Introduction

O honored folk, do not begrudge the sight / and rumor of reality.
—A. T. ROSEN, Federal Writers' Project, *American Stuff* (1937)

Here, in the vast granary of facts on life in America put away by the WPA writers, the documentary reporters, the folklorists preparing an American mythology, the explorers who went hunting through darkest America with a notebook and a camera, the new army of biographers and historians—here, stocked away like a reserve against bad times, is the raw stuff of that contemporary mass record which so many imaginative spirits tried to depict and failed to master.—ALFRED KAZIN, *On Native Grounds* (1942)

This book chronicles the search for authenticity in the United States during the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 to 1941. Amid skyrocketing unemployment and spiraling deflation, in the wake of the stock market's collapse, various writers, ethnographers, documentarists, filmmakers, and reformers sought out something real, something genuine, with which to ground an increasingly tenuous sense of national identity. They found it in the folk. The folk's rural, artisanal know-how seemed to comprise the "raw stuff" with which to remake American identity.

While the search for the folk did not begin with the 1930s, its urgency, direction, and shape altered considerably with the onset of the Depression.[1] The folk and their premodern authenticity were represented with an immediacy borne of the era's most modern technologies: documentary photographs and books, sound recordings, films, and newsreels. They emerged as an incongruous amalgam, providing, in the famous words of Van Wyck Brooks, a "usable past" for an uncertain present ("On Creating," 219). Featured as stalwart protagonists in much of the period's documentary, the folk took center stage in various narratives of recovery across the political spectrum. In some of these stories, this folk embodied a purportedly precapitalist way of life, an enduring stoicism in the face of the marketplace's erratic excesses. In other accounts, they

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represented an embattled group in need of government intervention—"pseudo-peasants" on the verge of vanishing due to the ravages of capitalism and unpredictable forces of nature (Smith, *Making the Modern*, 298). Viewed either as relics worthy of preservation or as victims deserving of aid, the folk were perceived as a pastoral resource integral to the nation's healing and crucial to the brokering of new deals.

Bearing the weight of so much consequence, the rhetoric of the folk not unexpectedly became "folksy." Many of the era's documentary endeavors transformed the folk into populist, regional clichés of "real" Americans and "real" America. In protest, a hybrid genre formed: documentary and satire merged in various ways to critique the fabrication of folk authenticity and expose its patriotic and corporate exploitation in the popular cultural narratives of the period. While many studies of realism in the 1930s simply assume the folksiness of the folk, this book is concerned with the "invention" of the folk in Depression-era politics and culture. From this angle, the folk constitute a powerful "fiction" in both senses of the term—as a falsehood and as a literary creation. *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression*, then, is about a search for folk authenticity and also about hybrid forms of documentary and satire that told a different kind of story about the folk in the most uncertain of times.

With the specter of a second Great Depression haunting nearly every discussion of a faltering global economy, it comes as little surprise that the thirties hold the antecedents to our own cultural moment. As politicians attempt to speak plainly, their pronouncements often take on a folksy quality. Some, like the former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, talk of "real America," while others, such as President Barack Obama, suggest "we dust ourselves off and get back to work." Former president George W. Bush is famous for his appeal to "gut feeling" in lieu of facts to explain his administration's flawed decision making, so much so that the parodic conservative political pundit Stephen Colbert coined the term "truthiness"—"not quite fact, not quite fiction"—to describe his rhetoric. As in the thirties, we've seen a powerful response to the folksy articulations of the last decade in the documentary of *Frontline* and, as Colbert's coinage suggests, in our own hybrid form of satire and documentary, the mock news of *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, and the *Dave Chappelle Show*. Indeed, when the satirist Jon Stewart was asked by Bill Moyers, who specializes in documentary, if the work of satire and

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documentary feeds into people's sense of helplessness, Stewart replied, "No. . . . this is how we fight back." Stewart's reply acknowledges the shared aims of these modes of address. In this dialogue and in shows like Stewart's, we glimpse the makings of a hybrid genre: satire and documentary coming together to expose the deployment of folksiness and its familiar appeal in the twenty-first century. By exploring the manufacture of the folk in conjunction with commercial capitalism and populist discourses of nation building, I hope in this book to shed light on our contemporary negotiations with mass-mediated identity and consumer culture, and our grappling with the "real" and the "authentic" in narratives of self, community, and nation.

It is no accident that the term "folksiness, the state or quality of being 'folksy'" originated in the United States in or around 1931, at the tail end of the Hoover administration (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Or that we've come to remember the tumultuous thirties through near-iconic iterations of the folk and the folksy: Walker Evans's black-and-white photographs of dispossessed tenant farmworkers; the Joad family in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and the movie of the same name; Franklin D. Roosevelt's homey radio *Fireside Chats*; Alan Lomax's recordings of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie housed in the national Archive of American Folk-Song; "Native" roadside attractions in the form of Wigwam motel courts, pay-to-visit tribal villages and Indian pageants, and totem poles commissioned by the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, Indian Division; and regional folkways collected in the travel guides of the Federal Writers' Project's American Guide Series (Veitch, *American Superrealism*, xvi). In such a list, we see how the populist ideal of the folk was disseminated through modern mass media. And no form would deliver the folk more convincingly than documentary, its seemingly straightforward language of facts and its emphasis on the quotidian compounding the realness of its subject.

The United States was not alone in seizing upon mythical figures of authenticity and realist forms of representation to fortify its citizenry in the havoc of the global Depression. In the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin advocated art that explicitly celebrated the life of the worker—the protagonist of a classless society presumed to be already in existence in the USSR—by institutionalizing socialist realism as the official artistic doctrine of the state in 1934 (Foley, *Radical Representations*, 162).[2] From another ideological platform, National Socialist German Workers' Party

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grounded its Nazism in "decontextualized ideas about folklore culled from Romanticism to the 1930s," conceiving *der Volk* as a figure of spiritual unity and racial purity, a gauge for state policies of racial cleansing (Bendix, *In Search*, 166). American conceptions of the folk would encounter and negotiate these distinct but contiguous cultural formations from Europe. As each of these iterations of the people show, such categories of authentic national personhood were invented, unstable, and shifting, and they served a range of political agendas on the left and the right. To what ends the folk and their pastness would be used—and abused—is part of the story I aim to tell.

Departing from a conventional literary history of the 1930s that couples nonfiction and social realism, this book traces the decade's convergent satirical and documentary genres in a set of unruly texts that bring to light alternative forms of cultural production and social critique around the figure of the folk: George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934), the Federal Writers' Project's *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (1939), Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), and Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). As I argue, the satirical energies of the thirties have been largely overlooked in the steady focus on realism, an omission that has rendered the writings of Schuyler, West, and others at best anomalous and at worst inscrutable. In fact, these writings were by no means anomalies, but instead responses to the Depression era's representational crisis and its corresponding recourse to icons of working-class and rural authenticity. Through these novels, ethnographies, guidebooks, and films, I trace the foundations of the folk in a fraught, triangular racial formation of white, black, and native. As I show, a hybrid genre of satire and documentary formed a site of theorizing in which conventional epistemologies of the folk were both staged and queried (Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro*, 11). This hybrid genre created a common discourse of moral truth-telling aimed at the patriotic and economic production of the folk in populist narratives promoted by the New Deal nation-state and corporate capitalism.

