” (Kertesz 391).

Rukeyser was known as a poet of some promise by the time she was 22—her first book, Theory of Flight, won the 1935 Yale Younger Poets Award—when she and close friend Nancy
Naumburg traveled to West Virginia in 1936 to witness first-hand the devastation of an industrial mining accident known as the Hawk’s Nest incident, which would directly inspire *The Book of the Dead*. But Rukeyser did not stay in West Virginia for long. As a young poet and journalist, she was drawn to Europe, particularly London’s literary scene, in the Summer of 1936, the eve of the Spanish Civil War (Kertesz 391). Sent by her editor to cover the People’s Olympiad in Barcelona, the anti-Fascist alternative to the Olympic Games—which were being held in Berlin under Hitler’s gaze—she fell in love with a male German athlete also headed for the Olympiad and crossed the border into Spain with him, experiencing the first days of the military coup in the Catalanian capital.\(^5\) For only five days, Rukeyser was immersed in an event which would inform her writing for the next forty years (Kennedy-Epstein). Returning to America from Spain, she began to work on *The Book of the Dead* and *U.S. 1*, the 1938 collection in which the poem appears, influenced by all she witnessed in Europe and West Virginia. *The Book of the Dead*, then, is also a poem that speaks for all oppressed—African American coal miner, Jew or Spanish Republican—and against all oppressors, corporation or dictator, an indictment of the profligacies of the 1930’s, at home and abroad.

**The Hawk’s Nest Disaster: America’s Worst Industrial Accident**

The Hawk’s Nest incident, also known as the Gauley Bridge disaster, remains the worst industrial accident in American history. In her 2008 collection of primary sources relating to the incident, Patricia Spangler writes that, “aided by the synchronic conversion of conditions unique

\(^5\) Rukeyser’s “lost” novel, *Savage Coast*, which was finally published in May 2013, contains many semi-autobiographical details from this tumultuous—and formative—episode in her life, which lasted from July 19 to 24, 1936 (Kennedy-Epstein ix). She later said Spain was “where I was born” (qtd. in Kennedy-Epstein vii).
to the 1920s, financially solvent corporations such as Union Carbide were quick to parlay a ruptured economy, a starving workforce and laissez-faire governmental oversight into fodder for unprecedented corporate profit” (xiii). In 1927, the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation created a subsidiary, the New-Kanawha Power Company, with the intent to “generate, produce, sell and distribute hydraulic, electrical and/or other power produced by water . . . both public and private” in the state of West Virginia (qtd. in Spangler 196). In 1933, West Virginia granted New-Kanawha approval “to construct [a] dam, hydro-electric plant and tunnel on New River,” to be known as the Hawk’s Nest tunnel (qtd. in Spangler 197). New-Kanawha then contracted with Rinehart and Dennis of Charlottesville, Virginia to hire workers to construct a tunnel at the base of Gauley Mountain through a vein of nearly pure silica—a deadly design, as it would turn out—in order to maximize profit. According to the U.S. Bureau of Mines, silica required “wet” drilling with a hydraulic drill in order to protect workers, but it was more time consuming, and the proper dust masks were to be fitted with a mouth filter rinsed every hour (Thurston 60). Instead, Rinehart and Dennis used a “dry” drill and most most workers went without masks of any kind, inhaling nearly pure silica into their lungs and contracting fatal silicosis (Spangler). The project, tellingly, also never operated as a public utility, instead providing both silica and water power to Union Carbide and its subsidiaries—not the public, as originally intended—and killing hundreds if not thousands of workers, the majority of whom were local African American miners looking for “safer” work than traditional mining.6

6 The actual number of dead are still unknown because many of the worker’s bodies were buried in unmarked graves and cause of death was attributed to pneumonia or other lung diseases. The Senate Hearings refer to 476 dead; subsequent investigations have suggested closer to 2,000 deaths (Thurston 60).
The Hawk’s Nest incident was a common topic in the press, especially the radical press, as Robert Shulman has documented. Rukeyser, a radical poet who wrote for the Communist-inflected *New Masses*, may have, in fact, been a “comrade”; despite published statements to the contrary, correspondence from her local Youth Communist League unit proves her political affiliations, if not her commitments. In a letter dated June 1934 from Y.C.L. Unit 409 secretary Paul Faber, he tells Rukeyser that her “consistent failure to attend unit meetings makes it necessary for the Buro [sic] to bring you up on charges and to consider the advisability of your expulsion” (Faber June 1934). However, a letter written two months later, in August states, “You cannot resign from the Y.C.L. You are either hanged by the enemy or expelled. A leave of absence now would be rather silly after all these years” (Faber Aug. 1934; emphasis in original). Thus, while Rukeyser was a *bona fide* member of the Y.C.L., her attendance at meetings was spotty at best; and her political beliefs—and her poetic vision—were more complex than the Y.C.L. may have been willing to accommodate.

With the Communist Party’s alignment with Social Democracy against Fascism in 1934, many writers who were Communists and fellow travelers became aligned with the Popular Front. Indeed, a number of critics have read Rukeyser’s poem as indebted to and reflective of Popular Front politics. Robert Shulman reads the poem as “radical documentary”: an achievement of High Modernism, “innovative documentary,” and Popular Front politics (Shulman 185).

---


8 Both Julius Lobo and Michael Thurston claim she was not a Party member. However, in conducting archival research at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, I have established Rukeyser’s membership in the Y.C.L. (Faber).
Thurston argues that *The Book of the Dead* achieves an “elegiac politics” through a combination of Popular Front politics and documentary modernism—that is, modernism infused with documentary techniques (Thurston 62). Julius Lobo, in analyzing Rukeyser’s script sketches for an unrealized film adaptation of *The Book of the Dead*, again looks to the Popular Front for clues to understanding Rukeyser’s poetic and filmic vision. John Lowney and David Kadlec emphasize *The Book of the Dead*’s racial politics. Lowney suggests that, for Rukeyser, Marxism could be a racial—as well as a revolutionary—politics, arguing that her poem has a dialogic relationship between individual and collective memory, with profound implications for “the collective power” of the (racially) marginalized voices the poet represents through documentary (Lowney 66). Kadlec, on the other hand, primarily focuses on Rukeyser’s use of X-ray technologies as they appear in the medical testimony of black workers involved in the Hawk’s Nest incident. Unlike Lowney, however, he argues that Rukeyser’s reading of this modern technology restores a “universalizing whiteness,” thereby sacrificing the racial for the class struggle—and a common critique of Marxist theory. Building on existing contributions that acknowledge *The Book of the Dead* as an example of documentary modernism, my own analysis of Rukeyser’s poem uses archival sources to illuminate the interplay of documentary techniques with a self-consciously modernist aesthetic. In *The Book of the Dead*, I argue, Rukeyser uses documentary modernism to both sympathetically treat and universalize the experience of African American miners’ deaths at the hands of a large American corporation.
Gauley Bridge: The Photographs

Two photographs. One depicts the interior of a shack in Vanetta, West Virginia, while the other reveals the exteriors of a group of shacks built alongside a train track that runs through the foreground of the grainy image. The interior photograph reveals a small slice of the occupant’s life: pots, pans, tins and various utensils hang neatly on a wall, part of which is papered over; there is a pipe stove towards the right side of the frame, a flour-sack cloth hung neatly on a clothesline. The overall effect is of a poor and pinched-together, though tidy, existence (Naumburg George Robinson’s Kitchen). The shacks in the exterior shot reveal little, other than their suggestive placement besides the railroad tracks. Following the curve of the railroad, a small group of men and a sign for “Vanetta” can just be made out. The seeming stillness of the humble shacks and men is in direct contrast to the movement suggested by the notably absent train, a modern machine ferrying men and raw materials to distant cities (Naumburg Shacks).

These photographs were taken by Nancy Naumburg, a documentary filmmaker and photographer who accompanied her friend Rukeyser on a trip to the Gauley Bridge area of West Virginia in 1936 (Kertesz 391). The kitchen in Naumburg’s photograph belongs to George Robison, a Union Carbide worker who figures prominently in The Book of the Dead, in “George Robinson: Blues.” We can read the exterior shot as a juxtaposition of the doomed and exploited workers (through their housing) with the railroad, which carried the raw silica to its final destination downriver (Spangler). Strikingly, though, these photographs, located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Walker Evans Archive, are incorrectly dated to the 1970’s, and are the only extant images from Rukeyser and Naumburg’s trip. They have also never been included in an
analysis of Rukeyser’s poem. That the trip to West Virginia directly inspired *The Book of the Dead* is certain; the presence of Naumburg as Rukeyser’s traveling companion and “model” documentary photographer, prefiguring Rukeyser’s documentary aesthetic in the poem itself, has itself been less studied, but remains no less important to a study of Rukeyser’s elegy to the miners who lost their lives at Gauley Bridge.

*The Book of the Dead*

In the introductory poem, “The Road,” two important subjects emerge that will recur through the poem cycle: West Virginia and the documentary photographer. West Virginia is invoked, of course, as the site of the disaster; in doing so, Rukeyser also draws on her reader’s likely awareness of the state’s troubled history, its own statehood a direct result of Virginia’s secession from the Union in 1861. To witness the landscape of West Virginia, Rukeyser, in the concluding stanzas of “The Road,” introduces a photographer, who “unpacks camera and case / [and] surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted image.” These early lines have a powerful double meaning, referring to both politics and aesthetics. They announce Rukeyser’s radical politics in that camera lenses, without correction, do produce “an inverted image”: the reference to the uncorrected image suggests the perverse ethical, political and economic circumstances of workers dying at the hands of their employers. Given Rukeyser’s political intentions, it’s tempting to link her use of the “inverted image” to Marx’s description of ideology as a *camera obscura* in *The German Ideology*: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from
their physical life processes.” Rukeyser’s invocation also acknowledges the role that documentary photography, as an enabling aesthetic metaphor, plays in her poem.

A cycle of 20 individual poems, *The Book of the Dead* can be read as a series of documentary photographs, as Robert Shulman suggests in his analysis of Rukeyser’s poem (183). The narrative poems often use devices from photography and film, like montage, and contain content you would expect to find in a Depression-era black-and-white photograph: in “Gauley Bridge,” the fourth poem in the series, a camera “sees the city / a street of wooden walls and empty windows, / the doors shut handless in the empty street, / and the deserted Negro standing in the corner.”

Though a poet by training, Rukeyser would have been very familiar with documentary photography; this was after all, the era of documentary photography, with the ubiquity of documentary images provided by the FSA and “picture” magazines such as *Life, Look* and *Fortune*. And, among her acquaintances and friends she counted Berenice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange—and, of course, Naumburg, whose involvement with the New York Photo League could certainly have familiarized Rukeyser with many of the current trends in documentary photography.

In addition to documentary photography techniques, *The Book of the Dead* incorporates evidentiary forms, such as: transcripts, including medical testimony, from the Senate hearings

9 These lines create an image not unlike one you’d find in Richard Wright’s 1941 *12 Million Black Voices*, which made extensive use of the FSA-OWI archives, the largest collection of documentary photographs from the 1930’s. The second stanza of “Gauley Bridge” includes a reference to a WPA Project itself: “nine men […] mending road for the government.” This suggests the influence of the FSA as well as Rukeyser’s familiarity with and fluency in the documentary mode.

10 Rukeyser’s friendship—or at least acquaintance—with these women is documented in archival correspondence held by the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.
convened in 1936 by the House Committee on Labor; Union Carbide and Coal stock quotes; letters written by afflicted workers and their families; and lines from the eponymous ancient Egyptian funerary text. “Philippa Allen,” for example, is composed of nearly verbatim testimony from Phillipa Allen, a social worker familiar with the Gauley Bridge tragedy. In addition to Allen’s testimony, Rukeyser also excerpts Emory R. Hayhurst’s medical testimony in “The Doctors” to powerful effect:

—Did you make an examination of those sets of lungs?
—I did.
—I wish you would tell the jury whether or not those lungs were silicotic.
—We object.
—Objection overruled.
—They were.

They “we” is, of course, lawyers for Union Carbide, the “they” workers’ lungs, representing the workers by synecdoche in a masterful use of what Stott described as exposé quotation, which “turns a subject’s most calculated utterance, his public statements, against him” (Stott 175). Letters written by afflicted workers include one from Mearl Blankenship, seemingly transcribed verbatim in the eponymous poem by Rukeyser: “my name is Mearl Blankenship. / I have Worked for you the rhinehart & Dennis Co / many days & many nights / & it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights.” The arrangement of Blankenship’s prose is certainly Rukeyser’s, with the end rhyme of “nights” and “lights.” However, because she preserves misspellings (e.g. both “tunnel” and “tunnell” are used) and errors in capitalization and syntax, it’s tempting to take this letter at face value. This direct, unedited testimony has the effect of gaining the reader’s trust and persuading them that their cause is just. Though the poet was certainly up to more than tran-
scription in *The Book of the Dead*, the use of evidentiary forms creates an expectation of faithfulness and certainty, part of the documentary aesthetic that Rukeyser is building here, line by line.

An archived transcript of a radio interview Rukeyser gave in 1938 upon the publication of *The Book of the Dead* gives us insight into Rukeyser’s intentions as to both her choice of Gauley Bridge for the “site” of her poem and the construction of the poem itself.

