Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues

Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

IV. Black Theatre, Archives and the Federal Theatre Project · Kate Dossett
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Le *Federal Theatre Project* (*FTP*) constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteure en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration* (*WPA*) dirigée par Harry Hopkins. Federal Theatre Project *(1935-1939) : contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et les figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is a singular adventure in the history of American theater, unprecedented at the time and never repeated at such. Headed during its four years of existence, from 1935 to 1939, by the author, playwright and director Hallie Flanagan, it is part of the program set by the Roosevelt administration as part of the New Deal, within the Work Progress Administration (WPA) directed by Harry Hopkins. Federal Theatre Project *(1935-1939): Context and Issues* is the first French volume on this essential period in the history of American theater. By combining cross-disciplinary approaches and case studies, this volume, which brings together contributions from researchers and artists, aims to shed light on the blind spots and forgotten figures of this period of American theatrical history, considering that these omissions themselves tell us something about the historiography of this period and, in turn, about the contemporary views we can take on it. The book is resolutely transdisciplinary, as was the FTP, with articles on theater itself, but also on music and film.

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QUATRIÈME PARTIE

Figures féminines et processus de légitimation

BLACK THEATRE, ARCHIVES AND THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

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> The history of the FTP records, like the Project itself, is one of troubles.
>
> Lorraine Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told: The Federal Theatre Project," 1979 [1]

> there may be thirty plays by Black writers alone that have never been produced. [...] All of that material from the Federal Theatre is just waiting to be surfaced.
>
> Amiri Baraka and Vévé Clark, "Restaging, 1979 [2]

The Federal Theatre Project figures prominently in debates about the promise and danger of political art in the United States. Ambitious in reach and in popular appeal, its contentious closure following Congressional investigations into Un-American activities in 1939 helped cement the project's importance in the Cold War American imagination. The Federal Theatre's continued significance in conversations about state-sponsored art is due, in no small part, to the many and extraordinary rebirths of its archive.[3] Out of place and out of sight through the first decades of the Cold War, this rich cultural archive remerged at an auspicious moment. Recovered in 1974, just as theatre makers of the Black Arts Movement were searching for a radical heritage on which to build, the timing of its rediscovery had a significant impact on both US theatre history and the history of Black radical culture. The epistemological frameworks established by the New Deal and its many agencies have long framed how and what we research. However, the research agenda for US theatre and drama studies has also

1 Lorraine Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told: The Federal Theatre Project," *Black Scholar*, vol.10, no.10, July-August 1979, p.70.

2 Amiri Baraka and Vévé Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*: An interview with Amiri Baraka," *Black Scholar,* vol.10, no.10, July-August 1979, p.64.

3 Vinson Cunningham, "How are Audience Adapting to the Age of Virtual Theatre," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2020.

been influenced by new modes of knowledge production since the 1930s. Domestic anti-communism, the Black Freedom Struggle, the Women's movement and more recently, the Movement for Black Lives, have reframed the racial and gender politics of knowledge production, influencing both what is collected (by archives, publishing houses, the repertoire) and how it is used (by scholars and theatre makers).

In this essay I examine the evolving history of the Federal Theatre archive and how it has shaped scholarly research on Black Federal Theatre. I argue that racial and gender hierarchies of the twentieth century continue to influence the knowledge that scholars produce about the Federal Theatre in the twenty-first. In order to better understand the history and significance of the Federal Theatre Project for African Americans and for women, we need to find new ways to read the archive. Too often we turn to the most accessible archives, attempting to read "against the grain" in archives that privilege the experiences and narratives of white subjects. This chapter argues that we need first to move along the grain, to understand how and in what contexts the archive becomes a knowledge producer, and how this has shaped the questions we ask.[4]

THE END OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT AND THE BEGINNNING OF AN AFTERLIFE

The Federal Theatre Project was an easy target for Congressional opponents of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Of the Four Art Projects that made up Federal One, the Federal Theatre Project was the most contentious: a publicly funded theatre project which reached around 25 million Americans, (approximately 20% of the population), refused to allow segregated audiences, and put on new plays which addressed labor, race and other social problems in America, it helped to define the very terms of American culture in the 1930s. Where its defenders saw a brilliant, unprecedented experiment brought down by Southern Democrats and Republicans wanting to slow the engine of New Deal reform, its critics decried an un-American programme that squandered taxpayers' dollars to produce mediocre art and Communist propaganda. In both historical scholarship and popular culture, the premature closure of the FTP in June 1939 following investigations by the Dies Committee, is often regarded as a staging post on the road to McCarthyism.[5] Named after Martin Dies, (the Texas Democrat

4 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2008.

5 See for example, Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Theatre, 1935-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994, p.107-108; Laura Browder, *Rousing the Nation*, Amherst, Massachusetts, U of Massachusetts P, 1998, p.153; Stuart Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.139.

who chaired the new House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) set up to investigate extremism at both ends of the political spectrum in 1938) the Committee has long played a starring role in the history of the FTP.[6] Immortalized in Tim Robbins 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*, the Dies Committee's incompetent interrogation of Federal Theatre director Hallie Flanagan has often been deployed to illustrate the illogic and absurdity of American anticommunism. When Flanagan was called to testify, committee members focused on her Guggenheim-sponsored research trip to Europe and Russia. Flanagan had reported her impressions on European Worker's Theatre in an essay published in a 1931 issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly*. Eight years later, Committee member Congressman Starnes read out an excerpt from Flanagan's essay, which included a reference to the English playwright Christopher Marlowe:

> Unlike any art form existing in America today, the workers' theaters intend to shape the life of this country, socially, politically, and industrially. They intend to remake a social structure without the help of money—and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness.[7]

In his effort to prove that Flanagan was sympathetic to, if not an associate of Communists, Starnes demanded to know: "You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?" Flanagan apologized with exaggerated politeness: "I am very sorry: I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe." None the wiser, Starnes demanded that Flanagan "Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference." Flanagan responded: "Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare."[8] To reporters covering the hearings, this incident was a source of mirth.[9] However, in both scholarly and popular accounts of the hearings, the exchange has assumed a greater significance. The Dies Committee's dubious methods—in particular their assumption of guilt by association—is seen as marking

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6 Reflecting Democratic dominance of Congress, the House Committee was composed of five Democrats and two Republicans. Of the Democrats, only John J. Dempsey of New Mexico was a clear supporter of the New Deal. Arthur D. Healey of Massachusetts was a wavering New Dealer; Joe Starnes of Alabama, and Harold G. Mosier of Ohio were not New Deal enthusiasts. The two Republicans were J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, an outspoken critic of work relief programmes, and Noah M. Mason of Illinois.

7 House of Representatives, 75 Congress, 3 Session, *Hearings,* Special Committee on Un-American Activities and Propaganda on House Res, 282, *Hearings*, IV, 2857.

8 *Ibid. Hearings,* IV, 2857.