Real Folks is organized around two variations of this hybrid genre; the first I call *modernist burlesque* and the second, *signifying ethnography*. These terms are meant to suggest the text's ascendant genre and its interplay with apparently unrelated modes of representation. Both modernist burlesque and signifying ethnography theorize the construction of the folk by way of the literary and the visual. Both forms inhabit that

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which they mean to critique, using exaggeration, irony, and reversal to reveal the performative dimensions of the object of their scrutiny. Each form makes its readers aware of their own press for the authentic. By way of their complicity critiques, modernist burlesque and signifying ethnography offer their readers a resistant reading practice.

When Schuyler and West deploy the folk, it is always a parodic citation. This gesture helps define their modernist burlesque, a kind of satire that occupies its subject from the outside in by pushing its most theatrical and technological elements to spectacular excess.[3] Both Schuyler and West deploy modernist burlesque to dismantle the authentic aura that surrounds the folk and the "self-made man," an aura derived from these figures' central role in capitalism's story of limitless opportunity. In their burlesques, they illumine how the clichéd story of American class ascension—the bootstrap myth—depends upon impersonation, a performative making of the self into the upwardly mobile, white, and male rugged individual. Each character enacts this transformation on stage in front of large audiences. The reader witnesses how the audience who consumes the performance wholesale becomes reified, incorporated as white supremacist or fascist cogs in a mass-produced nationalist script. In this way, Schuyler and West disturb the dynamics of identification central to the rags-to-riches plot. By providing examples of all-consuming spectatorship and their violent outcomes in the voice of documentary, the actual audience is asked to distance itself from the textual audience. As readers distance themselves from these narratives of authentic personhood and nation, other progressive political configurations and possibilities emerge to fill the void.

The second variation of this hybrid genre, signifying ethnography, follows a structural logic similar to modernist burlesque, citing and inhabiting that which it means to question in order to instill in its readers a self-conscious critical reading practice. Whereas modernist burlesque implicates the performing protagonist and his multiple audiences in the perpetuation of insidious nationalist dramas, signifying ethnography implicates the ethnographer and the reader in the activity of searching for "the authentic." In so doing, it shows the folk to be fluid, ephemeral, and impure. I draw upon Hurston's definition of signifying found in *Mules and Men*, one of the first definitions of the term in the study of linguistics, "to show off" (124n4)—and, I would add, "to show up."[4] As Henry Louis Gates describes it, *signifying* deploys the "use of

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repetition and reversal" to launch "an implicit parody of a subject's own complicity in illusion" (*Figures in Black*, 240). In regard to the popular nonfiction of the Depression, this illusion encompasses the desire for unmediated transcriptions of reality and a steadfast belief in their authenticity.[5] Within the signifying ethnographies this book treats, the reader is made aware of her own investment in the fiction of nonfiction's unmediated status.

The texts in *Real Folks* emerge within a particular juncture of *racial capitalism*, a term I use, following Cedric Robinson, to emphasize the ways race is always a foundational structure within the operation of capitalism in the United States (*Black Marxism*, 2).[6] In the first half of the twentieth century, Jim Crow, the federally mandated system of racial segregation, permeated capitalism's economic and social structures, resulting in unequal wages for workers as well as the segregation of places of consumption. These divisions also facilitated the growth of niche and crossover markets that cashed in on gendered, racial difference, such as Madame C. J. Walker's beauty products, designed primarily for an African American female clientele; and the race records of the 1920s, produced initially for African American consumers and then for a crossover market. Paradoxically, just as these niche markets grew, Fordist technologies of mass production ushered in the promise of standardized goods and a homogeneous "democracy of consumers" (Cross, *All-Consuming Century*, 2). As a consequence, singularity and homogeneity became mutually perpetuating market values. In this economy, the folk were positioned as unique artifacts, their difference made "real" through modernized media—the radio, records, concerts, newspapers, and movie newsreels—and its new ways of hearing, seeing, perceiving, and mediating (Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 57). These technologies worked in tandem with commercial culture's commodification of the folk on a national scale. In this way, the folk were capitalized on as a tonic against American standardization and against the crisis tendencies of advanced capitalism as evidenced by the Depression. Through their variations of the hybrid genre of documentary and satire, each of the texts in this book expose the ways the folk were both called upon to evoke a precapitalist past and exploited in the form of nostalgic folk authenticity. In the end, the folk are revealed to be an anxious product of commercial modernity—not an antidote to it. By examining the ways that satire and documentary hybridize each other in this period, we see at once the means by which the

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folk were constituted within a nostalgic story of corporate capitalism and also the vigorous critique of that constitution made so powerfully in the cultural expression of the time.

OH HONORED FOLK!

What is the story of the thirties without voice-of-God narration, the booming male voiceover that introduced such classic documentary films as Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937)? An omnipotent narratorial device invented in that era, it self-consciously projects a sense of its story's importance for posterity, in part, by imposing coherence on its subject. The loud, commanding tones of voice-of-God narration attempted to make order of the Depression's chaotic devastation. Many parties across the political spectrum vied for this powerful omniscient voice. The din of these voices then, and the symbolic place of the thirties in the national imagination now, make it all the more difficult to grasp that decade's texture, complexities, and contradictions (Veitch xvi). The artists included in this book grappled with these didactic representations as they spoke to the many conundrums of a nation racked by economic crisis. At the forefront of their efforts lay the thorny problem of how to represent "the people" (Veitch xvii; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 125). The folk provided one possible answer.

The economic free-fall of the early thirties destabilized prevailing notions of personal, communal, and national character. Fiscal chaos raised serious questions about what was "real" or "authentic." Banks failed by the hundreds; businesses cut back on production and payrolls; wages went down and unemployment went up. The so-called American Way of life was frequently revealed to be an American Dream.[7] All the while, President Herbert Hoover and his administration denied that there was any depression at all, insisting instead that the "downturn" was only temporary. In 1930, when a delegation came to Hoover seeking the immediate expansion of federally sponsored public works, he informed them: "Gentlemen, you have come sixty days too late. The Depression is over" (Levine, "Historian," 18). In spite of Hoover's denial, the plight of those who had long constituted and haunted the borders of the nation's economic order—the "ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed," as Franklin D. Roosevelt later put it—now took center stage.

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Populist and regionalist formulations of American identity reverberated in the shock waves of the crash of 1929. As a skeptical public grew increasingly more cynical, politicians, social reformers, journalists, and artists invoked various images of "the people" to render coherent the badly splintered imagined community of the nation. Yet, in the cautionary words of Michael Denning, "If language were politics, we would all be populists" (125).[8] One of the more infamous debates within the communist-leaning Left occurred in 1935 at the American Writers' Congress, when the literary theorist Kenneth Burke, in his speech "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," argued for the use of the term "the people" instead of "the worker," for its more "basic" address and mobilization (Burke 89).[9] Though Burke received a less than enthusiastic response for this suggestion, his speech augured a shift toward a more populist appeal: "If 'Third Period' communism talked incessantly of 'the proletariat,' the Popular Front tended to speak of 'the people' " (Alpers, *Dictators*, 11). Burke's semantic suggestion is but one instance of the period's populist turn. The ideological battles over "the people" were fought vociferously on the right and the left by demagogues such as Louisiana's crooked populist Huey Long and the fascist Father Coughlin, liberal centrists such as the New Dealers, and radical antiracist labor activists such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the larger Popular Front—in Denning's useful terminology, the "cultural front"—the affiliation of leftists and radicals who aligned themselves with New Deal liberals against fascism (xiii–xx).