I feel that it is on material of this sort that poetry must now build itself, as well as on those personal responses which have always been the basis for poetry. The actual world, not some fantastic structure that has nothing to do with reality, must provide the material for modern poetry … This is heroic American material. The town of Gauley Bridge stands as a pattern for all those places where people are linked even in the middle of their suffering, where people fight against an evil condition so that other people need not go through the same fight …. I have tried to dramatize the Congressional investigations because the human testimony produced there was so powerful. ([U.S. 1] Typescript)

In this brief response, Rukeyser, asked to justify her “unusual” theme to her audience and her interviewer, provides a new setting for narrative poetry, the American landscape, and new heroes, the average American. At the same time, she renders the town and people of Gauley Bridge as representative of a universal struggle for justice, echoing not only great epic poetry but also current politics. Her comment about the dramatization of the Congressional recordings provides additional insight into her inclusion of so much of the testimony—it is “so powerful” and remains so in much of its “raw” state, providing an evidentiary backbone upon which to build her poem.

*The Book of the Dead*’s title refers to both the ancient Egyptian funerary papyrus of the same name and the literal dead, the hundreds of workers whose lives were lost to silicosis.
Rukeyser’s use of the Egyptian “book” (in fact a series of papyrus scrolls by the scribe Ani) is at once aesthetic and politically symbolic: the hieroglyphs’ beauty would surely have arrested her, as would the importance, in the text—and in ancient Egyptian belief—of the weighing of a heart against a feather at the entrance to the Egyptian underworld. One’s heart must weigh less than a feather—that is, one must be virtuous—in order to get into the underworld. The heart becomes a recurring motif in The Book of the Dead, and spells from the Egyptian Book are used to reinforce this. In “Absalom,” the first-person narrative of Vivian Jones, the mother of three sons—workers—who died of silicosis, is interspersed with Ani’s text:

Shirley was my youngest son; the boy.
He went into the tunnel.

My heart my mother my heart my mother
My heart my coming into being.

This refrain of “my heart” connects to a maternal theme (Vivian Jones and Isis, Osiris’s wife and maternal symbol), but also alludes to the weighing of the heart. The heart of 18-year-old Shirly would surely pass the Egyptian scale test against the feather. The Book of the Dead is a elegy to those workers who lost their lives and a scathing indictment of Union Carbide’s owners—whose hearts would not be feather light. At the same time, however, Rukeyser plunges her reader deep into American history and beyond—the European fight against Fascism, the Egyptian underworld—using documents and documentary techniques.

---

11 Kadlec notes that a heart-sized, hieroglyphic-covered Egyptian amulet was on view at the Met during the time Rukeyser was living in New York and composing The Book of the Dead (32).
“The Road”

Rukeyser published *U.S. 1*, the larger collection of poems in which *The Book of the Dead* appears, the same year the Federal Writers’ Project published their eponymous guidebook on the road that extends the length of the East Coast, from Florida to Maine (Shulman 186). This is hardly a coincidence, given that a favored subject of 1930’s writers was America and its highways and byways, often rendered using a documentary aesthetic. The inaugural poem of *The Book of the Dead*, “The Road,” refers to both U.S. 1 and similar American highways, as well as the Egyptian road to the underworld, emphasizing the layered meaning of the larger poem’s title.

“The Road” is a narrative poem that sweeps the reader across the landscape of the U.S., down into West Virginia, a land rich in mineral wealth, and the site of the exploitation of the tunnel workers. The poem, composed of twelve stanzas of three lines each, can be read as an account of the road trip she and Naumburg took, past the “well-travelled six-lane highway planned for safety”:

These are the roads to take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry.

The “dear friend” to which Rukeyser refers is almost certainly Naumburg; a perusal of their private correspondence makes clear that their relationship was at once intensely personal and professional. An undated (and unfinished) letter to Naumburg reads “I have always had an idea

---

12 The correspondence to which I specifically refer can be found in the Muriel Rukeyser file in the the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.
that if I saw you or heard from you poems would leak out of my fingers,” conveying the intensity of emotion Rukeyser felt for Naumburg, as as well as the writer-muse relationship they had (*Incomplete drafts to Nancy Naumburg*). In fact, Naumburg, in addition to traveling with Rukeyser to Gauley Bridge, also provided advice and inspiration upon their return to New York. In a letter dated April 6, 1937, Naumburg provides the poet with a “general outline,” encouraging her to focus on certain aspects of Gauley Bridge, including a description of silicosis and its symptoms, first-person interviews with workers such as George Robison (whose kitchen she photographed), and the silica-lined tunnel itself, “a splendid thing to look at, but a terrible thing to contemplate.”

There is also evidence Naumburg had read drafts of *The Book of the Dead*, as she refers at one point to “your [Rukeyser’s] first two sentences, I would suggest . . .” (qtd. in Spangler 186). The papers read with “morning inquiry” are a reference to the wealth of press Hawk’s Nest received in the mid-1930’s.¹³ There is an emphasis on urban and suburban environments (“the suburban station” and “tall city”) as well as on the natural landscape of Virginia: “Select the mountains, follow rivers back, / travel the passes.” As the reader travels with Rukeyser from the city to the country, from New York to Gauley Bridge, the landscape becomes “fierce,” “braced,” and “vicious”—a force with which to be reckoned, much like the poem itself. One is also reminded of Naumburg’s photograph of the West Virginia landscape rising from the railroad tracks as they “travel the passes,” the stunning landscape of West Virginia, though impoverished, coming into focus.

Rukeyser’s focus on West Virginia is deepened in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas, in her reference to John Marshall. Marshall was the fourth Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and largely responsible for equalizing the Supreme Court with the executive and legislative branches. Before his tenure on the Supreme Court, however, he was a boy on the Virginia “frontier,” and it is this dual history to which Rukeyser refers: “John Marshall named the rock (steep pines, a drop / he reckoned in 1812, called) Marshall’s Pillar, / but later, Hawk’s Nest. Here is your road.” Marshall was already Chief Justice when he visited the site in 1812, and the name Marshall’s Pillar, for a cliff often used by fish hawks on the New River, fell out of use by 1840. As a Federalist, Marshall would have advocated for more, not less, government regulation, of the type that could have prevented the disaster, which Nancy Naumberg called “a terrible indictment of capitalism” in a letter she wrote to Rukeyser in 1937 following their trip to Gauley Bridge (qtd. in Spangler 186). The reference to one of West Virginia’s—though in Marshall’s time it was still part of Virginia—famous sons provides a transition to the second poem, “West Virginia,” which is steeped in the state’s history.

“Philippa Allen”

The third poem in the series is a long single-stanza poem composed entirely of New York social worker Phillip Allen’s testimony before the House Committee on Labor. The House Committee convened hearings in 1936 “to ascertain the facts relating to health conditions of workers employed in the construction and maintenance of public utilities” (qtd. in Spangler xv). Though New-Kanawha, Union Carbide’s subsidiary, had never provided any public services, media coverage of the silicosis outbreak spurred Congressional action. Allen, who had ties to
both Gauley Bridge and radical politics, was the first to testify before the Committee. Her opening statement appears, nearly verbatim, in “Phillipa Allen.” Rukeyser uses enjambement and other poetic techniques to affect the look and feel of Allen’s original testimony and create a sense of visual cadence—in other words, to turn it into poetry:

— I have talked to people; yes.
   According to estimates of contractors
   2,000 men were
   employed there
   period, about 2 years
   drilling, 3.75 miles of tunnel.
   […]
   The contractors
   knowing pure silica
   30 years’ experience
   must have known danger for every man
   neglected to provide the workmen with any safety device. . . .

The phrase “I have talked to people; yes” does not appear in Allen’s opening statement. Rukeyser creates the illusion of a conversation between Allen and a Congressman when, at this moment in her testimony, Allen was most likely reading a written statement she had prepared. Rukeyser takes other poetic liberties, adding phrases like “knowing pure silica” and “must have known danger for every man” and stripping language down to its essentials by removing conjunctions

14 Rukeyser, along with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, helped to invent what is now a tradition of “redirected language” in poetics. Brian Reed’s essay on “In Other Words: Postmillenial Poetry and Redirected Language” (Contemporary Literature, 52.4) considers the twentieth-first century incarnation of this tradition, including Coal Mountain Elementary, a long poem on a similar subject by Mark Nowak that fuses politics and poetics in much the way that The Book of the Dead does.
and prepositions.\textsuperscript{15} The overall effect is a staccato of short, shocking statements establishing the guilt of New-Kanawha/Union Carbide.

This kind of literary “mining,” rather than stripping meaning away, builds up layers of meaning out of the raw material of the social worker’s testimony, palimpsest-like, as if the lines were the strata of a slow-forming geological formation. Indeed, in \textit{The Book of the Dead} “meaning accumulates”: “Rukeyser uses quick cuts, montage, and personally charged images as well as a range of public languages, including carefully edited and well-paced versions of the congressional hearings” (Shulman 184).\textsuperscript{16} The documentary evidence, then, is both evidentiary \textit{and} poet-ic. Here, Rukeyser draws on the power of documentary to suggest veracity, using poetry to, in her words, “extend the document” with an almost postmodern sensibility that acknowledges the 1930’s expectation that while documentary should express the truth, \textit{some} sleight of hand on the part of the poet or photographer was anticipated (Rukeyser 1938 146). That is, she is keenly aware of the still emerging “rules” of documentary.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} In the section quoted above, a 1” indentation indicates the presence of what we are to take as Allen’s—or perhaps the unnamed narrator’s—thoughts.

\textsuperscript{16} “I think that it would be misleading to describe my poem as narrative poetry in the ordinary sense. I have tried to write a series of poems which are linked together as the sequences of a movie are linked together. . .so that during the sequence the reader has built up for him the story and the picture” (Rukeyser \textit{[U.S. 1] Transcript}).

\textsuperscript{17} One only need to look at the controversy over Arthur Rothstein’s staged cow skull photographs from the 1930’s to understand that, as is now, the evidentiary value of photography was not indisputable (Morris). Yet, as Errol Morris’s contemporary commentary on the controversy in the \textit{New York Times} shows, there was a certain expectation, then as now, that photography \textit{should} capture certain truths, even if its practitioners, like Rothstein, were already leveraging the public’s faith in the medium to their—or their employers’—own ends.
“Gauley Bridge”

In the fourth poem in the series, “Gauley Bridge,” a twelve-stanza lyric poem, Rukeyser moves from using historical documents to practicing techniques informed by photography and film, such as montage. The subject of “Gauley Bridge” is the town itself, rendered with a modernist aesthetic that quickly becomes politically charged as the narrative—a sick worker’s visit to a doctor—unfolds. The first line of “Gauley Bridge” returns us to the perspective of the photographer-as-witness from the “The Road,” with a difference: “Camera at the crossing sees the city.” Here, instead of witnessing as a photographer, we, as readers, are invited to enter Gauley Bridge as the camera, to look past “wooden walls and empty windows” and a “deserted Negro” to see a little boy and his dog run past a crew of government workers only to “blur the camera-glass fixed on the street.” From this momentary loss of perspective—literal and also figurative—we witness the daily lives of Gauley Bridge’s inhabitants: past the railway tracks and the town’s hotel, its “hive”-like post office, a bus station, and cafeteria. Then, in the sixth stanza, we join “the man on the street and the camera eye”—a reminder that we are here as (mechanical) witnesses, not inhabitants, to the streetscape and the man’s visit to the doctor: “he leaves the doctor’s office, slammed door, doom / any town looks like this one-street town” (emphasis mine).

The implication, though, is clear: while Rukeyser may be recreating in verse what “looks” like Anytown, USA through the use of the camera eye, it is invisibly marked by silicosis. This “any town” was an image captured so frequently and hopefully for the New Deal’s public relations campaign by FSA photographers, but the “slammed door” and the doctor’s visit reminds us that this is not, in fact, “any town”: it is Gauley Bridge, where hundreds of men are sick and dying from silicosis, and the dead are buried in an unmarked grave. The man we’ve followed “cough-
ing” from the post office to the doctor’s office, his hasty exit a tell-tale sign of a silicosis diagnosis a reminder that Gauley Bridge, like a sixteenth-century plague town, is marked.

In the seventh and eight stanzas, the railroad tracks, mentioned earlier in the poem, move to the foreground:

Whistling, the train comes from a long way away,
slow, and the Negro watches it grow in the grey air,
the hotel man makes a note behind his potted palm.

Eyes of the tourist house, red-and-white filling station,
the eyes of the Negro, looking down the track,
hotel-man and hotel, cafeteria, camera.

The train and tracks, so prominent in Naumberg’s photograph of Vanetta, the worker’s camp, are visible here as well. They are a signifier of so much: in Rukeyser’s poem, as in so many modernists texts and in Naumberg’s photograph, they represent distant cities and a distant future, one that many in this small town will not get to experience. In “Gauley Bridge,” Rukeyser has given the inhabitants of Gauley Bridge a voice, yet she has rendered that “voice” through the mechanism of sight, specifically a camera’s eye and the eyes of the residents themselves. This is a poem, unsurprisingly, preoccupied with vision, with cameras and perspectives (tourist vistas or otherwise). “Gauley Bridge” concludes with an elegiac image not of an afflicted town, but of a tourist vista that mockingly confronts the reader: “What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to the city and overgrown with roses? These people live here.” Once again, Rukeyser reminds her readers who is the subject of *The Book of the Dead*.

---

18 The billboard eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* (1925) cannot be overlooked as an inspiration here.
“The Disease”

“The Disease,” comprised primarily of testimony from an unnamed doctor reading an x-ray, has a clinical, objective tone towards silicosis and the eventual death of the patient whose lungs it describes in great detail. The tone of “The Disease” contrasts with the intimate and intensely emotional tone of the previous poem in the sequence, “Absalom,” whose speaker is Mrs. Charles Jones. “Absalom” ends with the short stanza, “He shall not be diminished, never; I shall give a mouth to my son.” Rukeyser allows Jones to do just that by including her voice in verse. Here, Rukeyser is using documentary—both what is already part of history’s record and what she is creating—to make her own case, with her readers acting as judge and jury. The Book of the Dead, then, may be as much a part of the historical record—part archive, part poem—as any congressional document.