9 See for example "On the Newsfronts of the World," *Life Magazine,* December 19, 1938, p.8; "Mrs. Flanagan Defends Plays as Propaganda," *Herald Tribune*, December 7, 1938, in Vassar Collection of Press Clippings, RG69 WPA, Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Box 137, National Archives.

the beginning of a sustained and sometimes successful campaign to use Congressional committees to deny both African-American and women's rights, and to push back against what committee members perceived to be a progressive bias in American arts, education, media and culture. [10] More immediately, the Dies Committee hearings are often regarded as precipitating the premature demise of the Federal Theatre Project. What is less often acknowledged, is the extent to which they influenced the fate of the archive and early attempts to write the history of the Federal Theatre.

The Dies Committee's investigations into the Federal Theatre Project had an immediate impact on the first drafts of history as well as the fate of its archive. In her testimony before Committee members in December 1938, Flanagan delivered an oral defence of the Federal Theatre. She also compiled, with the help of the legal division of the WPA, a written brief which made extensive use of the FTP archive and included a list of plays "with specific analysis of every play criticized," lists of organizations whose members made up theatre audiences, and a signed affidavit from Flanagan stating that she was not, and had never been, a Communist. The brief was not entered into the Dies Committee's transcript despite assurances from the committee secretary. [11] It seems unlikely that it would have made much difference to the Committee's report. Filed with the House of Representatives on January 3, 1939, the Dies Committee report focused much of its attention on the Federal Writers Project and included only a short paragraph that addressed the Theatre Project. Citing no evidence, the Committee concluded that "a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party." [12]

Having failed to get evidence from the Federal Theatre archive inserted into the official record, Flanagan determined to find another venue through which to present a full and public defence of the project. The former director took matters into her own hands. Immediately following the project's closure, Flanagan made plans to transfer a significant portion of the Federal Theatre archive to Vassar College, the liberal arts college in upstate New York where she directed the Experimental Theatre prior to her

10 Tim Robbins (dir.), *Cradle Will Rock* [1999], Buena Vista, 2006; John H. Houchin, *Censorship of American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp.149-150; J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, pp.126-27.

11 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, pp.338-339.

12 Investigation of Un-American Activities and Propaganda Report Pursuant to H. Resolution 282, 75th Congress, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1939, p.123.

appointment to the FTP. Securing a loan of the collection, and a Rockefeller Grant to catalogue materials at Vassar College Library, Flanagan did not wait for the Federal Theatre archive's transfer to be made official. According to Esther Porter Lane, a theatre director on the FTP and Flanagan protégée, portions of the FTP archive were liberated from the New York office before approval was granted. Lane recalled: "When I was in New York, we'd fill the trunk of my car with papers. It was a snitch kind of job, but Hallie needed them." [13]

There is no doubt that Flanagan and her close associates (she took with her to Vassar key members of her FTP team including National Service Bureau director Emmet Lavery) understood the administrative records, manuscripts and production records of the project as a political archive. [14] As early as January 1940, before the records had been organized, Flanagan opened them for "public inspection and study." Flanagan understood the legacy of the Federal Theatre would be central to current and future debates about government subsidy of the arts and was determined to shape that legacy: "This is a form of research," she explained to the *Vassar Miscellany News*, "which is more concerned with the present and the future than with the past. Consequently, we want to place our library immediately at the disposal of the college, for use by students and faculty alike." [15]

Flanagan spent the year after the demise of the project working on the first and still most widely cited account of the FTP. Published in December 1940, *Arena* is both a record of the achievements of the Federal Theatre Project and an attempt to protect its archive and legacy from its damaging encounters with the Dies Committee. Theatrical metaphors and devices are woven through the narrative. Flanagan casts the Congressional Committee hearings as an ill-conceived, badly rehearsed courtroom drama, replete with stock types: the hectoring, cigar-dripping Congressmen who set themselves up as judge and jury, the cameramen and reporters who formed the audience, and the heroic defender of the people: Hallie Flanagan. Organized into three acts—"Danger: Men Not Working," "Men at Work," and "Blasting: Work Suspended"—, the final part of the book is dedicated to the Congressional investigations and the campaign to save the project between the summer of 1938 and the final closure of the project on June 30, 1939. Unlike the Dies Committee report, *Arena* presents a wealth of evidence to support its thesis. In particular, it spotlights the treasure trove that is the Federal Theatre archive. In her closing argument, Flanagan addresses the FTP's

13 Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988, p.351.
14 *Vassar Miscellany News*, December 2, 1939, p.3.
15 *Vassar Miscellany News*, January 24, 1940, pp.1 and 4.

enduring legacy, taking pains to document the value of the archive not only to the US President but also to the directors of the Library of Congress and New York Public Library, each of whom had offered to house the collection:

> The President of Vassar College secured from the President of the United States the loan of the records for one year; the Rockefeller Foundation, believing that the records were of public and educational interest, financed a staff to put them in order and to make them available for this book and other books on various aspects of Federal Theatre. [16]

In September 1940 the WPA requested the FTP records be returned so that it might begin a new project surveying the plays written and produced on the project. While the FTP was terminated in 1939, the WPA would continue until 1943. [17] Accordingly, Vassar College Library, which had held the FTP collection on loan since November 1, 1939, returned the collection to the WPA on December 1, 1940, two weeks after Flanagan's own account was published to wide acclaim. [18]

Arena attracted a good deal of attention even before publication. Advance notices in *The New York Times* highlighted the in-depth discussion of the Federal Theatre's entanglement with the Dies Committee while the publisher's advertisement proclaimed: "HALLIE FLANAGAN at last tells the honest and complete story of the great American social experiment which she directed—The Federal Theatre." [19] The publisher's claims for the book are mirrored in much of the scholarship on the Federal Theatre. Scholars routinely quote from and treat *Arena* as an authoritative source. In 1978, four years after the Centre for Federal Theatre Project Research at George Mason University (GMU) had recovered and vastly expanded the archive of the FTP, its own newsletter described *Arena* as "the definitive history of the FTP." [20]

Flanagan is a skilled and persuasive narrator and her story includes recognizable villains and virtuous heroes. Moreover, she cleverly contrasts her detailed evidence with the baseless allegations that littered the meandering reports of the Dies Committee and on-going Congressional Committees investigations into Un-American activities. *Arena* includes 56 pages of tables organized in an Appendix. These consist of a Production Record classifying productions "according to type," as well as a financial statement,

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16 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.369.

17 *Ibid.*, p.369.

18 *Ibid.*, p.378.

19 "Notes on Books and Authors," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1940, p.121; "Books-Authors," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1940, p.35; "Display Ad," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1940, p.111.

20 "Why Hallie Flanagan," *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1978, p.4.