Within these competing expressions of the people, the folk were often posited as racialized relics of American authenticity and purity, the ballast from the past that anchored present imaginings of the national collective. Such usages were indebted to earlier iterations of the folk that emerged within the growing field of ethnographic folklore in the 1890s, and it is worth tracing that history briefly here for its relevance. Though its own distinct discipline, American folklore studies was built upon a European model originating in the counter-Enlightenment romantic nationalism that began to flourish in late eighteenth-century Germany. Folklore's most famous early interlocutor, the German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder, espoused the centrality of der Volk, "the people," and their language and customs in the organic, authentic development of the folk-nation (Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, xxv). Articulating a vision of the nation-state that was patriotic but also

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culturally relativistic, Herder argued that folklore and other expressive forms best represented the "spirit of the times" (*Geist der Zeiten*) and the shape of national character in its particular historical moment (Bunzl, "Franz Boas," 20; Bendix, *In Search*, 41).[10] Herder's philosophy concretized "the modern invention of the 'folk' category" at the naissance of industrial modernity (Bendix 35).

Inspired by Herder's valuation of the folk and tradition as key to the creation of world history and national unity, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—the famous Brothers Grimm—set about preserving and promoting German folk poetry and lore against the encroachments of modernity (Bronner, *Following Tradition*, 190). The brothers viewed such material as cultural treasures presumed to contain a purity, simplicity, and vitality particular to the rural regions of Germany, such as Hesse, where the Grimms themselves had deep family roots (188). Entwining Romantic longings for authentic folk artistry with a desire for scientific method and rigor, the Grimms annotated, edited, and categorized the tales they compiled, successfully "artifactualizing" their collections for a growing audience of scholars and popular readers (Bendix 49; Stewart, *Crimes*, 105–6). In an adjacent movement, British Romantics such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge concentrated their poetry on common people of humble and rustic origins, attempting to narrate their passions in a "language really used by men" (Wordsworth, "Preface," para. 5). The embrace of peasant protagonists and a corresponding pastoral aesthetics provided part of the impetus for the study of folklore internationally in the nineteenth century. In 1846, the British antiquarian William Thoms coined the term *folklore*, bringing together such German and English precedents to propose "a good Saxon compound, Folklore,—*the Lore of the People*," as a replacement for Latinate terms such as "popular antiquities" and "popular literature" (qtd. in Emrich, " 'Folk-Lore,' " 361; Bronner, *Following Tradition*, 219). In particular, Thoms hoped to enlist "some James Grimm . . . who shall do for the Mythology of the British Islands the good service which that profound antiquary and philologist has accomplished for the mythology of Germany." Thoms's coinage espoused the Anglo-Saxon revivalism and its particular concept of Englishness that he hoped the practice of folklore collecting in England would further advance (Abrahams, "Phantoms," 9).

In the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson and other American Ro-

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mantics in the mid-nineteenth century drew upon similar ideas in their notion of the "common man," a seemingly classless, unspoiled, and democratically inclined individual—a self-reliant white man—who undertook the task of building the republic, be he learned or illiterate (Bendix 72–74). While Emerson and Henry David Thoreau aspired to the authentic simplicity of the common man in the 1830s and 1840s, others located authenticity in marginalized communities of the North American continent through a concept of the savage folk, following the evolutionary model of the day (McNeil, "Pre-Society Folklorists," 3).[11] By 1888, the year the American Folklore Society was first established, Emerson's "common man" had been granted a national history that included several intersecting folk populations who bore the imprint of the so-called New World rather than the Old. Hence, in the inaugural volume of the society's *Journal of American Folklore*, its editor, William Wells Newell, outlined their objectives: to spur "the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America, namely . . . Relics of Old English Folk-Lore . . . Lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union . . . Lore of the Indian Tribes of North America . . . Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc." (Newell, "Field and Work," 3). The folk were thus primarily conceived of as white Americans of "Anglo-Saxon" descent, African Americans, and Native Americans (Becker, *Selling Tradition*, 54–55; Grider, "Salvaging the Folklore," 26). This unstable tripartite racial formation was already under construction in the work of Americans who were folklorists before the inauguration of the society, local-color writers, and collectors who amassed the songs and stories of each group.[12]

W. E. B. Du Bois improvised upon this popular concept of the folk as he made the case for African American inclusion in the modern nation in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): "There is no true American music but the wild, sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (7). Here, too, Du Bois drew upon his knowledge of Herder's Romantic formulations of the folk's "cultural gift . . . as the foundation of national character," most likely gleaned from his postdoctoral education in Berlin at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (Allen, "Reading of Riddles," 59). At this point in his development as an intellectual, rather than assert the formulation of a discrete African American nationality and

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risk its suggestion of black political separatism, he would deploy the notion of racial ideals (Allen 62). He advocated "fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" (*Souls* 7).[13] By locating evidence of these racial gifts bequeathed to the nation in the music and folklore of African Americans and Native Americans, Du Bois asserted a rootedness in a folk past for groups left out of the nation's charmed circle. In this way, the claim to a folk past functioned as a persuasive bid for true national belonging.

Yet the folk were just as often used to demarcate the grounds of exclusion, as seen in the immigration debates over "real" Americans and "real" Americas in the 1920s. In tandem with an expanding Ku Klux Klan membership that included as many as four million members, concerned citizens encouraged Congress to take into account the fate of the "American race"—"a blend of various peoples of the so-called Nordic race"—against the encroaching threat of "mongrelization" (qtd. in Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, 139). The cry of "race suicide" issued from the fear that if (white) "American" families did not increase their birthrate, as Alys Weinbaum puts it, "the United States would quickly become a land comprised of the darker-hued progeny of prolific foreign-born immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and the descendents of African slaves" (*Wayward Reproductions*, 188). Such beliefs led to the passage of the xenophobic Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921 and 1924, which excluded Asians and all but prevented the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans. Such nativist sentiments shadowed the populist rhetoric of the folk in the Depression era.

The discourse of the folk emerged at the intersection of the decade's populism and regionalism, their imaginary local communities expressive of no single ideological orientation (Denning 132–33; Veitch 166n5). The folk were not synonymous with the people; rather, they were construed as regionally located ancestors or native others in competing conceptions of the people. Just who the folk were in the period's many regionalisms depended on whether you were listening on the radio to Father Coughlin, FDR, or John L. Lewis. Indeed, in right-wing diatribes, the folk were made to be representatives of rural, small-town values, the Protestant

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work ethic, and the great White Way, a group threatened by the recent influx of immigrants, African Americans, and women in the wage-labor workforce. From a liberal angle, the folk stood for the legions of dispossessed agricultural workers who had fallen victim to mechanized farming practices, greedy lenders, and a series of catastrophic natural disasters, a group cast white or "without race or ethnicity" (Denning 134). In the period's most radical formulations, the folk represented a regional touchstone for an antiracist labor movement, their industrial folklore emblematic of the transition from agriculture to industry.