David Kadlec’s reading of The Book of the Dead draws heavily on Rukeyser’s use, and own reading of, x-rays. Linking photography and radiography, and drawing on John Tagg’s theories of the normative power of New Deal photographs, he writes that “‘The Book of the Dead’ performs a similar service to that of mass radiography, using its penetrating gaze to submerge difference central to the history of American labor and poetry in the 1930’s,” privileging the class struggle over racial differences (37). Kadlec’s argument is based on African American worker George Robison’s testimony before Congress, who at one point suggests that, covered in white silica dust, white men emerged white from the silica tunnel “just as black as the colored man,” thereby conforming to cultural norms that black men can never take on white face, only the reverse (qtd. in Kadlec 23). Instead, in “The Disease,” Rukeyser’s focus is on the black worker and his body.
The first two stanzas of “The Disease” are elliptical and fragmented, and would be straightforward if they were not so poetic:

This is a lung disease. Silicate dust makes it.
The dust causing the growth of

This is the X-ray picture taken last April.
I would point out to you: these are the ribs;
this is the region of the breastbone;
this is the heart (a white wide shadow filled with blood).
In here of course is the swallowing tube, esophagus.
The windpipe. Spaces between the lungs.

The reader is left little time to wonder what the silica dust causes the growth of, as the x-rays are immediately introduced in the next stanza: “these are the ribs; /… this is the heart…. / Spaces between the lungs. /… You’d say a snowstorm had struck the fellow’s lungs” (86). The lungs are an obvious focus, as the locus where the silica dust settles, ultimately causing death. Here, I depart from Kadlec in his reading of Rukeyser’s poem as reinforcing normative race relations in favor of the class struggle. In one example of what I see as a privileging of the racial struggle, Rukeyser includes testimony about the obvious whitening effects of the silica dust—“a snowstorm had struck the fellow’s lungs”—on what are statistically most likely the lungs of a black man, because the majority of workers at the Hawk’s Nest tunnel were black (Spangler). The typical “blackface” performance has been reversed, even if to tragic end. Rukeyser’s elegiac elevation of the black worker’s struggle is both universal and highly individual, as in the case of George Robison/Robinson.
“George Robinson: Blues”

“George Robinson: Blues” immediately follows “The Disease” in Rukeyser’s sequence, and it offers a counterpoint to the clinical, distanced perspective of the previous poem. The title “blues,” itself a reference to an African American music tradition, gives us a clue to Rukeyser’s method in this poem: improvisational, sampling from Robison’s testimony in some places in addition to her own language; and experimental, alternating line and stanza length, and using capitalization for emphasis. The speaker is George Robinson, after George Robison, a tunnel worker whose tiny, impoverished kitchen Naumburg photographed in Vanetta and who Rukeyser surely would have met if not interviewed, though the poem itself is primarily based on his testimony before Congress. Unlike Philippa Allen’s testimony, it is not reproduced verbatim; instead Rukeyser takes more liberties in her treatment of Robinson’s testimony.

The first stanza, like “Gauley Bridge,” introduces us to the town of Gauley Bridge, only this time is it through Robinson’s eyes:

Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand
    around, they let us stand
    around on the sidewalks if we’re black or brown.
    Vanetta’s over the trestle, and that’s our town.

Robinson could well be the “deserted Negro standing in the corner” from the first lines of “Gauley Bridge.” His claim that Gauley Bridge is a “good town” is belied by the reference to Vanetta as “our town”—a reference to class as well as racial differences. This claim is also undercut by the remainder of the poem, beginning with the second stanza: “The hill makes breathing slow... / and the graveyard’s on the hill.” Here, we are introduced to reduced lung capacity and the specter of death, a theme which will dominate the rest of the poem, bringing another
meaning to the “blues” of the title. In the third stanza, a statement from Robison’s testimony—“I
helped to bury about 35, I would say” becomes an interrogative refrain: “Did you ever bury thir-
ty-five men in a place in back of your / house, / thirty-five tunnel workers the doctors didn’t at-
tend / died in the tunnel camps, under rocks, everywhere, world / without end” (qtd. in Spangler
52). Rukeyser’s handling of Robison’s testimony is spare but effective: he also describes men
dying “under rocks” and how burial practices, which the poet elaborates upon in “The
Cornfield,” were not up to par (qtd. in Spangler 52).

In the second half of “George Robinson: Blues,” Rukeyser shifts her focus from death
and burial practices to the cause of those deaths: the pure white silica dust Robison describes in
his testimony. In the seventh stanza, Robinson notes that, despite the dangers, workers were im-
mEDIATELY called back into the tunnel after blasts: “hurry, hurry, into the falling rocks and muck.”
The final three stanzas describe the day-to-day conditions of the workers. Their water was milky
white from dust and no matter how much they cleaned their “clothes in the groves,” Robinson
laments “we always had / the dust.” He describes it, tellingly, as “white flour” that “twinkled”
and “really looked pretty down around our ankles” (emphasis mine). The final stanza is striking
for its very clear commentary on race. This stanza is very closely based on Robison’s testimony,
with the important alteration of a final sentence:

As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the
tunnel at night,
with a white man, nobody could have told which man was
white.
The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white. (emphasis mine)
In his testimony, Robison stated, “As dark as I am, when I came out of that tunnel in the mornings, if you had been in the tunnel too and come out at my side, nobody could have told which was the white man. The white man was just as black as the colored man” (qtd. in Kadlec 23).

Here, Rukeyser alters Robison’s testimony, which, as Kadlec has noted, is puzzling given how he has described silica’s whitening effects elsewhere. Was Robison’s testimony a slip of the tongue? Or was he adhering to cultural norms, as Kadlec argues? While we’ll never know, one thing remains clear: Rukeyser reverses Robison’s testimony, highlighting the whitening effects of the silica dust. And it is here, too, that Rukeyser, by subtly altering the historical record, creates a difference kind of memory, one that does not accommodate racist cultural norms. By distorting the Congressional record in verse, she changes history. True, Rukeyser has renamed Robison Robinson, as if to make doubly clear that the speaker of the poem is not George Robison, even while excerpting, in some cases verbatim, his testimony. In this moment where race becomes critical, Rukeyser rewrites Robison’s testimony, restoring the truth of the silica dust, and its whitening effects, to suggest that, far from essentializing race, silicosis and, by extension, the capitalist system that created the opportunity for the deadly disease, knows no color boundaries.

While for Rukeyser, the Gauley Bridge tragedy may not be only about race—even though David Kadlec makes an argument for this in his essay—it is certainly an important touchstone for her. Throughout The Book of the Dead, she casts her gaze wider, using the deaths of African American workers to represent a universal, international struggle, but she does so with a respect and a sensitivity that renders the lives of the dead workers nearly sacred. Her contribution, then, to the representation of and the understanding of the African American experience in 1930’s America should not be underestimated.
“The Disease: After-Effects”

In one of the final poems of the *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser leaves West Virginia and returns to Capitol Hill, specifically the chambers of the House of Representatives, offering her most powerful critique thus far of the inability of Congress to act by fusing the diseased body of the worker with the body politic. “The Disease: After Effects” is a narrative poem of twelve stanzas varying in length from one to fifteen lines long. It takes a sweeping view of the “after-effects” of silicosis, not only its now clearly devastating effects on Gauley Bridge, its inhabitants, and the miners involved in the Hawk’s Nest project, but those living across the U.S. The setting for the first stanza of the poem is the House of Representatives in session:

This is the life of a Congressman.
Now he is standing on the floor of the House,
the galleries full; raises his voice; presents the bill.
Legislative, the fanfare, greeting its heroes with
ringing of telephone bells preceding entrances,
snapshots (Grenz rays, recording structure) newsreels.

Shulman identifies this unnamed Congressman as Vito Marcantonio, a radical legislator who “represented an ethnically diverse congressional district in New York City’s 20th district of East Harlem […. and] was renowned for voting with his conscience rather than with his party,” as Rukeyser’s verse makes clear (Spangler 185). The senator, tellingly, does not escape the penetrating modern gaze: the camera and its analogue, X-rays, for the benefit of the news, those “snapshots (Grenz rays, recording structure) newsreels.”

---

19 Grenz rays, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology, “are a form of black light. Similar to ultraviolet light, x-rays, and gamma rays, these are all composed of photons, which are packets of electro-magnetic energy traveling at the speed of light. Grenz rays are produced at low kilovoltages giving them a very low penetration power. Half their energy is absorbed within the first half millimeter of tissue, which means that they do not penetrate beneath the skin” (“Grenz Rays”).
Grenz rays, a medical diagnostic used for viewing diseased lungs, Rukeyser begins to connect the government, in the figure of a Congressman, with the workers’ bodies. The bills introduced are no less radical than Marcantonio: an “embargo on munitions / to Germany and Italy / as States at war with Spain,” despite the U.S.’s official position of neutrality and isolation. Another bill would build “a TVA at Fort Peck Dam.” Finally, the bill to “prevent industrial silicosis” is introduced at the end of the first stanza (by Marcantonio).

Progressive Democrat Jerry J. O’Connell, who served from 1937-1939 and whose hometown was Butte is “the gentleman from Montana” introduced in the second stanza (“O’Connell”). The poet uses a dash to introduce the Congressman’s speech, who is reliving a childhood memory: a compelling personal anecdote of how his father, a striking miner in Butte, was shot by the sheriff and died from wounds sustained by the injury and “his disease”—silicosis:

—I’m a child, I’m leaning from my bedroom window,
clipping the rose that climbs upon the wall,
the tea roses, and the red roses,
one for a wound, another for disease,
remembrance for strikers. I was five, going on six,
my father on strike at the Anaconda mine;

This passage, so lovingly rendered by Rukeyser, captures a historical reality at the same time that it prefigures her damning appraisal of Congress’s inaction. Here, Rukeyser expands The Book of the Dead’s scope to include affected miners (and their sons, now Congressmen) across the United States, expanding the breadth of the disease—as well as its emotional depth—and thereby intensifying the elegiac nature of The Book of the Dead. Indeed, the disease is so widespread, it has the epic “proportions of a war”: “There are today one million potential victims. / 500,000 Ameri-

20 Marcantonio, like many Congressman, was involved in the official Congressional investigation.
cans have silicosis now. / These are the proportions of a war.” The inability of Congress to act is Rukeyser’s focus, noting in verse that only eleven—of 50—states have laws preventing industrial silicosis.

In the next three stanzas, Rukeyser’s verse become very focused, using modernist imagery to convey meaning. This is a narrator who, if not Rukeyser herself, possesses Rukeyser’s memories and political will. She begins with an aerial image:

No plane can ever lift us high enough 
to see forgetful countries underneath, 
but always now the map and X-ray seem 
resemblent pictures of one living breath 
one country marked by error 
and one air.

In his analysis of “The Disease: After Effects,” Shulman writes that “The X-ray and the ‘living breath,’ powerful emblems of silicosis, merge with the map of the ‘forgetful countries’ suggestive of the ‘embargo on munitions’ [in the poem’s first stanza] and the other ‘forgetful’ policies toward Spain, Germany and Italy that link them with Gauley Bridge as ‘one country marked by error and one air’” (231). To Shulman’s thoughtful analysis, I would add a visual component and emphasize Rukeyser’s connection of the Spanish Civil War and Gauley Bridge. The presence of Naumberg’s extant photographs, combined with the documentary technique on display elsewhere in The Book of the Dead, provide a strong visual component; here, in “The Book of the Dead,” vision (and technologies of sight; i.e. the X-ray) becomes a powerful metaphor for the complicated relationship between Congress’s inaction: their failure to enact laws to protect workers’ rights, to prevent disease on a catastrophic scale, and to act on a war abroad—the first war to use aerial bombardment—and whose casualties Rukeyser has witnessed with her own eyes.
Rukeyser intensifies the connection between the body and the body politic, and between blocked bills and blocked organs in the final four stanzas, ending the poem on a bleak note. She returns to a medical description of silicosis, another documentary technique incorporated into the poem:

It sets up a gradual scar formation;  
this increases, blocking all drainage from the lung,  
eventually scars, blocking the blood supply,  
and then they block the air passageways.

These blockages in the body notably produces “shortness of breath” and a “lack of vigor.” There is a sharp turn then to Congress, in the one-line stanza that follows: “Bill blocked; investigation blocked,” as if the same lack of vigor that characterizes the diseased body also seems to affect the body politic. At the same time though, in the final stanza, we as readers are reminded of the statistics, repeated from the fifth stanza: 500,000 suffering from silicosis, a million potential victims. As Rukeyser has all along, her scope is wide, using Gauley Bridge as an analogy for the whole country, and linking the plight of the workers to the soldiers fighting against Franco’s army in Spain.

“The Book of the Dead”

In the final, eponymous poem of The Book of the Dead, Rukeyser is at her most elegiac—and her most powerful—providing a damning assessment of the inability of the U.S. government to protect workers’ rights and, by extension, bodies. This is a poem fully elegiac in nature, mourning the loss of workers’ lives, in a lyric poem that relies less on documentary techniques than on the “echoes” of the those techniques she has already established throughout the
poem. Her strategy is to move full circle, returning to many of the themes she has already covered in the previous poems—the U.S. landscape, the Spanish countryside, the camera as a metaphor for sight—echoing, if not using, the documentary techniques she has already used to achieve her aesthetic and political vision.