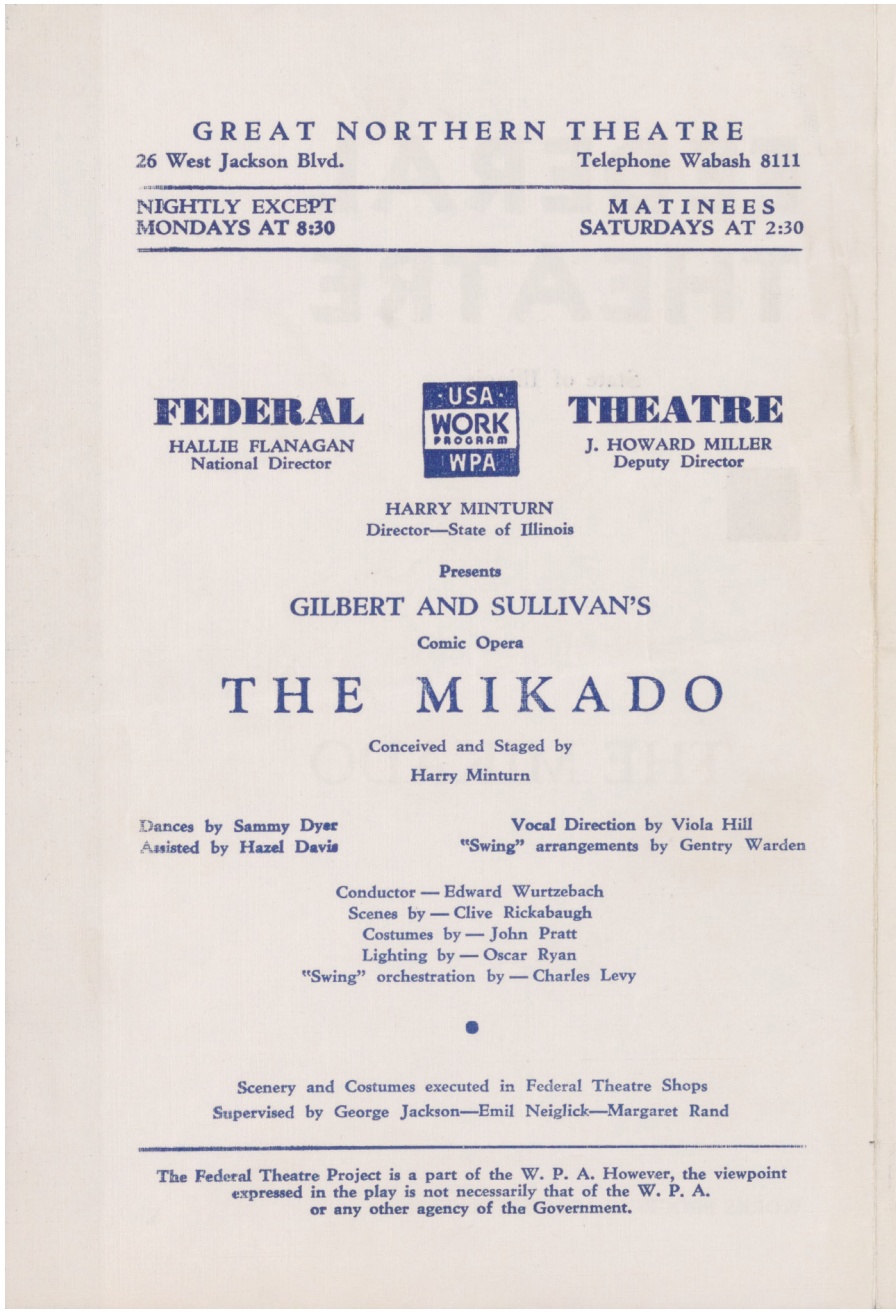
a detailed account of how data was collected, and a description of its cataloguing system. The Appendix follows a classification system that reflects the priorities and organization of the Federal Theatre Project. As Flanagan explains, "the general policy has been to list a play according to the special field which gave the plays its emphasis in Federal Theatre." Accordingly, the catalogue in her appendix is divided between dramas first staged by the FTP and those produced previously. For original dramas there is a further subdivision between New Productions "General" and New Productions "Special". This "special" category included Dance dramas, drama for Children, Living Newspapers as well as "Negro Drama, including material especially adapted for Negro companies."[21] Thirteen of the thirty New Productions categorized as "Negro Drama" are by Black authors. Of the remaining seventeen, some are adaptations of white dramas by Black troupes. However, like the many catalogues drawn up by FTP administrators, *Arena's* catalogue does not always acknowledge the Black creative labor that went into adaption. For example, the entry for *The Swing Mikado* merely states "adp. From Gilbert and Sullivan." Developed by the Black troupe of the Chicago Negro Unit under the supervision of Shirley Graham Du Bois, *The Swing Mikado* went on to become one of the biggest hits of the FTP, transferring to New York City and inspiring the rival commercial show *The Hot Mikado*. Graham's contribution to developing the show was written out both at the time and in later accounts.[22] "Negro Productions" also feature in the "previously produced on the professional stage" lists of plays. Categorized as "Standard Productions," the list of "Negro dramas" the FTP revived or "specially adapted for Negro Companies" is noteworthy: unlike the New Productions it consists almost entirely of white- authored plays. Of the twenty-five "standard Negro" dramas listed just three are by African American authors.[23]

Flanagan's focus in *Arena* on plays that were staged is understandable in light of the critical investigations by the Dies Committee. The committee had quizzed Flanagan and other witnesses on the length of time taken to make a play stage-ready, and why it was that certain dramas never made it into production. It was a line of attack with which Flanagan was all too familiar. Throughout the four years of the project Flanagan had to navigate the expectations of New Deal administrators and hostile legislators for whom success could only be measured in numbers: plays staged and audience

21 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.377-378.

22 *Ibid.*, pp.392-393; Mary White Ovington to Shirley Graham, February 27, 1939, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, MC 476; Gerald Horne, *Race Woman*, New York, New York UP, 2000, pp.79-80.

23 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.428-429.



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"Swing" orchestration by — Charles Levy

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The Federal Theatre Project is a part of the W. P. A. However, the viewpoint expressed in the play is not necessarily that of the W. P. A. or any other agency of the Government.