Communist conceptions of the folk in the 1930s overlapped with such radical formulations, though they were often hampered by a kind of nationalist romance (Jarrett, *Deans*, 93). In the communist thinking of the period, the folk comprised a laboring preindustrial peasant class from the past, a basis upon which to build a socialist nation. During the Third Period (1928–35) in particular, the Communist Party USA offered the history of rural southern black labor and culture as evidence for its Black Belt nation thesis. That argument proposed that black people living in the Deep South constituted an oppressed nation within a nation deserving of recognition and sovereignty (Foley 173–76; Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 3). Some Marxist commentators presumed that rural black folk culture was oppositional by nature, a repository of proletariat feeling from an authentic American peasant class (Foley 184). In the same years, Stalin turned to Russian folk culture to locate "pre-proletarian folklore" expressive of the attitudes of "working masses from the past" (Dorson, *Folklore*, 18). The prerevolutionary laboring peasant functioned as a heroic antecedent to the modern-day peasant-cum-worker and "folklorism—politicized folk adaptation—became a major industry in the Stalin era" (Dorson 18; Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 78).[14] In the United States, a folksinger and fellow traveler such as Woody Guthrie would mine traditional folk songs for their revolutionary potential. Figured as precursors to the worker, the folk and their premodern popular culture—people's culture—were understood to express the stirrings of a nascent movement toward proletarian sovereignty and revolution.

As such examples demonstrate, the politics and cultural production of the thirties were shaped by competing conceptions of collective identity and the folk's central place within them. Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to steer the country out of its misery, not just by introducing a host of

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new social programs but also by strategically entering into this revived debate over the definition and identity of the nation and its citizenry. As Priscilla Wald observes, “Official stories constitute Americans” (*Constituting Americans*, 2). No administration understood this better than Roosevelt’s. His New Deal seized upon the issue of the authentic folk to solve the problem of how to represent “the people,” developing programs that set out to display the vernacular traditions of historically marginalized groups to tell a story of national fortitude and exceptionalism. Among these official forays into folk culture, the president and first lady personally hosted nine folk music concerts in the White House between 1934 and 1942 (Filene 134). These events mirrored the administration’s cultural endeavors in the shape of the Farm Security Administration’s photographic section, its funding of the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk-Song in 1937, and the invention of Federal Project Number One. Under the auspices of Federal One, the Federal Writers’ Project would unearth and recount the regional folklore and culture of the nation’s states, towns, cities, and rural areas in its American Guide Series, publishing over a thousand books and pamphlets (Weigle, “Finding the ‘True America,’ ” 62; Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 111).

With the radical folklorist B. A. Botkin at the helm of the folklore division of the Federal Writers’ Project, Charles Seeger in charge of the Federal Music Project, and Alan and John Lomax directing the Archive of American Folk-Song, the New Deal officially joined in the decade’s folk revival (Filene 137). Taking a cue from the fields of anthropology and folklore studies, these government agencies focused their rhetoric and their actions on cultural loss, adopting an updated model of salvage ethnography, the same imperative that inspired the founding of the American Folklore Society some forty-five years earlier. Each of these projects sent photographers, folklorists, ethnographers, and fieldworkers out to gather images, interviews, lore, and songs from the nation’s local folk populations (Filene 136). As these professionals took up the project of many progressive reformers before them, investigating the assimilation process and “living lore” of recent immigrants, they redoubled their efforts to record the vulnerable dignity of “native-born” workers and “traditional” populations. Federal folklorists and others placed particular emphasis on groups who were viewed, in the words of the critical race theorist Devon Carbado, as “foreign in a domestic sense”

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("Racial Naturalization," 639). Such groups were accorded a racially and temporally liminal status, subject to an "inclusionary form of exclusion," positioned both inside and outside the national imagination as "original" peoples (Carbado 638).

Within this iconography, Native Americans, African Americans, and poor rural whites were conscripted to embody an organic, precapitalist past seen as apparently antithetical to commercial modernity. Whereas Native Americans were often depicted as highly marketable relics of an already vanished frontier, impoverished African Americans were often represented as exotic, domestic "others." Poor rural whites, alternatively, were made to symbolize a nostalgic and "traditional" Anglo-Saxon identity. Each group may have been assigned its specific place in the Edenic past but the groups certainly were not treated equally. These representations shored up white privilege, providing a folksy precapitalist antecedent to the white figure of the "standard" citizen-consumer in the 1930s. Though African Americans and Native Americans were included within the imaginary purview of the nation's original peoples, they were still denied the material prerogatives of proper citizenship. In *Real Folks* I demonstrate, in part, how these purportedly disappearing groups were used by New Dealers and others to tell a story of capitalist progress, to show just how far the country had come.

The production of the folk was not simply ideological, but economic in scope. Though the Federal Writers' Project was legally prohibited from making a profit from its publications, the project was certainly intended to stimulate the nation's economy (Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 63). The New Deal, along with various vectors of popular culture, promoted America to Americans. Four out of the five bestselling novels of the thirties explored the search for security in history or on the land, with repressive gender and racial hierarchies firmly in place: *The Good Earth* (1931), *God's Little Acre* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) (McElvaine, *Great Depression*, 221). Cultural loss and its preindustrial folk iconography thus became the occasion for a lucrative nostalgia, a nostalgia that ironically fortified capitalism, the very agent of "authentic" culture's destruction. Robert McElvaine, a historian, observes, "The past, like the ownership of a piece of land, offered a refuge for people distressed with the present and fearful of the future" (221). People bought into this strain of nostalgia, ideologically fixing and fixating on a stability that never was.

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DOCUMENTING THE FOLK

The folk emerged in many articulations of populism and regionalism expressed primarily through the medium of documentary. As several critics have argued, the folk were an animating subject within the documentary movement of the thirties and the New Deal grasped the potential power of this icon and this medium. Alfred Kazin observed in his literary history *On Native Grounds* (1942) that the unprecedented crisis of the Depression precipitated a "literature of nationhood, beginning with the documentation of America . . . and reaching a thunderous climax in an effort to seek out the American tradition" (485). Kazin argues that documentary, in providing "a living record of contemporary American experience," constituted a means of "collective self-consciousness" and "national self-scrutiny" (485, 486). In his groundbreaking cultural history *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, first published in 1973, William Stott built upon Kazin's work to launch his claim that "the primary expression of thirties America was not fiction but fiction's opposite . . . documentary . . . the communication, not of imagined things but of real things only" (xi). Stott made a powerful case for the centrality of documentary and its visual language of facts in the Depression's social reforms and conceptions of collectivity, and his account has become a touchstone in the study of the thirties. In this book, I reassess Stott's documentary synthesis, departing from his analysis in several ways: as he makes the case for documentary's preeminence in the thirties and its concern for marginalized groups, he overlooks other genres—the hybrid forms that, I will show, take up this cause with equal fervor (cf. Denning 119). As important, Stott discounts the degree to which documentary contains various fictional modes within it.