The first line of “The Book of the Dead” mirrors that of the first line of “The Road”: compare its “These roads will take you into your own country” to “The Road’s” “These are roads to take when you think of your country.”21 The difference, here, is palpable: no longer on an expedition of discovery, Rukeyser’s final poem is a call to action:

What three things can never be done?
The hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain.

From the “hills of glass,” a reference to silica, Rukeyser moves across time and space: to the “thirteen clouds”—an allusion to the thirteen American colonies—and then to Europe and the “hero hills / near Barcelona.” Again, having so recently visited Spain, the Republican struggle for democracy, fresh in her mind, becomes inextricably linked with the struggle for workers’ rights in Gauley Bridge and mines across America. Rukeyser then refers to America’s “photograph of power”: its ability to act rendered visually. The second half of the poem shifts to an elegy for the workers, who “carr[ied] light for safety on their forehead / descended deeper for richer faults of ore / drilling their death.” These “[h]alf-memories,” Rukeyser writes, “absorb us.”

Again, though, Rukeyser asks us to “widen the lens”:

21 “These roads will take you into your own country” is the first line of the fifth stanza of “The Road,” verbatim.
Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,
to photograph and to extend the voice,
to speak this meaning.

Finally then, the photograph, the poem, this poem, becomes a revolutionary act. By combining documentary fragments and elegiac lyric poetry and using the camera as both a metaphor and a revolutionary tool, she helped to create a new modernistic documentary aesthetic in The Book of the Dead, one that decried the politics of the day, but also sent the buried dead off with “seeds of unending love.”

At the beginning of The Life of Poetry, published in 1949, Rukeyser wrote, “In times of crisis, we summon up our strength. Then, if we are lucky, we are able to call every resource, every forgotten image that can leap to our quickening, every memory that can make us know our power” (1). The Book of the Dead is a powerful invocation of Rukeyser’s strength as a poet: an amalgamation of her political will, reportage, research, and memory—a testament and memorial to the mainly African American workers whose lives were lost and an affirmation of her aesthetic and political commitments.
CHAPTER THREE

“244,000 Native Sons”: The Photo League’s Harlem Document

Intended as an indictment of the system which produced him, Richard Wright’s 1940 protest novel Native Son chronicles South Side Chicago native Bigger Thomas’s inevitable fate, a product of the prevailing social conditions which Thomas, like African Americans around the country, had to contend with on a daily basis. The immense popularity of Wright’s novel inspired the publication of a photo essay in the May 1940 Look magazine titled “244,000 Native Sons.” Although the content of the essay was actually several years in the making, a collaboration known as the Harlem Document between members of New York’s Photo League and journalist Michael Carter, the editors of Look introduced the essay with this hook:

Because this intelligent and profoundly moving novel is the most profound blow struck for Negros since “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” because it is sure to heighten interest in their problems, LOOK presents on these pages the story of Harlem, Negro capital of America—the single neighborhood in New York where 244,000 Negroes live. It is not pleasant—this story of how thousands of our fellow citizens live, under conditions which often produce vice and crime, but it is a story which every socially minded American must contemplate. (Carter “244,000”)

Tellingly, the Harlem Document hadn’t been Look’s editor’s first choice. Eager for a similarly themed photo-essay to appear in the magazine following the success of Wright’s novel, Look’s editor asked staff photographer Arthur Rothstein to shoot a Native Son feature. However, Rothstein was on assignment with the FSA and had to turn them down. Look next approached the
Photo League; when the article came out in May, the magazine published just 13 photographs out of the 106 the League had submitted, along with text and captions by Carter (Raeburn 238).

In *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film*, Paula Massood writes that Harlem—not Bigger and Wright’s native Chicago—served as the epicenter of African American culture, and a microcosm for understanding, and documenting, race relations, describing it as a “central metaphor” for New York’s photographers and writers (Massood 95). This chapter will explore Harlem, both as a “central metaphor” and as a geographical location, with real subjects and bodies, through the lens of the Photo League and the photographs taken by its members there under the auspices of the joint project known as the Harlem Document. An analysis of “244,000 Native Sons” and “Harlem,” an additional photo-essay published in *Fortune* in 1939 featuring Harlem Document photographs by League members and text by Carter, reveals that the text and photographs often work at cross purposes, contradicting one another. The photographs taken by League members, I argue, embody a modernist documentary aesthetic in that they sacrifice neither social content nor aesthetic value. The result is photographic images which seek to preserve the dignity and lived experiences of their African American subjects even when the accompanying text seems to undermine it.

**The Photo League**

The Photo League had its conceptual origins in the American search for a New Deal, what former League member Lou Sterner aspirationally described as a “huge progressive move-

---

22 As I explore in Chapter Four, Harlem was also a site for the government patronage, where photographers, writers and white-collar workers were employed by the New Deal to capture both the desperation of the Great Depression and evidence of its gradual retreat under the largesse of the New Deal.
ment of hundreds of thousands of people” (qtd. in Panzer 33). There were also close ties to Communism and its left-leaning tendencies were well known.Originally part of the New York chapter of the Workers Film and Photo League, a party-line organization dedicated to the social value of film and photography, and privileging the former medium, the Photo League came into being in 1936 when the Film and Photo League had a schism over the intrinsic value of film versus photography and the artistic merits of both. The Photo League, naturally, fell on the side of photography and, while valuing social content as an organization privileging documentary photography, wanted photography to be seen as an “autonomous artistic practice” in its own right (Raeburn 224). During its fifteen-year operation, the Photo League opened its doors to over a thousand students, with dark-room access, classes, and exhibitions and lectures by well known photographers. Indeed, many “prominent photographers such as members of the Farm-Security Administration (FSA), Dorothea Lange, Jack Delano, John Vachon and Arthur Rothstein, those associated with f.64 such as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, and leading photo-journalists such as Berenice Abbott, Eliot Elisofson, W. Eugene Smith and Margaret Bourke-White took out membership or gave the group credence” (Dejardin 159).

Sidney Grossman, along with photographer Aaron Siskind, were the two main teachers at the League. Grossman was the Director of the Photo League school from 1936-49, while Siskind was the head of the Features Group, which was responsible for collaborative long-term documentary projects such as the Harlem Document (Dejardin 160; Panzer 36). By 1947, the

---

23 Although it was never as radical as the Workers Film & Photo League, the Photo League was eventually shut down in 1951 during the Red Scare, “having been deemed ‘subversive’ by the U.S. Attorney General” (Panzer 33).

24 Grossman, at the same time he was teaching for the Photo League, was also drawing a paycheck as a laborer for the WPA (Dejardin 160).
League had trained approximately 1,500 students in the art of documentary photography (De-jardin 159). Grossman encouraged students enrolled in Photo League classes to view “photography itself as an act of living, a way of increasing his [sic] knowledge of the world” (qtd. in Panzer 36). His teachings also reinforced the League’s belief in photography as an artistic practice: “Aesthetics does not exist for the camera as an isolated identity. Aesthetics, in fact, is inseparable from the purpose of the photographer and the use he makes of his theme” (qtd. in Panzer 36).

The League, under Grossman, recognized the epistemological value of photography for practitioners of documentary photography. At the same time, it considered modernist aesthetics integral to the social value of photography. Photography, then, goes beyond a metaphor for a way of seeing, as it does in Rukeyser’s Book of the Dead, and becomes a physically embodied way of living for the members of the Photo League.

Recognized as “one of the era’s most sensitive recorder’s of African Americans,” a photograph taken by League Member Consuelo Kanaga in 1950 amply illustrates Grossman’s teachings in practice (Raeburn 235). The figures in She is a Tree of Life, II, Florida, an African American family, pose in an aesthetically pleasing pyramid shape. Here, Kanaga tends to the aesthetic, rendering imperceptible the boundary between content and form—a hallmark of Photo League photographs. At the same time, the photographic image reveals a glimpse of the material hardships of living conditions in the South in 1950’s America through the holes in the boy’s shirt made visible by his raised elbow. The mother gazes away from the viewer into the distance, while the two young children disrupt the viewer’s sense of middle-class privilege by facing the viewer head on (Kanaga). There is no evidence of New Deal reform here, only destitution, yet it is not abstracted to the point of being rendered distant. In another photograph of the same family
in a similar pose by Kanaga, which was first exhibited at MOMA and then included in Steichen’s *Family of Man*, Mary Panzer writes that, “[i]n this subject Kanaga finds an opportunity to force preconceptions aside; extremes of light and dark make it impossible to see such a conventional portrait—the viewer has to look hard; no stereotype can survive such inspection” (36). The aesthetic works alongside the content—raising issues of poverty and racial stereotypes—to dispel the stereotypes to which Panzer refers. In other words, it was the aim of the Photo League to produce photographs with social content, but not to the detriment of the aesthetic.

Elizabeth McCausland, an influential 1930’s art critic and Photo League board member, was also a frequent lecturer for the League (Raeburn). In a typical lecture, she asserts the primacy of documentary and exhorts students to consider the social content of photography:

> In the 1930’s, the documentary school comes into its own, consciously and with mature intentions. That is a measure of the speed of the history and the powerful impact of social forces.

> So after the eccentricities of “art for art’s sake,” art returned to its historical role, as the spokesman of human experience and life. After a decade or so, when subject matter was déclassé, suddenly subject-matter became the ultimate criterion of art. A painting, a sculpture, a print, a photograph MUST have *content*, and not merely content of a personal or romantic character, but *social* content. (McCausland; emphasis in original)

Here, then, as voiced by McCausland, is a forceful return away from the 19th-century (and European) *l’art pour l’art* towards a more *American*, socially conscious-driven art, and one the Photo League, particularly the Features Group, fully embraced.
Harlem Documents

It would be an understatement to say that the Harlem Document has a complicated and fragmented history. Taken up by a group of primarily male, Jewish photographers (the Features Group, led by Aaron Siskind) in collaboration with an African American sociologist whose identity was constantly changing—in many senses the project was a failure (Berger 43). Taking place over four years, from 1936 to 1940, the project didn’t result in the planned book, which was to be divided up into eight sections—on “labor, health, housing, religion, recreation, society, youth, and crime”—and feature Carter’s “empirical analysis and hard statistics, bolstered by expert testimony and detailed ‘conditions for improvement of specific conditions’” (Berger 30). Instead, text by Carter accompanied images published in *Fortune* and *Look* in 1939 and 1940, respectively, and a much later book, *Harlem Document, Photographs 1932-1940: Aaron Siskind* (1981) that features the League images but not Carter’s text (Massood 95). The extant photographs are scattered and incomplete: some can be found at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; others in grainy copies of magazines from the late 1930’s and early 1940’s; still other notices of the project, such as brief exhibitions held in the late 1930’s, live on in the Photo League’s incomplete record, *Photo Notes* (Raeburn 229). And yet, the richness of the photographic images which do survive embody the philosophy of the Photo League, marrying a modernist aesthetic with a concern for social content and, ultimately, justice.

When, in 1936, Aaron Siskind’s Features Group was approached by an African American sociologist named Michael Carter to work collaboratively on a joint project known as the Harlem Document, they likely didn’t know Carter was not who he said he was. In reality, he was a Columbia University-trained journalist born Milton Smith who at various points in his life went by...
the Christian names Michael, Mikel and Mikal (Berger 43). John Raeburn, in his chapter on the Photo League in *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, notes that the work was collaborative in almost every way; the group met weekly, either at Photo League headquarters or at one of the photographers’ apartments, to critique each other’s photographs and plan subjects and shooting scripts (much like the FSA was doing) for the following week (Raeburn 229). Carter was almost always present for these meetings; because he was working under a presumed identity and profession, his contributions should be treated with caution.

Moreover, while much of the Harlem Document has been lost to history, an analysis of the extant articles can and has been made. John Raeburn offers a considered, thoughtful analysis of the Photo League and the available Harlem Document materials. His considerable attention to detail, particularly the exhibition history of the Harlem Document—photographs and text from the project were briefly exhibited around New York seven times in the late 1930’s—and the nuanced politics of the Photo League (not as radical as Fiona Dejardin claims) deserve praise. Raeburn, though, overlooks Carter’s unstable identity and he does not include the *Fortune* article in his discussion. Joseph Entin, in his chapter on Aaron Siskind and the Harlem Document in *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*, compellingly argues that Siskind’s images of African American residents of Harlem constitute modernist documentary by blending social realism with “a particular strain of American modernism” and by (self-)consciously entering into contemporary conversation on race relations (Entin 110). Entin’s analysis, however, is of *Harlem Document, Photographs 1932-1940: Aaron Siskind*, published in 1981 and featuring images by Siskind and text by the Federal Writers’ Project from the 1930’s (including one of Ralph Ellison’s life histories discussed in Chapter Four). The gap of nearly
forty years between when the photographs were taken and published, along with self-editing on Siskind’s part, makes this publication problematic for my own analysis of the Harlem Document, which seeks to interrogate “texts” that were published contemporaneously with the decade in which they were produced. Maurice Berger, in “Man in the Mirror: Harlem Document, Race, and the Photo League,” offers a more critical appraisal of the Harlem Document. He emphasizes the group’s whiteness (all of the photographers were white) and their failure to include African American photographers and ultimately provide a more accurate, nuanced depiction of Harlem: “The history of black self-representation that it ignored or did not know […] was august and consequential” (Berger). Berger’s claim cannot be ignored, and his analysis points to reasons why the Harlem Document may not have succeeded as a book project. My own discussion of the two feature-length articles published in Fortune and Look during the Harlem Document’s “lifetime” reveals contradictions at work between and within the texts; the photographs by Aaron Siskind and other Features Group members, however, in embodying a modernist documentary aesthetic seek to preserve the dignity and lived experiences of their African American subjects.