1. *The Swing Mikado* Playbill, Sir W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado*, [Chicago, IL, 193] Image (retrieved from the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, USA)

members.[24] Yet Flanagan's decision to foreground dramas staged by the FTP helped foster a scholarship that focused on what was given approval by white structures and administrators to the detriment of work created by Black Americans. Early historical accounts paid little attention to Black dramas developed but not staged on the Federal Theatre Project. Rather they focused on Black actors or the administration of Negro Units, both of which were often viewed through the lens of what they revealed about the apparently "progressive" views of its white administrators. For example, in 1974, Ronald Ross concluded that the Federal Theatre's "actual operation was as democratic as its rhetoric" and that African Americans were "involved in all levels of the planning of this new theatre venture."[25] Able to draw on an ever growing archive, and in the context of the development of Black Studies programmes, scholarly accounts in the 1980s and 1990s began to question narratives of good intentions and well-meaning white officials and sought instead to show the structural racism that underpinned all the Federal Arts programmes. Frequently focused on the administrative structures of the Negro Units, this scholarship has often, sometimes inadvertently, reinforced a white-centric narrative in which Black priorities were easily pushed aside by individuals or groups of white liberals.[26]

Recent scholarship has begun to correct this. Drawing on a broader production archive and by examining variant theatre manuscripts held in different archives, scholars have looked beyond the administrative and cataloguing processes that direct our gaze to white imperatives and desires, to find new ways to centre the political ambitions and creativity of the diverse communities who engaged with the FTP.[27]

24 Emily Klein, "'Danger: men not working,' Constructing citizenship with contingent labor in the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers," *Women & Performance*, vol.23, no.2, 2013, pp.193-211 (especially pp.200-202).

25 Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," *Journal of Negro History*, vol.59, no.1, January 1974, p.41.

26 Rena Fraden, *Blueprint for a Black Federal Theatre*, *op.cit.*, p.xvi, p.10; see also Tina Redd, "Staging Race The Seattle Negro Unit Production of Stevedore," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.7, no.2, Spring 1995, pp.66-85; Ron West, "Others, Adults, Censored: The FTP's Black Lysistrata Cancellation," *Theatre Survey*, vol.37, no.2, November 1996, pp.93-111.

27 Adrienne Macki Braconi, *Harlem's Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939*, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2015, p.19; Elisabeth Osborne, *Staging the People: Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.23-24, n.25, p.193; Lauren Sklaroff, *Black Culture in the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p.12; n. 131, p.263, p.137; Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2020 (esp. pp.20-25).

Even so, much work still remains to be done to open up and reveal the heterogeneous work of the many communities, groups and individuals who developed innovative and ambitious work in and around the Federal Theatre Project. The question of how best to access these histories, held in official archives constructed by and usually for white officials remains an important one. As scholars of colonial archives have suggested, one method might be to read "against the grain" to find the voices of those whose refusal is managed and contained in the archive. In Federal Theatre Studies, playreaders' reports are often read "against the grain." The FTP's National Service Bureau, included a playwriting division, which served as a clearing house through which all prospective FTP plays had to pass in order to be considered for production. Although there was a special committee of playreaders dedicated to reading 'Negro' dramas which included at least three African Americans (the playwright Abram Hill, John Silvera and C.C. Lawrence), the playwriting division was predominantly staffed by white employees, few of whom had a background in Black drama. Accordingly, playreaders reports are often replete with racist stereotypes, misconceptions about Black art and a broad ignorance of Black history. Even so, studies of Black FTP dramas pay disproportionate attention to the racial paternalism of white play readers reports.[28] Such an approach invariably keeps the spotlight focused on the desires—and sometimes fears—of white officials. It pays insufficient attention to how archives are produced and how the ways we use them can maintain the focus on white subjects and their priorities. To better understand the ambitions and creativity of African Americans, and especially Black women who made theatre on the project, we might first read "along the grain." Writing about colonial histories, Ann Stoler suggests we learn to be less assured when we approach the archive. She warns of the dangers of "assuming we know these scripts" with their "predictable stories" and "familiar plots." Rather she encourages us instead to question our starting points, "to explore the grain with care and read along it first."[29] As scholars of the Federal Theatre, we must first attend to the cumulative processes which have shaped Federal Theatre archives. Recognizing archives as producers, rather than depositories of knowledge, as subjects as well as sources, might enable us to write histories of Federal Theatre that disrupt, rather than reinscribe the hierarchies of the archive.

28 For example, Sklaroff dedicates ten of the forty-eight pages on Black Federal Theatre drama to the workings and reports of the Play Bureau (*Black Culture in the New Deal*, *op. cit.*, pp.50-60).

29 A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, *op. cit.*, p.58.

THE RECOVERY OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT ARCHIVE

The story of the Federal Theatre Project archive—like narratives of Black culture and the radical left—usually has it dormant through the middle decades of the twentieth century. It was woken from its long sleep in the 1970s when it was *discovered* by researchers from George Mason University. In fact, the FTP archive underwent several moves and significant cataloguing projects between its spell at Vassar and its recovery in 1974. As early as 1939, the WPA began working with the Library of Congress to collect and preserve its history. Between 1939 and 1941, state WPAs were invited to send their records to the central WPA office in Washington, DC which transferred the majority of documents to the Library of Congress.[30] This collection included administration and production records from the Federal theatre's New York office as well as the play scripts and music libraries of the FTPs National Service Bureau. In 1940, the WPA recalled the FTP collection on loan to Vassar College. The National Archives also held a significant collection of FTP materials, having overseen the processing of state and local Federal Theatre records held in the New York City office. In 1941, the Library of Congress WPA project, which at one point had eighty members of staff working on it, was closed. However, the Library of Congress and National Archives continued to work on the collections through the 1940s, dividing the materials so that the National Archives collection included predominantly administrative records and the official file of FTP production records, while the Library held another set of production records as well as the many FTP publications. In 1949, Frances T. Bourne, an archivist on the National Archives staff, conducted a major inventory of FTP records and recommended destroying over half the archive. Fortunately, the Library disagreed and held onto the collection, dispersing some of it to special collections and offloading duplicates through various exchange and gift programs. The collection remained in the Library's Capitol Hill buildings until the 1960s, when following a review in 1964, the Library decided to move the collection to a remote collection east of Baltimore where it remained for the next decade.[31] During the formative years of the Black Arts Movement, the archive of Black Federal Theatre dramas was inaccessible.

The dislocation of the Federal Theatre archive is part of a broader history of knowledge production that has made it difficult for Black artists to know of and build upon a rich heritage. Black theatre makers have long wrestled with how to uncover

30 Mary C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records at George Mason University," *Performing Arts Resources*, vol.6, 1980, p.13.