Nevertheless, I am indebted to Stott's critical formulation of documentary as a genre. Beginning with the coinage of the term *documentary* in 1926 by the British filmmaker John Grierson, to describe the "creative treatment of actuality," Stott undertook the task of establishing documentary as a genre unto its own, "as distinct as tragedy, epic or satire" (ix).[15] He convincingly linked together a vast range of cultural projects that manifested, in his words, a documentary motive and imagination, including Edward R. Murrow's radio broadcasts; popularized social worker case histories and other social science writing; serialized soap operas; the WPA's travel guides; picture magazines including *Life* and

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Look; Martha Graham's ballets *American Document* and *Appalachian Spring*; and documentary books such as Dorothea Lange's and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus* and Margaret Bourke-White's and Erskine Caldwell's bestseller *You Have Seen Their Faces*. For Stott, these texts illustrated documentary's conventions: its appeal to emotion as a means of persuasion; its tone of immediacy; its "cult of experience," to quote Philip Rahv, from his article of that title (8); its embrace of the visual record as its primary forms of evidence; its function as a form of populist propaganda for various social and political causes; its romantic and sentimental focus on the common people, the proletariat, and the folk, or in Stott's words, "the worker, the poor, the jobless, the ethnic minorities, the farmer, the sharecropper, the Negro, the immigrant, the Indian, the oppressed and the outlaw" (53), people presumed to be "more real" (56) than the celebrities and elites who occupied so much of the media's attention. As Stott's list suggests, the featured subjects of thirties documentary shared a hazy class-based association: each group was presumed to be "the salt of the earth," authentic by virtue of their representativeness as members of the urban industrial working class, the rural poor, and the racially and economically disenfranchised (53).

Kazin and Stott were surely right about the fixation within documentary on these groups as the lifeblood of American identity—its nationalist protagonists—and the genre's concomitant preoccupation with authenticity. In a sense, the link between documentary photography and the folk is so established that it is often taken for granted. Specifically attending to the camera in their discussions, both Kazin and Stott identified documentary's central role in the creation of the folk, illuminating a crucible of new technologies, disciplines, and institutions in the 1930s that made this representation possible (Kazin, *On Native*, 512).

Indeed, if photography provided one means of recording the folk and the primitive for the incipient disciplines of folklore and anthropology at the turn of the century, by the thirties, the camera had become the primary tool through which the folk were visualized. Technological innovations almost guaranteed the ubiquity of the still and moving image in the Depression era. The convenience of smaller, hand-held cameras fitted with built-in viewfinders and less cumbersome flash units, the invention of faster film, and improvements in photomechanical reproduction, as well as the availability of more affordable automobiles, enabled a new way of accounting for America by rendering its places and

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people more easily accessible and visible (Solomon-Godeau, *Photography*, 62). A more agile style of photography became possible, giving rise to the large-scale expansion of street photography and photojournalism and the inception of the first big picture magazines (Tagg, *Burden*, 181; Scott, *Street Photography*, 57). Terry Smith describes how, as photography "became the dominant visual media in the United States, not just within the imagery of reform but within visual culture as a whole. . . . it became more and more harnessed to the job of circulating images of products and ambience, to promoting the spectacle of consumption" (*Making the Modern*, 286). The cinema promoted such images as well. In the late 1920s, motion pictures gained sound and color, a flourishing production industry, and modern theaters for screening, advances that augmented their quality of indexical realism and their popularity as a form of leisure entertainment and civic edification (Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal*, 11–12, 68, 71). Through the Hollywood studio and star system of the 1930s, the film industry consolidated into a "national cinema" that articulated a new Americanism across classes and regions (2, 65, 74–77). The iconography of the folk materialized somewhere in the improbably shared terrain of social reform, leisure entertainment, and the marketplace—the space between realism and fantasy.

As the broad contours of Stott's study suggest, the communication of "real things only" was never entirely independent from the realm of fiction and its representations of the imagined. In contemporary film studies, the degree to which documentary and fictional forms inhabit one another has almost become a truism (Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 3; Rhodes and Springer, *Docufictions*, 3–6; Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 24). Michael Renov argues: "Fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another—particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity and questions of performance" (2). Given the considerable scholarship devoted to the discursive modalities of documentary, the study of documentary's enmeshment with particular *kinds* of fictional genres and tropes may be more to the point. Bourke-White's and Caldwell's documentary book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, for example, exploits a range of fictional modes including sentimentality, melodrama, and stereotype to depict its subjects—poor southern sharecroppers—as nonthreatening, even comic castoffs from an unjust and outdated economic system. The affective registers of these fictional modes—be they sympathy, estrangement, humor, outrage, or guilt—establish the param-

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eters through which the reader encounters the work's central characters. And those characters represent an iteration of the folk.

In Stott's version of the thirties, social realism and documentary rule the day as they petition for liberal social reform on behalf of "[society's] most deprived and powerless subjects," the folk among them (56). But, as I have suggested, this account largely ignores the complex fictional elements *within* documentary, much less the presence of hybrid genres perhaps more difficult to categorize, modes that also cohered around the figure of the folk to lodge a form of social protest. It would be easy to set up documentary as the earnest purveyor of the folk and satire as its wayward foil. Yet that explanation doesn't make room for the many documentaries and ethnographies of the period that undermined the authentic aura of the folk they set out to represent. Nor does it allow for the ways that the satires often delivered their final punch through the reportorial straight face of documentary. Such an opposition ignores the methods of social persuasion shared by these genres, their live wire of irony and their delight in overturning the presumed spatiotemporal distance that structures the gaze of the ethnographer, the middle-class observer, and the folk.

Something more incongruous is afoot. As Bertolt Brecht explains, "Indignation at inhuman conditions can be stimulated in many ways, by direct description of a pathetic or matter-of-fact kind, by narrating stories and parables, by jokes, by over- and understatement" ("The Popular and the Realistic," 110). Brecht's insight encompasses both documentary and satire. What Michel Foucault observes of the "historical disciplines" applies to the presumed divide between documentary and satire in the thirties: "We must not imagine that these two [forms] have crossed without recognizing each other. In fact, the same problems are being posed in either case, but they have provoked opposite effects on the surface" (*Archaeology*, 6). Indeed, both genres are dependent upon realism for their articulation and authority, documentary presumed to be a transparent transcription of nonfictional reality and truth, and satire, a deeply exaggerated, fictional representation of reality that nevertheless conveys a highly mediated commentary about the status of the truth. In this way, though manifestly different in tone and style, they are each fundamentally propelled by the enunciation of a set of truth-claims, however provisional and incomplete.

The genres of satire and documentary are porous and expansive, un-

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finished, impure. They inhabit one another. As Wai Chee Dimock suggests, "The membership—of any genre—is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, another empirical bit of evidence, to be added. . . . [Literature] will never solidify into a congealed shape. Its force of incipience pulls and strains against all taxonomic regimes. The spilling over of phenomena from labels stands here as an ever-present likelihood, a challenge to any systemizing claim" ("Introduction," 1378). Dimock then asks what would happen if literary studies were "organized by genres, in this unfinished sense, with spillovers front and center?" In its "unfinished sense," genre becomes hybrid and refuses the containment of the very taxonomic regimes from which it seems to issue. This generic propensity actively undermines the production of the folk as ossified type. It is no wonder, then, that the issue of genre, a taxonomy of representation, comes to the fore in an interrogation of the folk, a taxonomy of personhood. In her own performance as simultaneous folk informant and folklorist, an ethnographer such as Hurston enacts a tangible "spilling over . . . from labels." The hybrid texts in this study necessarily trouble the notion of genre as fixed. With the concept of hybridity—texts that enact their satire, in part, by adopting the tone and subject of documentary reportage and texts that document by way of satire's insurrectionary methods—I intend to place the "spillovers" between these two modes of representation front and center.[16] The "impossible purity" of the folk is rendered visible through the impurity—the hybridity—of genre (Brody, *Impossible Purities*, 11).