Fortune, 1939

Nearly a year before the publication of “244,000 Native Sons” in Look magazine, another Harlem Document photo-essay appeared in Fortune magazine, in July 1939. Fortune had begun publication in February 1930, a few short months after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 (Vanderlan). Part of Henry Luce’s Time/Life media empire, Fortune initially advertised itself as a periodical which would “represent business in ink and paper and word and picture as the finest
skyscraper reflects it in stone and steel and architecture” (qtd. in Vanderlan 92). Given the Wall Street Crash and ensuing Great Depression, the business-minded magazine soon found itself “increasingly [publishing] searching and critical investigations of the American industrial system” (Vanderlan 92). Gradually embracing the New Deal and championing social rights for poor and working-class Americans, *Fortune* had an editorial policy that was “open” to the labor movement and exposed rather than hid the effects of the Depression. This “radical capitalism,” as Vanderlan terms it, was largely due to the collaboration of poet Archibald MacLeish, one its star writers and later co-managing editor, and Ralph Ingersoll, the original managing editor (Vanderlan). At the heart of *Fortune*’s mission was the effort, according to Ingersoll, to “integrate journalism and literature” (qtd. in Vanderlan 111). Thus, investigative stories often had long descriptive opening passages. Following a crisis at the magazine in 1936 over what Henry Luce saw as its loyalty to capital and its editors and writers saw as an obligation to unbiased reporting, many of its most outspoken and radical writers left. *Fortune* was not the pointedly critical magazine in 1939 that it had been in the mid-1930’s, though it continued to feature documentary stories like the one of Harlem that appeared in July of 1939 (Vanderlan).

The theme of the July 1939 issue, intended to introduce its mainly white, middle-class readership to New York City, was the year-long World’s Fair being held in Flushing Meadows, New York (Massood 96). The issue also included features on city health, the garment district, immigrants and “mugging.” Carter’s essay in *Fortune* touches upon five themes—health, housing, crime, entertainment and religion—intended to introduce its readers to Harlem, in keeping with the theme of the issue. Unlike the *Look* essay, Carter is not identified as the author; however, individual photographers are identified, with each image credited to the photographer who
took it. The majority of photos are by Aaron Siskind; photos by League members Hansel Mi- eth, Wendell MacRae and Carl Mydans are also featured. Two very small photographs, of a danc- ing couple and a “voodoo” man, are credited to picture agencies in the article itself. The overall tone of the article is mostly negative, with few exceptions, and the text often overdetermines the images, which have the power to speak on their own.

On the first page of the article a photograph by Aaron Siskind shows a man employed by Father Divine hawking “Peace” and home-cooked food from the window of a building. One of the functions of religion in Harlem was social; Father Divine, referred to in the article as a “jack- leg” preacher, was popular for his social ministry, such as the meals he offered for 10 and 15 cents to residents of Harlem as an alternative to government aid. Siskind’s image is striking, not only for the juxtaposition of text—peace proffered along with food—but also for the hand-letter- ing of the sign, and for the figure of the man, dressed in white or light clothing, silhouetted against the dark window. Siskind’s composition has modernist elements in its composition, but it is not abstracted to the point of removing it from the social context; it remains firmly rooted in its surroundings—in this case, the Harlem ministry of Father Divine. Another photograph featured in the Fortune photo-essay is the image of a domestic interior which will also be featured, cropped, in the Look feature the following year. The photograph, again by Siskind, shows a mother and daughter sitting at a modest but amply supplied table in a cramped but tidy apart-

---

25 Multiple scholars, including Massood and Raeburn, have indicated that Carter was the author of the Fortune article.

26 In Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film, Paula Massood at-tributes all of the images in the Look article to Photo League photographers (95).
ment. In the *Fortune* article, the image has not been cropped to the same extent, and depicts clothing hanging from the line in the foreground. The effect here is to literally distance the viewers from the subjects in terms of framing; at the same time, it gives a more expansive view of the interior, revealing clean washing on a line, a sign that the child is cared for.

The text in the *Fortune* essay, primarily arranged in columns, two or three to a page, creates a heavy effect. That is, the text in *Fortune* works to make the photographs feel more illustrative—evidentiary—even if that is not the case. Beyond the visual representation of the text, because of the nature of the issue—meant to introduce a wider audience to the city of New York, and to Harlem, for the advent of the World’s Fair—more information is included about the borough, and it is clearly written for a white audience. For example, Carter makes frequent references to African Americans as “they” or “them” and informs readers of the history of the boroughs and the African American presence in trade unions, as well notable residents of Harlem. One striking difference between the *Look* and *Fortune* articles is the inclusion of the achievements of prestigious Harlem residents, such as “Dr. Louis Wright, an authority on brain injuries, who is a member of the American College of Surgeons and a leader of Harlem’s cultural and social life” (170). And although the article is peppered with facts and figures and the names of real inhabitants, fiction has a place, too. In describing Harlem’s “Bohemian group,” Carter refers to fiction from the Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing the motley character of the social set: “The Bohemian Group, made famous by Madame Walker and by Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, includes some of the top social stratum, intellectuals and artists, and also pimps and numbers

---

27 The original image by Siskind actually shows a third figure seated at the table to the left of the mother (Siskind). This succession of cropped images, first in *Fortune* and then in *Look*, is an excellent example of how a photograph’s meaning can be altered upon reproduction and for publication.
bankers” (170). It may be an accurate portrayal, but it is not necessarily the most flattering, or even comprehensive, depiction of Harlem society.

Finally, the materiality of the original article cannot be overlooked. Along with the World’s Fair theme of the issue, readers in 1939 looking for the last page of “Harlem” (text only) would have encountered an ad for Corning Glass, along with a full-page photograph of the Lincoln Tunnel at night, with a single car emerging from the brightly lit tunnel, and the caption: “There’s a Glass roof under the Hudson River…” (Carter 169). A stark contrast from the photographs and words describing Harlem, Fortune retained its alliance to industry through its advertising, if not its editorial, content.

Look, 1940

“244,000 Native Sons” was published in the May 21st, 1940 edition of Look magazine. In publication from 1937-1971, Look’s focus was predominantly on photographs, like its rival Life, which also began publication in 1937 (Massood 95). And like Henry Luce’s Life, Look capitalized on the decade’s preoccupation with documentary photography. In “A Look at Look,” Mary Panzer writes that “Look’s vision of America, as a democracy made up of families whose differences comprised the nation’s strength, was reflected in its deliberate focus on race, on women’s changing roles, on the new and the young, and on the underdog” (58). Look, like Fortune, was a bi-weekly publication, unlike Life, which was published weekly. The process of publishing a story was a collaborative effort under editor Daniel D. Mich, who was the publication’s editor from 1937 until his death in 1965 (Panzer 60). Typically, a staff writer and photographer pitched an idea to the editors; upon approval, the two went out into the field to cover the story.
Then, the art director and editor would assign the number of pages. Finally, all four would collaborate on the eventual story that appeared in the magazine (Panzer 60-1). “244,000 Native Sons” would not have been a typical collaboration, however, with the editors soliciting photographs and text from the Photo League and Carter; while we do know that *Look’s* editors winnowed the 106 submitted down to 13, it is not known how “collaborative” that process was with the League, and whether or not Carter’s text or captions were edited.

The photo-essay is subtitled “Bigger Thomas, tragic hero of ‘Native Son,’ was a victim of environment [sic]. Here, in a study of Harlem, *LOOK* portrays the kind of environment that produced him.” There are 13 black-and-white photographs and five sections of text spread over six pages: “Harlem Home,” “Harlem Delinquents in the Making,” “Potions for the Body, Prayers for the Soul,” “Harlem’s People at Play—A Feverish Pursuit of Happiness,” and “Harlem’s People at Work—On Jobs That Keep Them ‘In Their Place.’” Even a glance at the photographs, taken by Jack Manning, Aaron Siskind and other unnamed Photo League members, and text, it is clear the two are disjointed. The text contradicts the images and, at times, itself. For example, religion is described as a salve; Harlemites’ “souls are clean,” yet “crime is . . . plentiful” and “vice [e.g. prostitution] is as inevitably a part of Harlem as yachting, polo and private planes are a part of Park Avenue” (Carter 10, 12).

In the “Home” section, a small image of intimate domesticity—the same photograph by Siskind that appeared in *Fortune* the year before—is juxtaposed with a large, double-page photograph of an apartment block populated by residents who have come out on to the catwalks to

---

28 The *Look* article only identify the photographs as being taken by Photo League members. Several sources, including *Harlem Document, Photographs 1932-1940: Aaron Siskind* identify the authors of the images.
take in an Elks Parade in the street below. These images, which tell us little beyond a glimpse of a humble domestic scene, or Harlem residents’ enthusiasm for a parade, are meant to be taken of evidence of “squalor” (8). In a caption below the photograph of the woman and child, Carter’s text reads: “Such squalor as that shown above is not isolated, but depressingly typical” (8). Below the Elks Parade, the caption reads: “An Elks Parade brought these hundreds of Negroes from their packed apartments to dramatize the worst housing problem in New York” (8). The interior scene, instead of showing squalor, actually depicts a well fed child and a caring, if perhaps tired, mother. Similarly, the apartment block bursts with life, and the building itself undulates in shadow and light, alternating between romanesque arches and the rectilinear and triangular shapes made by the windows and catwalk ladders. The bodies of the Harlemites are also a contrast in color, between the white of their clothing and the black of their faces, arms, legs and hat bands. This is no abstract modernist composition—the figures are still firmly anchored to the building and their environment—but the modernist elements I’ve described above make it a remarkable photograph. It is also, tellingly, not the misery Carter describes.

In another section, “Harlem Delinquents in the Making,” a photograph of five young boys is captioned “Five Social Problems,” and readers are informed that the image represents “typical Harlem boys” (10). These boys have survived infant mortality, which Carter tells us kills one in 20 Harlem children. Like Bigger Thomas, these boys have to choose to either “accept” or “fight” their “social plight”: “To accept is deeply humiliating; to fight is to court trouble, for the odds are against him” (10). Massood, in her analysis of “244,000 Native Sons,” writes that while the aim of Carter’s text was “to influence the ‘socially minded American [to] contemplate’ the
effects of the substandard living conditions in Harlem on its residents (disease, infant mortality, delinquency), it just as often overdetermines the impact of the images” in its heavy handedness (97). The image of the five boys has a similar impact as the photographs of the spectators at the parade: five young faces, some looking directly at the camera, some frowning, some smiling, some staring off camera. It’s hard to know what these boys are thinking at the this moment; impossible, even with the twin problems of poverty and racism, to predict their future. They defy the text’s dire tone, even with the “odds” against them.

Unlike many documentary images which were produced in the 1930’s, including many for the government by the FSA, Entin contends that Siskind’s photographs in Harlem Document do not “[efface] its politics” (43). Heeding Walter Benjamin’s warning of the dangers of photography in producing “aesthecized images of dire poverty, turning representations of social inequity and oppression into artifacts of artistic appreciation and contemplative pleasure,” Entin’s reading of Siskind’s photographs focuses on the tension between photographer and subject, arguing that modernism and documentary function dialectically, “each mode producing the conditions for the other’s interruption” (Entin 8, 112). My reading of the images in “244,000 Native Sons,” like Entin’s, focuses on the relationship between documentary and modernism; however, unlike Entin, I move away from a reading that looks at the more “sensational” aspects in play; in fact, it is my contention that the less sensational images work more slowly on the viewer, transcending their perceived evidentiary value through a powerful insistence on both modernist aesthetics and social content.

The remaining four sections on Harlem cover life, health, religion, play and work, with corresponding photographs and text. Carter’s text, like that in the sections on housing and youth,
often contradicts the photographs taken by League members. For example, in text accompanying a photograph of a crowded dance hall (fig. 6), Carter tells his readers that “dance halls throb and swirl with couples who dance as if they meant it; club life fairly hums with activity, and the avenues seethe with with promenading throngs. Harlem’s people work a lot more than they play. They burst for relief from drudgery” (12). The image, though clearly joyful, doesn’t match the voyeuristic, almost fetishistic quality of the text: verbs like “throb,” “swirl,” “seethe” and “burst” reduce the Harlem partygoers to primitive pleasure-seekers. The photograph, instead, feature couples dancing, including one couple in the foreground that, smiling, confronts the viewers with a direct and powerful gaze. Neither stereotypical nor sensational, it instead compels viewers to confront the photograph’s African American subjects.