31 Mary C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records," art. cit., pp.14-15.

a Black tradition in a context where not only Black theatre, but knowledge about it was controlled by white run theatre, research, and publishing industries. Such debates were especially important during the early years of the Black Arts Movement. Black theatre artists rejected the inheritance of those who came before them who they regarded as relying on and working within the parameters set by white institutions. Insisting art controlled by white people could not articulate the experience and needs of Black communities, leading figures of the Black Arts Movement argued there was no radical Black tradition on which to build before the 1960s. Manifestoes of the Black Arts movement frequently distance themselves from, even as they spotlight, the many connections to their literary antecedents.[32] From Baraka's "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1963) to Larry Neal's essay in the Black Arts edition of *The Drama Review* (1968), and Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World* (1975), Black arts of the first half of the twentieth century are presented as inauthentic, mediocre and middle class.[33]

If the articulation of a Black Aesthetic relied, at least initially, on generational disaffiliation, the Black Arts Movement would ultimately come to play a defining role in recovering the long history of Black radicalism. Black Federal Theatre would be central to this restitution. In his 1979 essay "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro American Literature," Baraka traced a Black tradition through the slave narrative, the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance. Notably, he singled out Theodore Ward's Federal Theatre play, *Big White Fog*, as one of the "finest plays." Lamenting the obscurity of Ward and his work, Baraka argued: "It is impossible to teach Afro-American literature correctly if you don't know about Theodore Ward's Big White Fog." Baraka became a champion of Black Federal Theatre plays following a visit to the Federal Theatre archive at GMU in 1979: "There's a play by Langston, one by Hughes Allison who was a local playwright called *The Trial of Dr. Beck*. They have another play of his at George Mason University; it's a long historical pageant that he wanted to put on. [...] All that material from the Federal theatre is just waiting to be surfaced."[34]

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32 James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2005, p.8; David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics," *American Literary History*, vol.3, no.1, March 1991, pp.93-110.

33 Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "The Myth of a Negro Literature," first published in *Saturday Review*, April 20, 1963; Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review*, vol.12, no.4, Summer 1968, pp.28-39; Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: the Black Novel in America*, Garden City (NY), Anchor Press, 1975.

34 A. Baraka and V. Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*," art.cit., p.160.

The process of re-surfacing begun in 1974 when Lorraine Brown, an English and Women's Studies professor at GMU in Fairfax, Virginia, began looking for the collection at the Library of Congress (**fig.2**). Enquiring into the whereabouts of this important national collection, Brown and her colleagues at GMU *discovered* the archive was being held at an unsuitable and inaccessible Baltimore warehouse. They secured a loan of the collection from the Library of Congress and a series of funding awards from major grant awarding institutions, which allowed Brown and her colleagues to restore and catalogue the collection and to set up a new Research Centre for the Federal Theatre Project at GMU.[35]

2. George Mason University faculty members (left to right): John O'Connor, Lorraine Brown, and Michael Sundell examine FTP materials in Fenwick Library, 1974 (Broadside photograph collection, R0135, Box 9, Page 12, Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA)

They expanded the archive too. A decade long oral history program and the collection of the personal papers of Federal Theatre participants breathed new life

35 For a brief account of the recovery of the Federal Theatre Archive, see John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, Uncensored*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, pp.vii-viii. The history of the recovery of the FTP archive is also told in *Federal One,* the newsletter is available in SCA, GMU. The account published in *Performing Arts Resources* offers detail on the many different parts of the Federal Theatre archive but tends to trumpet the role of the Library of Congress (M.C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records," art. cit.).

into the archive. Veterans of the FTP, long wary of sending materials to the official archive following the FTP's contentious shut down in 1939, began to donate theatre manuscripts and private collections to GMU, as well as to regional public and University Libraries.[36]

A special Black Theatre issue of *Black Scholar* published in 1979 reveals how the recovery of the FTP archive was shaped by, and part of, the Black Arts Movement. The issue includes essays from theatre historians James Hatch and Krystyna Bakowski and an interview with Black Arts playwright and theorist Amiri Baraka, alongside an essay from Lorraine Brown on the discovery of Black theatre makers in the FTP archive. What is Black theatre, and how to recover and preserve its histories and traditions would become central questions for the Black Arts Movement. They are questions that feature prominently in Brown's contribution to the *Black Scholar* volume. Brown was acutely aware that the written record had been particularly untrustworthy in its failure to document the contribution of African Americans to American theatre: "paper records," she admits, "often omit information altogether, tell an incomplete story, mislead or even occasionally falsify what actually occurred." This belief was an important factor in the impetus to begin an oral history programme that "although providing its own conflicting versions of the "truth," would supplement and illuminate immeasurably the material already at hand."[37]

Over the next forty years, GMU's oral history recordings and transcripts would feature heavily in scholarly accounts. But the oral histories also informed the recovery and cataloguing of the FTP and had a significant impact on the new research it generated even as it was being collected. In 1976, the Research Centre for the Federal Theatre Project at GMU launched *Federal One, A Newsletter of 1930s Culture*. Published at regular intervals between 1976 and 1994, in October of 1994, it was retitled *New Federal One*. A record of the archive, *Federal One* catalogued, summarized and publicized key research discoveries. The newsletter gave particular prominence to the oral history programme through regular updates on upcoming interviews, requests for information concerning potential interviewees and through publishing snippets from and profiles of recent interviewees. Black theatre and theatre makers feature prominently early on. For example, the second issue of *Federal One* published in May 1976 is dedicated to Black drama. It describes the range of "outstanding plays

36 Oral histories of FTP participants are catalogued under the WPA Oral Histories Collection, 1961-1984, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA (hereafter OHC-GMU).

37 L. Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told," art. cit., p.71.

players and companies" and of the "[l]arge and enthusiastic audiences" which "reaped the delights and benefits" of the "fruitful collaboration" between young aspiring theatre makers and established practitioners, before concluding "few other divisions of the Federal Theatre brought more accolades than did the nine Negro Units."[38] The on-going process of recovering and interpreting the FTP archive through the lens of oral histories would reveal there were up to seventeen, rather than nine Negro Units as first thought. Significantly, *Federal One* attends not only to Negro Units but also to Black creatives. For example, the May 1976 issue included a profile of two prominent Black theatre makers on the project, Ralf Coleman, the only African American to serve as Director of a Negro Unit from the outset, and Clarence Muse, who served as an advisor to the Los Angeles Negro Unit and guest director of *Run Little Chillun*, the enormously successful production of Hall Johnson's Black folk drama with music which ran at the Mayan Theatre for two years.

The *Federal One* newsletter spotlighted recent oral history interviews with Black playmakers whose significance could not be fully understood through the administrative and production records of Negro Units. For example, it featured profiles of Theodore Browne and Joseph Staton, actors and playwrights who were at the centre of the Seattle Negro Unit as actors and playwrights. The Seattle Negro Unit has been well documented in both the archive and scholarly literature on the FTP. In addition to the records of the FTP, there are collections at the University of Washington documenting its history. These include the papers of Florence and Burton James, two white liberal drama professors, whose Seattle Repertory Theatre sponsored and directed the Unit from its inception in 1936 until 1937. When they left the project, Hallie Flanagan sent her protégée, Esther Porter to help run the city's Negro and Children's Theatre Units. The high profile of Florence James and Porter within the theatre world and in the records of the FTP have served to foreground the role of white women in promoting Black theatre on the project. However, oral histories conducted by GMU researchers have helped uncover the leadership roles of Black troupe members who guided the Unit both before and after the Jameses left the project.

38 "Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Project," *Federal One,* vol.1, no.2, May 1976, .p.1.