TOWARD A RADICAL COMPLICITY

In deposing social realism's hold on the thirties by highlighting a previously obscured hybrid aesthetic, my study joins other recent scholarship. In his important work *The Cultural Front*, for example, Michael Denning argues for the predominance of a kind of "social modernism" whose aesthetic innovations conformed to the logic of the oxymoron (122). Following the ruminations of Kenneth Burke on the political work of the grotesque, Denning equates social modernism with the revolutionary symbolism of the "proletarian grotesque." The proletarian grotesque is a trope that deploys the grotesque, such as "the gargoyles that open *Citizen Kane*, the accident-victim photographs in Weegee's *Naked*

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City . . . the gigantic head of Mussolini in Peter Blume's *Eternal City*," in order "to wrench us out of our repose and the distance of the 'aesthetic' " (122–23). It is a way of seeing that potentially realigns our class allegiances. Denning's proletarian grotesque offers a broader insight into the Popular Front's strategies of representation: it shows how the arts of the Popular Front pushed genre into excess as a vehicle for protest, how they burlesqued, dismantled, and refigured typical narrative formulas and codes to shake their readers and viewers loose from a practice of passive reception. This strategy of disillusion through illusion moves away from populist oversimplification, toward a critical reading practice and a possible reconception of progressive politics. Given their penchant for burlesque as a form of satire, Schuyler and West might be understood to anticipate the Popular Front's aesthetic strategies in the early 1930s, and Sturges might be understood to ironically reflect upon them in the early 1940s. In their modernist burlesques, each artist pushed genre into excess, combining high with low.

In modifying *burlesque* with *modernist*, I name a distinct formation of burlesque that satirically and politically unmasks popular narratives of self-making as conveyed through the latest modernized technologies of mass production and media. I choose the word *burlesque* for its grotesque, imitative, and overtly theatrical meanings: as a noun, it is a form of literary or dramatic caricature or a "grotesque imitation of what is, or is intended to be, dignified or pathetic, in action, speech, or manner" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Although in its current usage, *burlesque* is linked almost exclusively with "girly shows"—an association that began with the burlesque "leg" shows of the nineteenth century and was solidified at the famous Minsky brothers' nightclub in the 1930s—as the usage patterns in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggest, in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth this genre of performance was far more diverse and complex (Lewis, *Traveling Show*, 195; Glenn, "Taking Burlesque Seriously," 93). Susan Glenn explains that burlesque connoted a "mocking, irreverent humor" wrought out of "parodic imitation of literary and theatrical texts and styles . . . as well as contemporary social, cultural and political fashions and foibles" (93).

While its earliest usage extends in Europe back to the seventeenth century, burlesque has more recent ties to specific forms of American popular theater, such as vaudeville and minstrel shows and other ambivalent acts of impersonation and self-making. Such acts naturalized (and

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denaturalized) authentic identity through visual performance. Within this era of theatrical spectacle, burlesque emerges as a parodic citation of the performative. Each text of modernist burlesque in this study knowingly features a protagonist whose deployment of performativity in front of an audience consolidates rather than undoes the power of racial discourse and other discourses of authenticity.[17] The performative as it works *within* each plot fulfills this conservative function. Yet, in a secondary register, the actual readers of the text are made critically to *see* this operation in action. We are made to comprehend just *how* the open dramatization of performativity shores up discourses of authenticity by way of a triangulated dynamic of looking whereby we watch the textual audience as they watch the performance on display. In this way, modernist burlesque demonstrates the ideological workings of performativity in cultural narratives of authenticity.

Indeed, George Schuyler seized upon the burlesque and its performative dimensions to describe his own satire, *Black No More*: "I have tried to deal with [racism] as a civilized man; to portray the spectacle as a combination madhouse, burlesque show and Coney Island" (qtd. in Mills, "Absurdity," 2). Around this time, in 1931, the folklorist Constance Rourke, in her groundbreaking book *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, forecast Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque as she reflected upon the "lawless" energies of burlesque that had overtaken American theater one hundred years earlier: "To sustain burlesque something more than grotesquerie is needed. Satire enters into its attentions; once a territory is invaded by burlesque, all its objects are likely to look puffed and stretched, pinched and narrowed. But pure satire stands aloof, while burlesque wholly possesses its subject and wears the look of friendship" (110, 101).[18] Rourke underscores the edge and the danger of burlesque, that by inhabiting the subject of its mockery, it risks giving the initial appearance of sanction, of perpetuating the inanities it means to upend. Along these lines, Fred Moten reminds us that "modes of radical performativity or subversive impersonation are always already embedded in the structure they would escape" (*In the Break*, 2). In its strategic imitation, burlesque both invokes and forecloses the affective structures and desires that cohere in the subject of its derision; such are the friendly, even erotic, energies of burlesque as it lays its subject bare.

The burlesque disturbs. The authors' distance from their "material is always a bit uncertain," and the same goes for the readers, who are

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temporarily transported into the grotesque spectacle through the surface plot's drive toward revenge or sympathy (Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 102). In the examples of Schuyler's and West's novels, each plot attempts to manipulate the reader through affect in its twisted denouement: Schuyler's *Black No More* enjoins its readers to wish revenge on the white supremacists in the scenes leading up to their lynching, and West's *A Cool Million* elicits a momentary tinge of sorrow for its protagonist Lem as he is assassinated and then mourned as a martyr for the fascist party at the rally that concludes the novel. At the peak of violence in each text, readers must recoil from the duped majority—from the crowds, audiences, and dominant communities represented in each text—the people who (perhaps unwittingly) "buy into" the ideological system under review. Only the readers' unfolding recognition of their own manipulation within this scene prevents their interpellation within a white-supremacist, fascist script. Notably, modernist burlesque accomplishes this alienation effect when it most closely imitates documentary, adopting a reportorial tone and perspective that recounts such atrocities in graphic detail, a mode in stark contrast with the grotesque absurdities that surround it (Brecht, "Alienation Effects," 91). These novels avoid populism's temptation, its collective unification of "the people" against an "external enemy," an oversimplified "us" versus "them" (Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," 557).[19] By advocating a critical insider/outsider position for its readers, these texts espouse socialist ideals while taking an antipopulist stance. Moreover, they disallow any easy recourse to a liberal politics of empathy.[20] For these reasons, burlesque is often a risk the Left feels it cannot afford. Schuyler and West took that risk and, as a consequence, their work has been largely ignored or unrecognized in accounts of the leftist aesthetics of the thirties.