The final image in the photo essay is much starker, however. Having covered Harlem’s entertainment, the reader is left with a nearly full-page image of an African American woman on her hands and knees scrubbing a floor, her face cast down, one hand resting on a scrub brush, both hands covered in soap suds, a bucket to her right in the background. The caption tells us that “[t]he vast majority of Negroes find themselves consigned by their color to the most menial tasks, at poor pay, under daily fear of abuse and humiliation” (Carter 13). The text ends with what we are told is a quote from the woman pictured: “My knees are sore from prayin’ and scrubbin’” (Carter 13). Having built up much of the text condemning Harlem housing conditions, youth, religion as “old-fashioned,” entertainment as primitive vice, Carter ends on a more sober, dignified note (11). This is a woman who works hard and prays hard(er).
Conclusion

Some Harlem residents, tellingly, did not approve of the image of themselves reflected either in a 1939 exhibition of photographs at the Harlem YMCA, entitled *Towards a Harlem Document* (Berger 33). The show, intended to gain the approval of the African American community, had a mixed reception; comments in the visitor’s book included such remarks as “a collection of documentary evidence that should move all to action” alongside “The pictures are true and factual, but why show one side of life in Harlem?” and “What about the intellectual and cultural side?” (qtd. in Berger 33). Maurice Berger, in “Man in the Mirror: *Harlem Document*, Race, and the Photo League,” charges that the lack of any African American photographers in the Features Group, as well as the group’s “color blindness”—their unwillingness to engage with the African American tradition of self-representation—“rendered aspects of the Harlem Document and its methodology nearly obsolete by the time of its completion” in 1940 (Berger 33). And while it is true that the images produced by the Photo League’s Features Group of Harlem have not the commercial or exhibition success of, say, the FSA images, with many images lost to the archive or to history, it is possible to see them in a different light. That is, through the photographers’ aesthetic and political commitments—their “radical eye”—the photographs attain a new status as representative images of documentary modernism: photographs which unite social documentary with modernist aesthetics in an attempt to achieve their aim, even if they weren’t completely successful during their subjects’ lifetimes.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Capturing the idiom”:
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* and the Federal Writers’ Project

In the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, the eponymous narrator writes from the hole he has retreated to at the end of the novel. His new shelter is part of an abandoned basement in a whites-only building, discovered accidentally when he falls through a manhole during race riots in Harlem. It has become a light-filled refuge, unknowingly powered by the local electric company:

> Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death. […]

> That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean. It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. […] In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I’ve wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. […] Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and the light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I’ll start on the floor. (Ellison 1965 7)

For the eponymous narrator, whose dark skin has ironically rendered him “un-visible” to society, the nearly blinding—white—light is equated with truth (Ellison 1952 “Introduction” xv). The bright hole is where he will contemplate the invisibility thrust upon him by a racist society too blinded by their own prejudices to see him. This image of the narrator, contemplating his existence underground while listening to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and
Blue” and eating sloe-gin-drenched vanilla ice cream—and only emerging, time to time, from a manhole—are only two of many in Ellison’s 1952 novel that pique the contemporary reader’s imagination. It was no less so for Gordon Parks, then a photographer for *Life* and a friend of Ellison’s, when he began a photographic project inspired by the publication of *Invisible Man*, with shooting scripts provided by Ellison (Raz-Russo “Visible Men”). The collaboration between the two friends resulted in a short piece published in the August 25, 1952 issue of *Life* magazine—four pictures were featured, including the two described here, but dozens more were taken by Parks, some staged using friends as models, some documentary in style featuring street scenes of Harlem in the early 1950’s.29

Ellison and Parks’ collaboration in 1952, following on the heels of the success of *Invisible Man*, was certainly not Ellison’s first foray into photography and Harlem—or his first brush with the concept of invisibility. Fifteen years earlier, as a newcomer to New York City, Ellison stood on the streets on Harlem, collecting life histories for his job at the Federal Writers’ Project. In one such interview, he talked to Leo Gurley, who told him a tall tale about a folk hero named “Sweet-the-monkey,” who is, strikingly, invisible.

Coming to New York from Tuskegee Institute in 1936, where Ellison had matriculated but not taken a degree, Ellison studied art, including photography, and began publishing book reviews and short stories in publications such as *New Masses*. The young writer’s influences were broad, ranging from Langston Hughes and Richard Wright to T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.

29 An exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016 made public for the first time most of the photographs from this joint project, as well as from another collaboration begun in 1948 by Gordon and Parks: “Harlem in Nowhere,” which documented the Lafarge Mental Hygiene Clinic in words and images, never appeared in print as the publication it was destined for, *’48: The Magazine of the Year*, declared bankruptcy (Cloutier 29).
He gained firsthand experience of the documentary aesthetic that defined the decade when he joined the New York City branch of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1938. He described his experience interviewing residents of Harlem for the FWP’s folklore project as one which allowed him to develop “a technique of transcribing that captured the idiom” of African American speech—a technique which gives *Invisible Man* much of its resonance (Mangione 256; qtd. in Banks xx). Though scholars have explored the significance of the Federal Writers’ Project on Ellison’s literary career, they have largely overlooked the life histories he submitted as part of his work for the folklore project, and their influence on his subsequent novel. Ellison’s experience working for the FWP immersed him in a modernist documentary aesthetic that allowed him to perfect a technique for capturing the idiom of African American speech. Thanks to the experience of interviewing informants and collecting their stories, Ellison came to deploy documentary as a tool to create a visually rich discursive universe of African American experience.

**The Federal Writers’ Project and the Folklore Project**

The creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 at the depths of the Great Depression provided work relief for unemployed laborers; through the Federal Art, Music, Theatre and Writers’ Projects, the WPA also provided employment for actors, artists, musicians, playwrights and writers on relief (McDonald ix). Operating under the auspices of the WPA, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) employed 6,600 people, at a salary of approximately $20 a week, in the capacity of editors, researchers and writers during its eight-year span, from its conception...
in 1935 to its decentralization in 1939 to its demise in 1943 with the U.S. mobilization for World War II (Brinkley; Mangione 329-330).^{30}

While the collectively researched and produced American Guide Series was the Project’s raison d’être, under the direction of John A. Lomax, National Advisor on Folklore and Folkways, and Benjamin A. Botkin, Folklore Editor, Project workers compiled the largest body of first-person narratives ever collected in America, more than ten thousand in total (McDonald 704; Banks xi).^{31} These life histories, which sought to reproduce the informants’ vernacular, “were meant to reflect the ordinary person’s struggle with the vicissitudes of daily living” (“About”). They are comprised of interviews with people whose lives would have otherwise gone unrecorded—what Botkin termed “history from the bottom up”—such as iron workers, maids, meat packers, sharecroppers and vagrants, many of whom were recent immigrants to America (Botkin xiii). The majority of these life histories, which were formally organized at the time as Life Sketches, Living

---

^{30} The name Federal Writers’ Project is actually something of a misnomer. Although a central office in Washington, D.C., headed by National Director Henry G. Alsberg, oversaw production and did the final editing of the American Guide Series, research and production of copy was carried out at the state level (Mangione). The Guides were also published on a state-to-state basis (Penkower 30-31). And while writers were included in the ranks of Project workers, the majority were not writers by profession. Katharine Kellock, National Tours Editor for the American Guide Series, noted: “No house painter was ever sent to the Art Project for work, but the public and its representatives assumed that anyone who had ever managed to have his words printed was an author, in the literary sense” (qtd. in Mangione 95).

^{31} To accommodate their various constituents, FWP leaders decided to produce a series of guidebooks organized by state (Penkower 33). Not only would fiction and non-fiction writers—in addition to geologists, historians, lawyers, librarians, “spinster schoolteachers” and other white-collar relief workers—be capable of contributing to this format, there was a dearth of comprehensive, up-to-date American guidebooks (Penkower 58).
Lore, Industrial Lore and Occupational Lore, have not been published.\textsuperscript{32} A selection of the manuscripts, which have been moldering away in the Library of Congress since the 1930’s, are now available online—2,900 have been digitized and uploaded to date—thus offering scholars and researchers unprecedented access to what has been called “one of the most underused and untapped historical collections in America” (Brinkley).\textsuperscript{33}

Intended for inclusion in the American Guide Series, the collection of folklore was an integral part of the Federal Writers’ Project from its inception (McDonald 704). Initially limited to traditional rural folklore, Botkin shifted the collection to a more urban focus, broadening folklore to include industrial, living and urban lore, all of which were included under the wider category of life histories because they dealt with daily life (“About”; Mangione 270). Botkin, who had a national reputation as a folklorist, joined the Project as Folklore Editor in 1938 (Mangione 270). Prior to his appointment, the American Folklore Society rejected FWP Director Henry Alsberg’s request that the Society appoint someone to oversee the folklore project on the grounds that “no one who is not a scientifically-trained folklorist can collect dependable folklore”—that is, because Project workers were not trained in ethnography or a similar field they should not be collecting lore (qtd. in McDonald 717). However, the Project’s revolutionary approach towards

\textsuperscript{32} Exceptions to this include *These Are Our Lives*, a selection of thirty-five life histories published in 1939 by the Project’s units in North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia. More recently, in 1978 the University of North Carolina published *Such As Us, Southern Voices of the Thirties* (Rapport 15). Ann Banks edited 80 first-person narratives for publication in *First-Person America* in 1980, and Florida-based writer Pam Bordelon documented Zora Neale Hurston’s involvement with the Project in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings from the Federal Writers’ Project* (1999).

\textsuperscript{33} There has been a resurgence of interest in the FWP in the past decade. *Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story*, a documentary film directed by Andrea Kalin, was released in 2009. Christine Bold (*The WPA Guides: Mapping America*), Jerrold Hirsch (*Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*), David Taylor (*Soul of a People: The WPA Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America*), and Nick Taylor (*American Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA*) have all published studies within the past 10 years.
collecting oral life histories helped to dissolve “the barriers of academic formalism by stressing the contemporary aspects of American folklore” (Mangione 269). The expansion of the scope of the folklore project was in part due to what Botkin saw as an opportunity to craft “a comprehensive picture of the [sic] composite America” (qtd. in Mangione 270). With units in every state, he saw the Project as an ideal means by which to create this “composite” portrait. While interested in collecting specific types of histories from their informants, Botkin also sought to preserve relevant details about the informant in order to make as accurate a record as possible. The date, place and time of an interview were usually recorded; where possible, an informant’s name, address and physical description were also provided (see fig. 3). Some life histories even give detailed background information, such as education, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. This all suggests an interest in creating as accurate an historical record as possible, at the same time that Project workers were encouraged to develop practices such as “creative listening.”

In fact, Botkin believed that the collection of life histories was more naturally suited to the writer than the scholar (Mangione 272). The Manual for Folklore Studies, issued by Botkin in 1938, reminded Project workers that “your business is to record, not correct or improve”: “take down everything you hear, just as you hear it, without adding, taking away or altering a syllable” (McDonald 709; qtd. in Banks xx). Whether or not these instructions were always carried out is debatable: Jerre Mangione, former Coordinating Editor for the Project and its main historian, writes in his memoir, The Dream and the Deal, that Project workers were actually given “wide leeway” to develop their own techniques (Mangione 272). Botkin stressed the process

34 Hyde Partnow, a writer on the New York City Project, described his method for interviewing informants as “creative listening”—conducting interviews without writing down what the informants were saying in order to hear what they were saying—prompting WPA historian William F. McDonald to claim that the folklore project “perhaps came nearer than anything else [within the Project] to combining the guidebook interpretation of America with the interests of the creative writer” (713, 714).
of interviewing as “the conscious or unconscious collaboration” between Project worker and informant. The life history would, ideally, be “narrated as told by an informant . . . with all the flavor of talk and all the narrative art [. . .] belonging to the natural storyteller” (qtd. in Banks xv; emphasis mine). And although he stressed accuracy, Botkin was aware of the unavoidable subjectivity on the part of the informant—and the interviewer (Banks xx). Indeed, he viewed “subjectivity of recollection [. . .] as a window onto the ways that people shape and reshape their identity” (Banks ii). The interviews were, moreover, carried out without the benefit of recording devices; instead, they “were reconstructed from notes and memory” after the interview had taken place (Banks xx).

In the context of a larger documentary trend, then, the life histories constitute a literary collaboration between informant and Project worker. In fact, Ellison’s naturalistic novel Invisible Man contains echoes of the life histories he gathered for the Project. Analysis of interviews Ellison conducted, which are accessible as part of the Library of Congress’ digital collection, reveals that he made use of both their idiomatic and literal content in Invisible Man, blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction. In addition to the fact that Ellison came across an invisible folk hero years before he began writing Invisible Man, the refrain of one of the novel’s characters is found verbatim in another life history Ellison collected while working for the FWP in Harlem.

Ralph Ellison and the Federal Writers’ Project

Using his connections to the powerful Communist lobby within the FWP, Ellison’s friend and mentor Richard Wright helped Ellison, Wright’s junior by six years, to secure a job with the Project’s “living lore” unit in 1938 (Jackson 199). A musician by training, Ellison had done well in his English classes, and had even published a poem in the campus literary journal (Mangione
256). But Ellison had had very little professional writing experience, so the Project served as ad-hoc graduate training for the fledgling writer (Jackson 201).

Ellison honed his craft and found his “literary personality” while working for the Project. His early prose style was emulative, making the FWP the perfect place to develop the documentary technique that would later influence *Invisible Man* (Mangione 256). In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1955, Ellison described how, when living in Dayton, Ohio in 1937, he would practice writing by studying known authors’ styles. From Hemingway, he recalled, he learned sentence structure and how to organize a story, and his short story, “Hymie’s Bull,” is heavily influenced by the senior author (Ellison “Art of Fiction” 210-211; Mangione 256). After Ellison showed some of his exercises in fiction to Richard Wright, who had published *Uncle Tom’s Children* in March of 1938, and would begin *Native Son* on Project time, Wright responded defensively: “Hey, that’s my stuff” (Jackson 198; Penkower 166; qtd. in Mangione 256). Ellison stopped showing Wright his work (Mangione 256). Such early experiments—which he would later dismiss as “fodder”—suggest that Ellison was still searching for his own style, which he would later describe as “realism that goes beyond and becomes surrealism” (Jackson 199; qtd. in Mangione 256).