3. Cast of *Noah* with Florence and Burton James outside the Seattle Repertory Playhouse (Theodore Browne Collection, CO225, Box 1, Special Collections Research Centre, George Mason University Libraries)

Theodore Browne and Joe Staton were never appointed to formal supervisory roles during their time at the Seattle Negro Unit. As such they feature more often as subjects rather than creators of records in the official FTP archive. Yet it was they who shaped the direction of the Unit, writing new dramas and adapting white-authored material for the Seattle troupe. Both began their Federal Theatre careers playing lead roles in white-authored, white-directed dramas including *Noah*, *Stevedore*, and *It Can't Happen Here*. Both ended up as directors and playwrights creating new material and bigger ambitions for the Seattle Negro Unit. Theodore Browne is best known for his John Henry drama *Natural Man*, which was first staged at the Seattle Metropolitan Theatre, in 1937, and adapted by the American Negro Theatre in Harlem, in 1941 (**fig.4**). It is one of the few dramas developed on the Negro Units to be published in a Black theatre anthology. Browne also adapted Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* for the Seattle troupe, though it was closed down after just one performance by the WPA state director, who found its risqué theme (the women refuse to have sex with their men until they agree to stop fighting) provocative. He also wrote a Harriet Tubman drama, *Go Down Moses*, which was being

rehearsed by the Harlem Negro Unit when the project was shut down in 1939. When Browne left for the East Coast in May 1938, it was Staton who became the driving force behind the Seattle Negro Unit. He devised and directed *An Evening With Dunbar* in October 1938 and, alongside troupe member Herman Moore and played a key role in adapting *The Taming of the Shrew* for the company in June 1939.[39]

4. Episode 8, Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, Seattle Repertory Playhouse, Seattle Negro Unit (Federal Theatre Project Photograph Collection, C0205, Box 69, Folder 25, Special Collections Research Centre, George Mason University)

In their oral history interviews both men reflect on their relationships with white supervisors. Commenting on the power dynamic between white supervisors and the Black troupe, Staton observed: "These people left a lot of the things to us because it made them look better."[40] While Browne later paid credit to the Jameses: "I thought the Seattle Unit owed them a great deal," he also recorded his own role in recruiting

39 Staton and Oliver interviews. Staton is variously listed as director or sometimes assistant director on the productions he staged (Production Notebooks for *An Evening with Dunbar* and *Taming of the Shrew,* Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Boxes 1006 and 1079).

40 Joseph Staton interviewed by John O'Connor, 7 January 1976, p.23, OHC-GMU, Box 10, Folder 6.

actors to the unit at the outset, "of course, knowing me, they got me to interview the Negroes, you know, who were on relief at that time and had possibilities."[41] Charles Monroe, actor and stage manager for Seattle Negro Unit productions, recalled Browne's influence: "We were just the Indians. He was the chief and we were the Indians."[42] Oral history interviews with white supervisors on the Seattle Unit also add complexity to our understanding of the relationships between official white leaders and informal Black leaders within Negro Units. Appointed to direct the unit in a production of *Is Zat So?* in the winter of 1937-1938, Esther Porter remembered the troupe trying to educate her. The play concerns a prize-fight boxer who helps a white socialite out of a fix. Porter recalled the troupe "insist[ing]" she come along with them to watch a boxing match: "[T]hey thought I shouldn't direct the show unless I came and saw what a fight was really like."[43] White directors assigned to the Seattle Negro Unit soon discovered that their vision of Black drama would be resisted and reimagined by this tightknit and talented group of emerging theatre professionals.[44] Oral histories help us understand the complex dynamic at play between white supervisors and directors and Black creatives who drew on the resources of and found ways to navigate both the opportunities and limitations of Negro Units. They also spotlight the creative work of Black theatre makers on the project, rather than the choices and decision making of white directors.

The oral history programme at GMU and its dissemination through *Federal One* are important markers in the history of Black Federal Theatre because they initiated the slow process of reframing the categorization of Black drama first developed under the auspices of the project. The Black drama issue of *Federal One* includes a mini catalogue of "Black plays *and* plays produced by the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project" (emphasis mine). Such a distinction matters, for it recognizes that Black plays and plays produced by Negro Units are not one and the same. Moreover, it suggests a capacious understanding of the idea of "production." Plays "produced" appears to refer here both to plays developed, but never staged by the FTP, as well as to plays that were staged. Such a categorization is important for it allows inclusion of African American women whose work was dismissed by FTP programmers and whose invisibility is reinforced

41 Theodore Browne interviewed by Lorraine Brown, 22 October 1975, OHC-GMU, Box 2, Folder 11, First tape, Side 1, 4, 19, and 6.

42 Charles Monroe interviewed by Lorraine Brown, 9 November 1978, OHC-GMU, Box 7, Folder 25, First tape, Side 1, 33.

43 Esther Porter Lane, interviewed by Mae Mallory Krulak, 7 September 1976 (revised by interviewee, February 1979), OHC-GMU.

44 Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.62.

by categorizations of Black work in the FTP archive and Flanagan's *Arena*. For example, *Federal One*'s list of Black plays includes five plays by the Harlem Renaissance playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, the only Black women to appear on the list. Not one of her five plays were produced by the FTP.[45]

THE VISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN ARCHIVES

The invisibility of Black women as creatives and directors on the FTP reflects the disproportionate opportunities made available to white men and women, and to a lesser extent Black men, in comparison to their female counterparts. But it also reflects the gendered processes of knowledge production which have served to amplify the creative and intellectual legacy of men, not least by imagining the play as the product of individual genius rather than dynamic collaboration. The histories written onto the Federal Theatre are no exception. For while the Federal Theatre archive documents the considerable contributions women made to the Federal Theatre Project, there has been no systematic study of how gender shaped the experiences and opportunities available to playwrights, actors, and directors, as well as access to the technical and administrative roles required to make theatre. Studies of women on the FTP are few and far between, and tend to focus on a handful of white women who occupied leadership roles on the FTP but whose reputation was made before the project: Hallie Flanagan, the first woman to win a Guggenheim scholarship, whose directorship of the FTP made her the only woman to lead one of the four arts projects; Susan Glaspell, the prize-winning playwright and co-founder of the experimental Provincetown Players, who served as the Director of the Midwest play bureau of the Federal Theatre Project from 1936 to 1939, and Florence James, director of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and Seattle Negro Unit.[46] While each of these women played important and even defining roles in

45 "Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Project," *Federal One,* vol.1, no.2, 1980, pp.3-4.

46 Flanagan is a frequent presence in many studies of the Federal Theatre and in histories of anticommunism which explore her testimony before the Dies Committee. See, for example, Kate Dossett, "Gender and the Dies Committee Hearings on the Federal Theatre Project" *Journal of American Studies*, vol.47, no.4, November 2013. However, there has, surprisingly, been no recent biography of her. Joanne Bentley, her stepdaughter, authored a biography in 1988 (*Hallie Flanagan*, *op.cit.*). She is an important figure in Tim Robbins' 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*. In 2010, Vassar commissioned a new play by the playwright Mattie Brickman as part of its sesquicentennial celebration. Playground explores Flanagan's life at the start of her career as a professor at Vassar and her trip to Russia. Until recently Glaspell was a widely admired but seldom studied pioneer. Recent studies include: Émeline Jouve, *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion*, Iowa City, U of Iowa P, 2017; Martha C. Carpentier and Émeline Jouve (eds.), *Trifles:*

shaping the FTP in the 1930s, the paucity of opportunities for women creatives across the project is deserving of a fuller study.