Neither Schuyler nor West situates himself or his readers *outside* of mass culture, where they both worked in other capacities, as a journalist and a screenwriter respectively. Theirs is a complicity critique in which the reader is implicated (Pfister, "Complicity Critiques," 610, 620–23; Stott 26–30; Marcus 114). In Schuyler's and West's positioning of their readers, they reenact a familiar modernist plotline but with a crucial difference: in the standard account of modernism, as Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz observe, it was "a movement by and for a certain kind of high (cultured mandarins) as against a certain kind of low (the masses, variously regarded as duped by the 'culture industry,' admi-

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rably free of elitist self-absorption, or simply awaiting the education that would make the community of cognoscenti a universal one)" ("New Modernist Studies," 738). Schuyler's and West's burlesques replay the story of modernism from a progressive political perspective. In their critique of commodity culture, the masses *are* duped by the "culture industry" along with the patriotic slogans of the nation-state and the racist, misogynist spectacles of advanced capitalism. Yet, the community of cognoscenti is not composed of apolitical, cultured mandarins who stay above it all through the transcendence of high art. Rather, in the destructive clearing of modernist burlesque, this community is made up of those who are able to perceive the ideological implications of uncritical consumption by way of their own *proximity* to that practice.

Undeniably, this is a chastening model. West and Schuyler produce a reader who in the words of Matthew Roberts "is 'critical' by way of his [or her] very complicity in the ideological mechanisms of mass culture" ("Bonfire," 65). What we are left with in these works, then, is a self-conscious reading practice, a perspective from which to reenvision progressive imaginaries and enact new alliances. It is not for nothing that Schuyler's and West's leftist activism in the early thirties—Schuyler's founding of black consumer cooperatives and West's efforts at unionizing Hollywood—coincided with the writing of these novels.[21] Arguably, these efforts were mutually reinforcing. Proceeding with the knowledge of their own complicity within the intractable conduits of commodity culture they criticized, a position that might lead to resignation, Schuyler and West instead strove to transform the structural frameworks of production and consumption they confronted on a daily basis.

In a sense, modernist burlesque plays with an insider/outsider paradigm central to the discipline of anthropology's embrace of participant observation fieldwork at this time. If modernist burlesque proceeds from "the look of friendship," from intimate proximity to critical distance, the ethnographies based upon participant observation most often move in an opposite direction. They trace the journey of an outsider-become-insider who alternates between both positions to achieve the experiential authority of the ethnological informant coupled with the critical objectivity of the ethnographer-observer. Hurston's *Mules and Men* is a tour de force of signifying ethnography: Hurston plays herself as an anthropologist outsider and a folk insider, entwining these stock roles into a Möbius strip of authenticity and performativity. A mediator between her

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subject and her audience, she signifies on the colonial and imperialist entanglements of anthropology and her readers' concomitant expectations of a preindustrial folk, real in their simplicity, out of time and removed from the circuits of modernity. By the book's end, her readers become most aware of Hurston's performance in staging the folk and their own press for authenticity. As Daphne Lamothe argues, Hurston and other "native ethnographers" like her deploy "a black modernist gaze"; they insist upon "a way of seeing that dislocates ways of [anthropological] knowing" (2, 3). Citing the conventions of modernist anthropology, particularly its emphasis on participant observation fieldwork, wherein the researcher forms personal relationships with community informants and participates in the life of the group, Hurston shows her readers how these conventions produce the image of the folk—and she makes them aware of their own complicity in the process.

EXTRAVAGANT INCONGRUITIES IN THE ARCHIVE

Though the racial and regional identities of the folk shift from text to text, the logic of the folk, their commodification, and appropriation is the thread that binds these disparate works together in this study. Although each of these texts addresses the construction and deployment of the folk in the thirties, they have nevertheless rarely been brought into conversation with each other, because of the bounds of periodization, genre, and politics. In assembling this unconventional archive around the figure of the folk, I hope to dismantle some of the false distinctions that support the conceptualization of discrete cultural lineages emanating from the New Deal, modernism, and the Harlem Renaissance. By necessity, I am attempting to draw together more tightly several already overlapping conversations about the trajectory of black modernist production, the work of the cultural front, and the documentary thrust of the thirties. My thematic emphasis inevitably includes artists who fall both within and outside of the parameters of the Left. Though writers such as Nathanael West and George Schuyler were avowed if idiosyncratic radicals, artists such as Zora Neale Hurston and the filmmaker Preston Sturges are considerably more difficult to classify in terms of their personal politics. This constitutes but one productive incongruity within this book's own archive.

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Such incongruous considerations and pairings are built upon revisionist scholarship that challenges the orthodoxies of academic inquiry into the 1930s and 1940s, primarily the assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between communist political affiliation and social realism. This book owes much to scholarship that breaks with this portrayal—work by Rita Barnard, Sara Blair, Michael Denning, Brent Hayes Edwards, Barbara Foley, Rena Fraden, Robin D. G. Kelley, William Maxwell, Bill V. Mullen, Cary Nelson, Paula Rabinowitz, James Smethurst, Michelle Stephens, Jonathan Veitch, Alan Wald and Mary Helen Washington—which instead interrogates the vexed political identities and interracial and international formations of the literary Left and its multifaceted mainstream and experimental cultural production.[22] Each scholar insists upon the imbrications of class and race, a point often neglected in considerations of Depression-era culture. Following these recent methodological innovations, my work assumes that the literary and cultural practices of American class conflict in the 1930s cannot be separated from their racial or their gendered dimensions.

I am also indebted to revisionist scholarship on the thirties which departs from more biographically oriented criticism to elaborate upon debates among an ideologically diverse, even politically antagonistic group of writers and intellectuals—in the case of Susan Hegeman's *Patterns for America* (1999), debates regarding culture and "regional diversity and class-based artistic movements," and in the case of Michael Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* (2000), debates regarding "the literary politics of the welfare state" (Hegeman 13; Szalay 16). Following their labors, I pursue the rhetoric of the folk as it is dismantled in the resistant reading practices of an unlikely set of hybrid texts and incongruous voices.

To illuminate the hybrid variations of satire and documentary as they merge to query the folk, the book's chapters are ordered in three sections intended to build on each other. I begin with modernist burlesque, then turn to signifying ethnography, and conclude with a return to modernist burlesque, a structure that might seem to reinforce the division between satire and documentary that I mean to blur. What I hope to show, instead, are variations of this hybrid genre in texts that individually speak to one another in close conversation and that collectively tell a quasi-chronological story of the folk and its critiques in the 1930s. The first part of the book, "The Folklore of Racial Capitalism," examines George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*,

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two modernist burlesque novels that strikingly forecast the vexed role of the folk in the nation's racialized political economy. Following Jonathan Veitch's work on West, I use the title "The Folklore of Racial Capitalism," combining "the folklore of capitalism" (Thurman Arnold's phrase for the symbolism and mythology of capitalism) with the term "racial capitalism" to describe the cultural narratives that gird a Jim Crow economy (Veitch 88; Arnold, *Folklore of Capitalism*, 1). Schuyler and West suggest that the maintenance and profitability of the color line depend upon the violent production of raced and gendered bodies as spectacle and invisible threat for a paying audience. The book's opening chapter turns to *Black No More*, a burlesque of the novel of racial passing that shows how racial authenticity is both capitalized upon and produced within consumer capitalism. In a bid for social mobility, the novel's black protagonist, Max Disher, is turned white through a mechanical procedure called Black-No-More invented by a black scientist, and soon the rest of the country's black population follows suit. Once Max occupies the privileged position of white masculinity, he markets his skills as a public speaker to corporations and white-supremacist organizations, who hire him to advance racist propaganda among white workers. Tracing the manufacture, promotion, and regulation of race in the novel, I argue that *Black No More* illuminates new market possibilities for the trade of racial property in commodity form during the Fordist era. In this way, the novel augurs the period's enthusiastic commodification of the folk.