As a member of the New York City Project’s living lore unit, Ellison’s main assignment was to interview residents of Harlem (Mangione 270). He explained his informal process in a 1977 interview:

I hung around playgrounds; I hung around the street, the bars. I went into hundreds of apartment buildings and just knocked on doors. I would tell some stories to get people going and then I’d sit back and try to get it down as accurately as I could. Sometimes you would find people sitting around on Eighth
Avenue just dying to talk so you didn’t have to encourage them too much. (qtd. in Banks xvii).

The interviews he conducted were a collaborative exercise between himself and his informants, with his own stories often providing the impetus. Collecting folklore in Harlem also presented Ellison with the opportunity to experiment with rendering the African American vernacular. Ellison’s self-described technique of idiomatic transcription, which he perfected in *Invisible Man*, was pioneered while working for the Project: “I tried to use my ear for dialogue to give an impression of just how the people sounded. I developed a technique of transcribing that captured the idiom rather than trying to convey the dialect through misspellings” (qtd. in Banks xx). In picking up on Ellison’s use of the verb transcribe, I imply his musical background as well as the oft-improvisational nature of the interviews. Rather than transcribing his informants’ speech by rote, Ellison’s documentary work for the FWP mirrors that of other practitioners of documentary modernism. And Ellison’s aesthetic in *Invisible Man*, owing a debt to both documentary and realist traditions, is also infused with a modernist spirit; in its improvisational nature, it has an affinity to jazz, another one of Ellison’s pursuits, and a modern art form in its own right.

Ellison’s experience working for the Federal Writers’ Project in Harlem also provided him with the aesthetic and historical background with which to create his novel. In addition to his work for the folklore project, Ellison researched “the black presence in Manhattan,” plowing though archives in the New York Public Library that dated back to the eighteenth century. One of his Project essays was on “The Insurrection of 1741,” a slave rebellion that inspired him in his

---

35 To transcribe is “[t]o make a copy of (something) in writing.” The verb also has a meaning relating to music which shouldn’t be overlooked given Ellison’s musical background: “[t]o adapt (a composition) for a voice or instrument other than that for which it was originally written” (“transcribe, v”). The latter definition connotes more of translational approach than the former.
perception of its similarity to the contemporary African American struggle for equality (Jackson 200). Indeed, Ellison approached his work with “radical purpose” and his research gave density to his historical perspective (Jackson 201). “It threw me into my own history,” Ellison later recalled. “Once you touched the history of blacks in America you were deep into American history” (qtd. in Banks xx). This background would almost certainly have been useful to Ellison when he approached the construction of *Invisible Man*, with its layered and subterranean perspectives on American history.

While the Federal Writers’ Project plunged Ellison into history, references to falling *outside* history are recurrent in *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, being thrown into history made him self-aware. The invisible man believes that, “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside of history; but inside of it they didn’t see us” (402). For the narrator, being inside history means being actively involved in the making of history. It also means being able to participate in and influence the African American struggle for social justice. However, the invisible man realizes the great difficulty of doing this as a marginalized minority: “I *was* and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction” (408). Shortly before Brother Tod Clifton disappears into the jungle that is Harlem, he tells the invisible man, “I suppose sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history [. . .] Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts” (305). Clifton does indeed “plunge outside history”: he ends up selling paper Sambo dancing dolls on the streets of Harlem before he is murdered by a white cop whom he provokes. For the invisible man, “only the plunge was recorded, and that was the only important thing” (359).

In addition to nurturing his inchoate creativity and inculcating in him a sense of historical perspective, the Project also provided Ellison, vitally, with enough money to pay his bills. Con-
sequently, Ellison was one of the few ex-Project writers to articulate his gratitude for the Project. “Writers and would-be writers, newspaper people, dancers, actors—they all got their chance,” Ellison would later recall appreciatively, referring to the four Federal Art Projects (qtd. in Mangione 255). He suggested that working for the Project allowed him for the first time to think about writing as a career: “Actually to be paid for writing . . . why that was a wonderful thing!” (qtd. in Banks xviii). The Project’s financial support was particularly consequential for Ellison as an African American writer. He later suggested that the Works Progress Administration was a liberating experience for educated African Americans:

> The entire WPA system gave Negro intellectuals, clerical people and so on the first opportunity that they had ever had to exercise their skills and, as with me, to learn new skills. There’s no doubt about it, that, to that extent, the economic and social disaster of the country was a freeing experience for the Negro people. (qtd. in Bold 21)

Certainly, Ellison was not the only African American writer to benefit from the Project: Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker and Richard Wright are other notable examples. And, there is little doubt that the cosmopolitan New York City Project offered more opportunities for African Americans than the Projects operating in other states.

---

36 Zora Neale Hurston was involved with the collection of folklore in Florida; Margaret Walker worked for the Illinois Project in Chicago; and Richard Wright was a member of both the Illinois and New York Projects.

37 In Ellison’s native Oklahoma, white Project workers refused to use the same water fountains as African American Project workers. In Mississippi, the Project’s four African African workers quickly resigned—and were likely forced to (Jackson 199).
In the late spring and summer of 1939, Ellison submitted five first-person narratives as part of his work for the folklore project. Titled “Harlem,” “Eddie’s Bar,” “My People Made the Truckin Business,” “Colonial Park,” and “City Street,” the life histories range in subject from Southern folk tales to race and religion to life in New York City, but all feature first-person narrators who are African American men, ranging in age from young to old. As Ellison described above, his technique for interviewing residents of Harlem often involved telling stories to get people started, and all of these encounters took place in public spaces, such as bars, parks and street corners. Three of these life histories, “City Street,” “Colonial Park” and “Harlem,” were published in First-Person America in 1981 as “Jim Barber,” “Eli Luster” and “Leo Gurley,” respectively. The editor, Ann Banks, felt it necessary to invent fictitious names for the unnamed informants of “City Street” and “Colonial Park.” Leo Gurley is the real name of Ellison’s informant. The titles used here are the original titles given by Ralph Ellison or ones assigned by the Library of Congress. Two of the life histories, “Harlem” and “Eddie’s Bar,” possess salient connections with Invisible Man, while the others serve as writing workshops for Ellison, in which he practiced transcribing the African American vernacular that would later dominate his celebrated novel. The life histories also provide readers with a rich connection to both the working practices of documentary and the lived experiences of African Americans in the 1930’s.

In “Harlem,” repeated references to a folk hero’s invisibility directly correspond with Invisible Man. Ellison interviewed Leo Gurley on the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in

38 It should be noted that while the life histories are reproduced in Banks, they are only treated summarily in relation to Invisible Man. Arnold Rampersad and Lawrence Jackson, Ellison’s biographers, do not discuss them at all except to note that “[v]ery little that Ralph composed for the Project rose to the level of literature” (Rampersad 116).
June of 1939. On a Harlem street corner, Gurley told Ellison a fantastic story about a folk hero named Sweet-the-monkey. The setting of the story is Florence, North Carolina, described as “one of these hard towns on colored folks” (“Harlem” 1). Apparently, Sweet (as he is familiarly known) is immune from the abuse of “white folks” (“Harlem” 1). The reason is that, remarkably, Sweet is invisible: “Sweet-the-monkey cut open a black cat and took out its heart. Climb up a tree backwards and cursed God. After that he could do anything” (“Harlem” 1).

Gurley’s story clearly falls into the realm of folklore; even as it resonates on a symbolic level, he intends Sweet’s invisibility—and its advantages—to be taken at face value: “He cleaned out the stores. He cleaned up the houses. Hell, he even cleaned out the dam bank!” (“Harlem” 2). A legendary hero who is able to elude capture, Sweet embodies a kind of folk justice by which a guilty black man avoids being captured by white men, in opposition to the myriad innocent black men who were summarily lynched without justification or reason in the South. Gurley’s tale, then, falls squarely in the tradition of tall tales, and echoes Charles Chestnutt’s nineteenth-century attempts to bring racial equality to Uncle Remus with his “Uncle Julius” tales.

While Sweet’s invisibility is the result of black magic, and is used to conceal and empower himself—even if only so that he can carry out illicit acts—it nevertheless corresponds to the unnamed narrator’s symbolic invisibility in *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s narrator is invisible “simply because people refuse to see” him—that is, because he has been marginalized and opp-

---

39 This is some dispute about the year in which this interview was recorded. Although “June 14th, 1938” appears on the first page of the narrative, Form A lists the date as June 14, 1939. A stamp mark in the upper right corner of Form A, which reads “July 6, 1939,” appears to confirm an interview date of 1939.

40 Ellison’s concept of invisibility would have also been inspired by W.E.B. DuBois’s theory of a black “double consciousness,” as well as a passage in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (which deeply influenced Ellison’s conception of the city), in which Stephen Daedalus imagines his mother listening to a pantomime of Turko the Terrible: “I am the boy / That can enjoy / Invisibility” (qtd. in Jackson 320).
pressed beyond recognition, existing in what Lawrence Jackson describes as “a competing and opposite reality that is submerged but rides alongside of popularly recognized poses of existence” (Ellison *Invisible Man* 7; Jackson 321). Invisibility becomes a refuge for the narrator of *Invisible Man*. “I myself, after existing twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility,” he claims (10). Yet in the epilogue to the novel, the invisible man decides to emerge from his Thoreauvian hibernation, as “there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (468). Similarly, Gurley tells Ellison that Sweet, still invisible, is rumored to have returned to Florence after an absence of five years.

Adding another dimension to the trope of invisibility, Botkin, significantly, described the best life histories as those in which “the interviewer succeeds in eliminating himself entirely and the reader is brought face to face with an informant” (Botkin xii-xiii; emphasis mine). Thus, Project workers were encouraged to be invisible. As an invisible man—an interviewer—Ellison was in an ideal position to record the lives of those around him, at the same time exploring history through Project research assignments. As a published author, Ellison was no longer hidden behind a cloak of invisibility, as he had been while interviewing informants on the streets of Harlem. The invisible man, somewhat ironically, then becomes the prominent—unnamed—narrator of Ellison’s only novel.

Also noteworthy in “Harlem” is Ellison’s reproduction of Gurley’s idiomatic speech without resorting to misspelling (except in a few instances, such as “hisself” for himself and
“im” for him). For example, Gurley’s description of one of Sweet’s many escapes is rendered thus by Ellison:

The white folks started trying to catch Sweet. Well, they didn’t have no luck. Theyd catch ‘im standing in front of the eating joints and put the handcuffs on im and take im down to jail. You know what that sucker would do? (“Harlem” 2)

Here, Ellison relies on the rhythm and cadence of Gurley’s speech, along with his use of phrases like “white folks,” “eating joints” and “suckers,” to convey the nuances of his informant’s speech. Indeed, because Ellison’s aim in *Invisible Man* was accurately transcribing the African American vernacular, he used to record himself reading his manuscripts aloud in order to hear the rhythm of the words (Jackson 426).

The second striking example of Ellison’s utilization of the life histories is his appropriation of the refrain of an unnamed informant at “Eddie’s Bar,” who Ellison interviewed in April of 1939. The informant, a man originally from Jacksonville, Florida who has been living in New York City for twenty-five years, tells Ellison, repeatedly, “Ahm in New York, but New York aint in me. You understand?” (1) This phrase is repeated, verbatim, in *Invisible Man* by kind-hearted Mary Rambo when she is speaking to the narrator, whom she has rescued from the streets of Harlem after a hospitalization following the explosion at the paint factory. “Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t get corrupt-ed” she tells the invisible man (207). Here, Ellison corrects the misspelling of “I’m” that is

Compare, for example, a transcription which uses misspelling to convey meaning. In “Yalluh Hammuh,” a first-person narrative written by Margaret Walker in Chicago in 1939, Walker relies on misspelling to represent the African American vernacular, almost to the point of incomprehension: “now Yal-luh Hammuh bin pilin san bags on de levee an he cum in town Saddy night wid a cad uv money big ezyo two fistes put tagedder. He go on inside a lil shindig an spy him a gal; real nice lookin gal an he go ovah ta huh an ax huh ta dance an she excep. Well dey gits ta dancing, an Yalluh Hammuh git ta feelin real good” (Walker 2).
present in the original document, but otherwise the phrase is not altered. Mary is trying to tell the narrator to take care of himself and not let the city in any way alter who he is, a meaning that is apparent in “Eddie’s Bar.”

Ellison’s informant goes on to say, “Son, if Ah had-a got New York in me Ahd a-been dead a long time ago”—the kind of caveat one could imagine Mary giving the invisible man (1). As an example of how people can be corrupted by New York, he cites “Pimps. Numbers. Cheating these poor people outa whut they got. Shooting, cutting, backbiting, all them things. Yuh see? Yuh see whut Ah mean?” (1) Someone who has “too much New York” in them goes “tearin up peoples property [. . . ]. Now yuh know thats a bad man, gonna tear up the wops place” (1-2). It is also notable that the informant mentions violent behavior as evidence of someone who had “too much New York”; the invisible man only becomes violent after living in New York City.