In an early edition of *Federal One*, researchers at GMU offered an initial assessment of women's participation on the Federal Theatre Project suggesting: "Their jobs were many, varied, and occasionally surprising." Women were, perhaps unsurprisingly, most visible as actors, but even here they were "surprisingly under-represented."[47] As a work relief project, the FTP, unlike commercial theatre, sought out productions with large casts to meet the primary function of relieving unemployment in the theatre industry. Yet even on the rolls of actors, men outnumbered women actors "by large ratios." Women often took roles as costume designers and as seamstresses, but far less often as technicians. When it came to the FTP's record on supporting and staging women playwrights *Federal One* offers a generous appraisal, suggesting the project's "playwriting needs were sufficiently wide and its Play Bureau progressive enough to prevent discrimination by sex."[48] Such a view is at odds with the data: of the 2,845 FTP productions, only 532 (just under 20%) were written by women and few women of color were given opportunities to develop new work. Overall, women constituted 27 percent of participants in the Federal Theatre Project, approximately the same as the number of women participating in the Federal Art Project, but less than the 40 percent of women who worked on the Federal Writers Project.[49] Of those dramas penned by women, plays for children, as well as vaudeville and religious productions were well represented. Significantly, white women were also relatively well represented in plays of Black life. Of the plays that were staged, they were often by already established female playwrights, including Glaspell (*Suppressed Desires* and *Inheritors*) and Lillian

On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers", Jefferson, McFarland, 2015, a collection of new essays to mark the centennial of Glaspell's best known play; Noelia Hernando-Real, *Self and Space in the Theater of Susan Glaspell*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2011; Linda Ben-Zvi and J. Ellen Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2010; Florence Bean James's posthumously published memoir: *Fists upon a star* (with Jean Freeman), Regina, Saskatchewan, U of Regina P, 2013. Also see Kurt E. Armbruster's *Playing for Change*, Seattle, U Book Store P, 2012; Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*

47 *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1976, p.6.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene suggest that in 1938, the peak year of WPA employment, women made up 13.5% of the WPA workforce, a figure disproportionate to their representation in the overall workforce where women made up 24% of workers, and had unemployment rates commensurate, if not higher than men (*Women, Art and the New Deal*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2016, pp.41-42). Also see the list of FTP plays with authors' names in the Finding Aid for the FTP collection at GMU.

Hellman (*Les Innocentes*), although a number of suffrage plays and anti-war plays were given their first productions by the FTP, including *Lucy Stone* by Maud Wood Park.[50]

The fewer opportunities accorded to women as creatives on the Federal Theatre Project is part of the story of why women's contributions have not been recorded in the same way as their male counterparts. But it also reflects systems of recognition and reward within the theatre industry, as well as archival and academic practices, which have obscured the collaborative process of playmaking, the roles of women and especially women of colour. As we have seen, the recovery of Black theatre making on the Federal Theatre was championed in the 1970s by the emergence of Black studies programmes and journals such as *Black Scholar*. There was, however, no equivalent effort to recover, promote and celebrate the work of women who made theatre in and around the Federal Theatre. Amiri Baraka's championing of Theodore Ward, the restoration of the FTP archive, and anthologizing of a small number of Black-authored FTP dramas in *Black Theater U.S.A.* has helped recover the work of Ward, Theodore Browne and Abram Hill. Yet it has also contributed toward a Black aesthetic which reifies a particular *radical* Black tradition, one created and narrated by men. Such tradition making has been important in redressing the silencing of Black male creativity and tradition making in theatre. But it also reminds us that Black knowledge production about the practice and history of theatre in the United States has sometimes served to amplify the creativity of Black men at the expense of Black women.

This is a phenomenon by no means unique to Black theatre or Black radicalism. Historians and archivists have long recognized that archives are not mere containers of records, but rather help bring into being that which they document. Archives reproduce power in various ways, through exclusion and neglect, as well as through inclusion and containment.[51] Women, and their creative work, are often presumed missing from the archive; they are also harder to find. The considerable resources required to recover work scattered across numerous collections named for male geniuses is compounded by the emotional labour required to confront over and again the archive's refusal of Black female agency. Black feminists have created new analytical frameworks to map and historicize the ways in which Black women develop radical visions of freedom while protecting themselves from the "controlling images" which occupy archives of the enslaved. From Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance," to Saidiya Hartman's

50 "Women Playwrights," *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1976, p.7; see also E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, *op. cit.*, pp.70-84.

51 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago/London, U of Chicago Press, 1995, p.23.

"critical fabulation," the imaginative labour of Black feminist knowledge production has been concerned to find ways to map the unknowable, to reclaim and make visible that which has been strategically withheld, without re-enacting the violence of the archive.[52] Other scholars have demonstrated that inclusion in the archive is no guarantee of inclusion in historical narratives. Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodward have argued that too often Black women's contributions are not invisible, but harder to see, because they do not fit into the race-gender categories through which we view the past.[53] Black women creatives working in and around the Federal Theatre Project have been excluded and written out of archives and catalogues. But they have also been hidden in plain sight.

Black women were central to the making of Black theatre on the Federal Theatre Project and oftentimes they documented that contribution. Understanding women's

roles as makers of theatre and agents of change requires that we examine both the archives of the Federal Theatre Project as well as personal papers of African Americans. It also demands a troubling of the categories which centre male theatre makers. In order to access the contributions of women, we need attend both to the collaborative process of play making and the history of Black theatre manuscripts. In the 1930s, much of this collaborative work took place in what I call Black performance communities. These communities developed in and around, but importantly operated beyond the white-controlled Negro Units of the Federal Theatre. The idea of a Black performance community draws on Richard Barr's notion of the "temporary social organization" which performance creates among spectators, actors, and actants—that is the director, author, composers, set designers and others whose "backstage" roles shape both text and performance.[54] Although temporary, these social communities are capable of producing longer lasting relationships and alignments between actors, actants and spectators. Women were at the heart of Black performance communities. Some had official roles within Negro Units or established Black theatre communities, such as Rose McClendon, Edna Thomas, and Fredi Washington in New York City, while Shirley Graham Du Bois was the supervisor of the Chicago Negro Unit. Others, such as Gwen Reed in Hartford and Gladys Boucree in Chicago were, and remain, less well-known. But they were part of a broad network of women who made theatre: on play-reading

52 Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs*, vol.14, no.4, Summer 1989, pp.912-920; Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol.12, no.2, June 1, 2008, pp.1-14.