Schuyler's concerns dovetail with West's in his novella *A Cool Million*, the subject of chapter 2, which also makes visible the violent economics of white patriarchy and the myth of class mobility. In that novel, its plucky American boy hero, Lemuel Pitkin, is literally torn to pieces in his efforts to earn "an honest cool million." In a darkly comic way, both books give serious consideration to the menace of domestic fascism in the form of racial segregation and other modern racial systems several years in advance of the collective antifascist efforts of the cultural front in the mid- to late thirties. In a letter that Nathanael West wrote in 1939 to Saxe Commins, an editor at Random House, West made the case for his own prescience: "Did you ever read a book called *A Cool Million* that I wrote and that was published by Covici Friede? A lot of people think it is a pretty good one and that the reason it flopped is because it was published much too soon in the race toward Fascism. It came out when no one in this country except a few Jeremiahs like myself, took seriously the

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possibility of a Fascist America" (West, *Nathanael West*, 791). Schuyler's and West's books articulated this argument in the beginning of the decade and aimed it not just at the South, but at the nation as a whole. With stunning acuity, these novels not only skewered the racist populisms that prevented interracial working-class solidarity; they also prophesied the folk's patriotic function for the nation-state in crisis, as we see in the chapters that follow.

To be sure, the folk become decidedly folksy in the Federal Writers' Project's *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, the subject of chapter 3. This chapter opens up the middle section of the book, "Performing the Folk," initiating an exploration of signifying ethnography, this study's other hybrid formation of documentary and satire. Both chapters 3 and 4 examine the role of the folk in official and individual-authored texts as they perform competing narratives of regional and national identity. These accounts focus on the particular case of Florida and turn on the question of northern and southern reconciliation in the era of Jim Crow and the problem of the rural folk within "uneven modernity" (Hegeman 4). Precisely because the South was often viewed as a feudal exception to northern industrialism, it was also seen as a pristine, rural enclave of anachronistic folk cultures vanquished elsewhere by modern commerce. This perspective informs much of the Florida guide and its marketing of nostalgic temporalities. I turn to the guide then to track the ways it draws upon this iconography to formalize the folk's function in the New Deal's story of progress. The guide is this study's least hybrid but most polyvocal text in that it consists of sections authored by many different contributors. The chapter argues that the guide promotes the state's tourist appeal and the nation's economy through the lure of ethnography and the promise of a heretofore hidden folk tableau vivant composed of "crackers," Seminoles, and Negroes visible to the prospective automobile traveler. This pageant of authenticity conforms to the guide's strategy of populist synecdoche: the Yankee common-man visitor stands in for the modern white American collective, while Florida's native folk are relegated to the past and to the geographic margins of society.

If the Florida guide is the proverbial straight man of my archive, an example of what this study's other texts work against, it also performs something equally tricky: due to its polyvocality, the hegemonic depiction of the folk is contested within its own pages. The guidebook editors

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hired their staff of writers partly on the basis of where they came from and who they were, in hopes of efficiently employing ethnographers who were simultaneously informants. In this way, they would create a "native" travelogue of each region. Like almost every entry in the American Guide Series, the Florida guide is composed of chapters drafted by different writers; some of them—most notably, the sections penned by Zora Neale Hurston—contradict and complicate the construction of the folk advanced by other sections. Hurston upends the folk, drawing upon strategies perfected in her work of signifying ethnography about Florida and its black inhabitants, *Mules and Men*, published four years earlier, a text that elicits and refuses the reader's desires for the authentic folktale and teller. In an exploration of *Mules and Men*, chapter 4 contends that Hurston constructed herself simultaneously as a distanced anthropologist and an authentic representative of the folk as she collected the folklore of her home town of Eatonville, the camps in neighboring districts where African American laborers harvested turpentine, and finally, the voodoo subculture of New Orleans. As Hurston reenvisioned the geographical and gendered contours of her fieldwork, she created a modern narrative of her subjects. While much of the documentary and ethnography of the thirties asked where and how the folk fit into the nation, Hurston's text self-reflexively cornered its readers and the discipline of anthropology itself to ask somewhat rhetorically, "Just who wants to know?" In this way, her ethnography signifies on representations of the folk in the official populism of the New Deal.

In the third and last part of the book, "Populist Masquerade," I return to modernist burlesque in Preston Sturges's masterpiece *Sullivan's Travels* as it cycles through the mainstream conceptions of the folk by which the thirties are still remembered. Sturges reiterates Hurston's query and asks once more just *who* it is who wanted to *see* the folk. Chapter 5 picks up the question of spectatorship to analyze the ways the film contrasts and consolidates competing configurations of genre, popular desire, and audience. By attending to the protagonist Sullivan's masculine transformation and its relationship to genre and the racial and class politics of the Popular Front, my argument pursues an aspect of the film that has been largely ignored. In its genre crossings and its masquerade, the film parodies the most prominent populist tropes and folk iconographies of the Popular Front and the New Deal. As the film stages a dialectic between realist and antirealist genres, as it visibly enacts masquerade that

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fails, and as it depicts different movie audiences diegetically within its picture, the film preempts the actual audience's turn either to a posture of aesthetic distance, or, conversely, an attitude of liberal empathy. Instead, it encourages its audience to adopt a stance of critical distance that may or may not bring about a realignment of class allegiances.

These chapters home in on a powerful form of social commentary located in the performative dimensions and resistant reading practices of the hybrid genre of documentary and satire: they show how these hybrid forms undercut the thirties folk revival's claims of authenticity; how they reveal the manufacture of the folk in a narrative of commercial capitalism's progress; and how they expose the inner workings of populist and fascist ideology. By harnessing the force of the performative in the hybrid genres of modernist burlesque and signifying ethnography, these writers, photographers, and filmmakers set out to raze America's "folklore of racial capitalism."

All the while, they proceed from a question succinctly posed in James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "How was it we were caught?" (81). Agee repeatedly asks this question, first in the voice of one of his female subjects and then as a rhetorical mantra, transforming it into an existentialist plaint. As we see in the work of Schuyler and West, Hurston and Sturges, there are other ways of asking the question and other answers, too. All these artists begin with the assumption that they and their readers are caught—they are implicated—just as surely as the characters that populate their works and the folk who took center stage in the populist rhetorics of the Depression era. Enjoining their readers to ask, "How was it we were caught?," they call for a self-reflexive reading practice that perceives the seductions of the real and the authentic in narratives of self, community, and nation and the possibility that radical truths may be found in the most outrageous of fictions. It is this reading practice and its potential for a progressive critical politics that I pursue in the chapters that follow.

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