Though the three other life histories, “My People Made the Truckin Business,” “Colonial Park,” and “City Street,” lack literal correspondences with *Invisible Man*, their thematic concerns narrative practices inform the novel. In “My People Made the Truckin Business,” Ellison conducted a joint interview with fellow FWP worker Clerance Weinstock at the Harlem Labor Center.42 The informant, a truck handler for forty-one years, perceives that he has been exploited by the predominantly white capitalist system. The use of “my people,” “our” and “we” throughout the narrative is inclusive, indicative of all African Americans. To make his point, the informant refers to a poster on the wall: “You see that picture up there in the wall? ‘Black and white unite.’ Them hands is clasped together in the picture, but here its wide apart” (1). In this instance, Elli-

42 A copy of “My People Made the Truckin Business” was subpoenaed by the Woodrum Committee, which, led by Virginia Senator Clifton A. Woodrum, tried to decentralize the WPA’s Arts Projects. The work of the Committee was emphatically not supported by President Roosevelt, who was responsible for the creation of the WPA and, by extension, the FWP (Quinn 272-3).
son documented what would later influence his fictional account of thirties America, when many African Americans were communists and fellow travelers. The poster that the informant refers to epitomizes the ideology behind *Invisible Man*’s Communist organization, the Brotherhood. The invisible man actually designed a similar poster for the Brotherhood with the caption, “After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America’s Future” (310). Although in theory the Brotherhood was devoted to racial harmony, in practice it kept its black “Brothers” segregated. The New York City Project was, like the Brotherhood, intellectually—if not physically—segregated: Ellison’s research was exclusively devoted to the African American community and its presence in history (Jackson 210).

Two other first person narratives that Ellison crafted in June of 1939 after interviewing informants on the streets of Harlem, “Colonial Park,” and “City Street,” reveal an increasingly skilled ability to transcribe African American speech. This same technique is apparent in *Invisible Man*, for example, in incestuous sharecropper Jim Trueblood’s speech. In “Colonial Park,” Ellison interviews “an elderly Negro man, born in Virginia,” whose view of the period’s social inequality is refracted through his religious beliefs. He uses the sinking of the Titanic as justification of the limits of white power—and evidence of God’s omnipotence: “Man can only go so far,” he says, “Then God steps in” (1). However, Ellison’s informant gets his facts wrong: he claims that the Titanic was headed to England, not American, in 1912 and also states that the current year is 1929. Thus, although he presents a unique perspective on recent events, his memory is seemingly unreliable. However, these narrative missteps are also part of the folklore tradition upon which Ellison's informant is drawing. For example, disputing the notion that God took one of Adam’s ribs to create Eve, he says, “I caint remember the exact words, but it said he took something and it didn’t say nothing bout no rib” (2). His final vision is apocalyptic: “But you just
watch: the lawd [Lord] made all men equal and pretty soon now its gonna be that way again” (2). He predicts that a great flood will wipe out rich men like Rockefeller. A war will follow the flood, but “wont bother me an you. [. . .] It’ll be the wicked killing the wicked!” (4). Indeed, Ellison’s informant in “Colonial Park” views God-given nature as a social leveler:

This breeze and these green leaves out here is for everybody. The same sun’s shining down on everybody. This breeze comes from God and man caint do nothing about it. I breath [sic] the same air old man Ford an old man Rockefeller [sic] breath [sic]. They all got money an I aint got nothing, but they got to breath the same air I do. (1)

He also has a unique vision of Genesis—which he believes occurred just 1900 years ago—comparing Eden to an apartment building in Harlem: “Its [sic] just like your father owned that building over there and told you you could live in it if you didn’t do certain things” (1). His final vision is apocalyptic: “But you just watch: the lawd [Lord] made all men equal and pretty soon now its gonna be that way again” (2). For Ellison’s informant, social justice can only be achieved through divine intervention. Like some of the residents of Harlem the Features Group photographed in Look and Fortune, the narrator in “Colonial Park” viewed religion as a powerful ally, an answer to racial and economic and inequality he saw all around him.

The somewhat younger informant in “City Street” makes his living by playing in a band. The subject of the narrative is his disgust at white beer-drinking “cats” who patronize and insult blacks:

One a these bums come up to the stand and says to the banjo player: “If you monkeys dont play some music, Im gonna throw you otta de jernt [joint].” Man, I quit singing and looked at the sonofabitch. Then I got mad. I said: “Where the goddam hell you come from, you gonna throw somebody outa this band? How
you get so bad? Why you poor Brooklyn motherfriger, I’ll wreck this goddam place with you.” (1)

The informant resolves the situation by pretending to pull his gun. He concludes the account by stating: “You see he thought cause we was black he could talk like he wanted to. In a night club and drinking beer!” (2) On a different occasion, he describes how some “white cat” tells him he stinks because he “aint a good fellow like the other cats”—he won’t take him up to Harlem and show him around. In other words, he wants Ellison’s informant to take him “slumming,” but he’ll have none of it (2). Here, Ellison vividly captures the racial tensions of the day, including the then-common practice of “slumming,” as his informant describes it, when Harlem was considered an “exotic” destination by whites. He describes to Ellison how the same thing happens on yet another night—and his reaction is just as fierce:

What-in-the-world do you want to come up to my place for? You aint got nothing and I sho aint got nothing. Whats a poor colored cat and a poor white cat gonna do together? You aint got nothing cause you too dumb to get it. And I aint got nothins cause I’m black. I guess you got your little ol skin, that the reason? (3)

Thus, for the informant, whites remain the oppressor and enemy of black people. Out of a sense of racial pride, he will not spend money to show off his apartment to some “poor white cat.”

In “City Street,” Ellison captures the idiomatic speech of his informant in his reproduction of phrases like “beat-up change,” “I was really laying it Jack,” “You oughta seem em fall back from this cat,” “slaphappy jitterbugs,” “white cat,” and “mammydodger” (1, 2). His casual yet aggressive manner of speaking is similar to that of some men whom the ostracized narrator of *Invisible Man* addresses as “Brother”—the standard greeting of the Brotherhood—when he walks into the Jolly Dollar, a fictional Harlem bar:
“Shit,” the tall man said.
“You said it, man; he a relative of yours?”
“Shit, he goddam sho ain’t no kin of mine!” (341)

This is not to suggest that “City Street” directly inspired Ellison. However, it does suggest that while working for the Project, Ellison developed a technique of rendering the African American vernacular with minimal misspelling—the same technique that he used in *Invisible Man*. Ellison viewed his use of the vernacular as an ongoing process, “a way of establishing and discovering our national identity” (“Going to the Territory” 609). In a recent biography Arnold Rampersad also notes that the FWP “made possible a literary career for Ellison” through its support of the writer during his early years in New York City (154).

Ellison’s personal reasons for collecting life histories for the Project also has parallels with *Invisible Man*. Interviewing residents in Harlem, Ellison was striving to “document the changes in the black experience when millions of blacks moved from southern farms to northern cities in the early twentieth century” (Banks 250). This is conveyed in Gurley’s perspective of Florence, South Carolina as a “hard” place for “colored folks”—implying that New York City, a Northern city, is more enlightened—as well as Sweet’s ability to outwit “crackers.” Another, differing, perspective is that of the narrator in Eddie’s Bar, who has been careful not to be corrupted by urban life—“Bright lights, Pretty women. More space to move around”—and has “never done nothin to nobody” (1, 2). He is a New Yorker, but declares, again and again, “Im in New York an New York aint in me” (1). This migratory theme is also apparent in *Invisible Man*. The invisible man’s quest—the goal of which changes with each geographical move he makes as he becomes more and more aware of his invisibility—takes him from an all-black college in the South to New York City, where he ends up living in a hole on the fringes of Harlem.
Finally, folklore was central to Ellison’s conception of literature, specifically black literature: “What are the specific forms of [...] [black] humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning?” The answer, he said, can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group’s character. [...] These drawings may be crude, but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group’s attempt to humanize the world. It’s no accident that great literature, the products of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base. (“Art of Fiction” 213)

Elsewhere, Ellison described African American folklore as “powerful, wonderful and universal”: he believed that folklore expressed “what [the] Negro experience really is” (“A Very Stern Discipline” 732). Ellison would have likely included such narratives as “Harlem” and “Colonial Park” in his definition of folklore, with their themes of black dispossession and supernatural solutions. Given the importance that Ellison ascribed to folklore, as well as the fact that he began to write professionally while working for the Project, it does not seem presumptuous to suggest that Ellison’s work for the folklore Project did more than allow him to develop a technique of capturing the African American idiom: it also inculcated in him the fundamental importance of a culture’s folklore.

**Conclusion**

Ralph Ellison joined the Federal Writers’ Project with literary aspirations but had not yet published any fiction. He went on to write *Invisible Man*, an award-winning novel that speaks to—and for—Americans: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison *Invisible Man* 469). Interviewing residents of Harlem for the FWP gave Ellison a chance to
hone his craft through the development of a method of transcribing the African American idiom. In his own words, “our most characteristic American style is that of the vernacular”:

Mark Twain, who transformed elements of regional vernacular speech into a medium of uniquely American literary expression [. . .] taught us how to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners. (“Going to the Territory” 608, 609).

Ellison’s first-person interviews also serve as snapshots of life in Harlem, capturing, among other things, stories of life in the South (and, by extension, the Great Migration), through folklore tales like that of Sweet the Monkey and daily life in Harlem through stories of “slumming,” Communist party ties and, more darkly, racial inequality. While Ellison was no stranger to black-and-white photography, these interviews are expertly rendered in shades of grey. His “transcription,” when compared to other first-person interviews collected for the living lore unit during the same time period, lack his aestheticism. Ellison’s experience working for the FWP inculcated in him a documentary technique that is at once precise and improvisational, and places his work for the Federal Writer’s Project and *Invisible Man* in a category of modernism that draws aesthetically from both documentary traditions and high Modernist experiments in language and form.
CHAPTER FIVE

Coda: The Radical Eye

Defense is sight; widen the lens and see
standing over the land myths of identity,
new signals, processes:

—Muriel Rukeyser, “The Book of the Dead”

The topic of my dissertation is, as I’ve stated, the modernist documentary poetry, photographs and first-person narratives—and their subjects—which I’ve considered in the previous chapters. The producers of those works, Muriel Rukeyser, the Photo League—Aaron Siskind, in particular, as head of the Features Group—and Ralph Ellison are, in many ways, also the subjects of my dissertation. These figures captured my imagination early on, through their poetry, photography and first-person narratives, respectively. Rukeyser’s and Ellison’s language became a model for my own; Nancy Naumburg’s photographs of Vanetta, West Virginia and the Features Group’s—not to mention Gordon Parks’—photographs of Harlem became part of my visual vocabulary. And because a large part of this dissertation has been focused on the cultural conversations and working relationships of practitioners of modernist documentary in the 1930’s, this is an appropriate place to reconsider the nature of those relationships.
To my knowledge, Rukeyser, Ellison and members of the Features Group did not know one another personally or run in the same social circles. However, they all worked in close proximity to one another geographically. In the late 1930’s Rukeyser was writing *The Book of the Dead* in New York, the Features Group was actively taking photographs in Harlem, and Ralph Ellison was living and collecting life histories in Harlem. They also all had close, if not collaborative, working relationships with other practitioners of modernist documentary: Rukeyser, with Naumburg; the Features Group collaborated from its inception; Ellison, with his informants, and later with Parks. In an undated letter to Rukeyser, Nancy Naumburg, writing from New York, expresses “doubts” about the Workers Film and Photo League: “I’m still a bit doubtful about the film League. We’re moving above the League for Struggle for Negro Rights [sic]. You must come down as soon as something happens there” (Naumburg Letter to Muriel Rukeyser). Instead of casting suspicion on the Workers Film and Photo League, I include this letter as evidence of the closeness—geographical, cultural and social—in which these practitioners were working.

Temporally, all of the works I discuss are also remarkably aligned. They were published or recorded in a two-year span, beginning with *The Book of the Dead* in 1938, and ending with Harlem Document’s *Look* feature in May of 1940. These works, then, represent a late-1930’s documentary modernism, one that shows a mature response to the Great Depression and the government’s response, in the form of the New Deal and its “alphabet agencies.” Rukeyser, members of the Photo League (by and large—there were exceptions), and Ellison all embody a progressive politics: one, that if critical of the New Deal, is not *entirely* radicalized. This is in keeping with
the broad strokes of both the Communist Popular Front and the tone of progressive politics in the late 1930’s.43

These geographical and temporal connections are far from coincidence, of course. In choosing my subjects, I strove to include diverse genres—poetry, photography and life histories—that were most representative of the modernist documentary trend I, along with other scholars, have begun to identify. The Book of the Dead, the Harlem Document and Ralph Ellison’s life histories are all responses to modern life that employ the genre of documentary.

The “defense” Rukeyser wrote of in “The Book of the Dead,” the final and eponymous poem in her long poem sequence, was sight: the kind of close looking that gave her the perspective to write about the Gauley Bridge tragedy with critical empathy for those affected. Similarly, Gordon Parks, a close friend of Ellison’s, used the camera on the offensive. “I picked up a camera,” he famously said, “because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty.” The camera, for Parks, is not only a powerful metaphor for the kind of vision that can reveal social injustices, as it is for Rukeyser in The Book of the Dead: It is a literal one. The camera, then, becomes a radical “eye”—a literal and figurative way of viewing the world—as it was for Photo League members; a weapon of choice, for Parks; and a metaphor for a particular kind of sight that embodies social justice, as it was for Rukeyser. Even for Ellison, who was using his ears, not his eyes, the metaphor of seeing figures powerfully in Invisible Man, a book whose origins can be traced back to the life histories the

43 Rukeyser’s only proof of Communist membership, in the YCL, actually calls her membership into question. It is harder to determine the exact political leanings of all the members of the Harlem Document Features Group—but my research has not uncovered any direct ties to the Communist Party. Ellison, in Invisible Man, is certainly critical of communism, represented by the Brotherhood.
fledging writer collected in Harlem. The goal of this dissertation has been to demonstrate how, working in close proximity, Rukeyser, the Harlem Document photographers, and Ralph Ellison embraced “new signals, [and] processes”—in other words, a fully modernist documentary—in order to render the lived experiences of American Americans in a positive light, turning away from a history of representation in photography and in print that had largely done just the oppo-site.
Works Cited