53 Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodward, *Want to Start a Revolution?*, New York, New York UP, 2009, p.3.

54 Richard Barr, *Rooms with a View*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 1998, p.11.

committees and as cast members, women critiqued, amended, and wrote collaborative Black manuscripts. They also devised and developed new Black theatre manuscripts.

5. Gwen Reed, circa 1950s (Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library).

Gwen Reed is a case in point (**fig. 5**). An important creative presence on the Hartford Negro Unit, Reed was secretary of the Charles Gilpin Players, an independent

community theatre established in Hartford, Connecticut in 1921. Like many of the FTP Negro Units, the Hartford Negro Unit developed out of a well-established Black theatre producing company. The Gilpin Players met in churches, halls and sometimes in each other's homes throughout the 1920s. They staged their own work as well as performing white classics and new work by white theatre practitioners. In the 1930s, Reed, who worked in the tobacco fields of Connecticut, appeared in her first acting role for the company in a production of *Trilogy in Black*, a collaboration between the Black theatre troupe and a local young white playwright Ward Courtney. Reed also began writing her own dramas, some of which were staged by the Gilpin Players. In 1937, the company applied to become a recognized and funded Unit of the Federal Theatre Project with paid administrative staff and a Black troupe. Reed played a number of leading roles including Marie in Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's' *Porgy* and May in Paul Green's *The Field God*.[55]

Reed's work as an actor for the Hartford Negro Unit is documented in the official FTP archive. So too is her authorship of new work. Reed was one of several members of the Black troupe who wrote the collaborative, radical new drama *Stars and Bars*. Devised by the Hartford Negro Unit in collaboration with Ward Courtney, *Stars and Bars* was a Living Newspaper, a new form inspired by Russian and European workers theatre and remade for the Federal Theatre Project. Living Newspapers incensed Congressional opponents of the New Deal from the outset. Shining the spotlight on the inequalities which blighted the lives of Americans, Living Newspapers became an early target of the Dies Committee's investigations into Un-American activity on the Arts projects.[56] Responding to these charges in *Arena*, Flanagan downplayed the radical nature of Living Newspapers, insisting they were as American as "Walt Disney, the March of Time and the *Congressional Record*" and that they "did not resemble anything hitherto seen on the stage."[57] The scholarship on the Living Newspaper has pursued the question of how far they represented a radical innovation in US theatre. While some scholars view the Living Newspaper as a decisive break with the bourgeois realism that had shaped leftist American theatre in the early decades of the twentieth

55 W. Earle Smith, "The Charles Gilpin Players," December 7, 1936, Production Records, New Heaven, FTP-LOC, Box 1068; "Negroes on W.P.A Projects," Connecticut Federal Theatre, National Archives, E839, Box 32, Folder Negro, No. 3 and 4. Gertrude Don Dero Memo to William M. Stahl, 7 December 1936, Production Records, New Haven, FTP-LOC, Box 1068; "Negro Drama Players Now Part of WPA," *The Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1936, p.20.

56 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.433; Stuart Cosgrove, *Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.133.

57 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.70.

century, others argue that the move away from realism—sparse sets, documentary styles and mass casts—can be attributed to the requirements of Federal Theatre budgets rather than any commitment to Brechtian political theatre.[58] The problem with such debates about the radicality of the FTP's Living Newspaper is that they are framed within the parameters of an archive that only includes white Living Newspapers. There were likely five Black-authored Living Newspapers in varying stages of development when the FTP closed in 1939.[59] While we know little about three of these beyond their titles, we do have manuscripts for two Black Living Newspapers. *Liberty Deferred* was written by Abram Hill and John Silvera, under the supervision of National Service Bureau director Emmet Lavery, and a version of it has been published. However, a fifth Black Living Newspaper developed by the Hartford Negro Unit has not been catalogued or included in studies of Living Newspapers. Black Living Newspapers require us to reframe our understanding of the genre and the possibilities for experimental theatre making by Black creatives on the FTP, for they offered a radical critique of the Living Newspaper form, of the FTP and of US theatre.[60]

Stars and Bars was written by the Hartford Negro Unit between 1937 and 1938. Set in Hartford, it puts the spotlight on the city's poor housing and health provision and its disproportionate effect on Black lives. That racial discrimination in the urban North was less honest, rather than less acute that in the Deep South, is its constant refrain. Originally entitled "The Hartford Negro," it was renamed "Bars and Stripes," before eventually settling into its new name in the summer of 1938. *Stars and Bars* is usually credited solely to the young white dramatist Ward Courtney, both in Federal Theatre Project programming and catalogues, and on the rare occasions it is mentioned in FTP scholarship.[61] Such attribution is at odds with the manuscript which records the contributions of the Black troupe to the Living Newspaper on the opening page: "Based on research compiled by the author, with the cooperation of the Negro Unit of the Connecticut Federal Theatre."[62] Black authorship is clearly documented throughout the manuscript. Alvin Napper, a Tenants Rights activist in Hartford, and member of the Hartford Negro Unit wrote an extraordinary poem for the scene that opens Act 2.

58 Ira Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre,* Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1985, p.150; Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.130.

59 Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, pp.80-81.

60 *Ibid.*, especially pp.78-121.

61 See for example Paul Nadler, "Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project," *African American Review*, vol.29, no.4, 1995, p.616.

62 The Hartford Negro Unit with Ward Courtney, "Stars and Bars," Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University, Box 6, Folder 1.

"Drama of the Slums," is clearly a parody of the Federal Theatre's most successful Living Newspaper, *One-Third of a Nation*, which was often advertised as a "Saga of the Slums."[63] Napper's scene personifies the diseases of poverty: Tuberculosis, Infant Mortality, and Syphilis seize women, men, and children and dance them off stage to an early death. Napper's authorship is highlighted on the title page of Act 2: "The poem, 'Drama of the Slums', written by Alvin Napper of the Negro Unit for the play."[64] Other troupe members also contribute sketches drawn from their own lives and experiences of the Black community. Donald Wheedlin, a Communist activist and lead actor for the Unit appears in a scene as himself, NEGRO, alongside Courtney, who appears as AUTHOR. Together the two men travel to a crowded slum in Hartford's North End to interview a female tenant about her exploitative landlord. Black women are not only subjects but also authors in *Stars and Bars*. Gwen Reed wrote the medical sketch (Act 1, scene 5) which showcases the inferior medical treatment received by Black Americans. Based on her own experience, it suggests the anguish and pain suffered by Black communities while they waited for the doctor to arrive, only to be treated with disdain and prescribed expensive and useless medication. Reed's authorship is documented on the manuscript. As with other accreditations to Black authors, Reed's contribution is given a full page ahead of the scene in question with the following citation: "Sequence on medical attention in the following scene written by Gwendolyn Reed of the Negro Unit for the play."[65]

Despite Reed's prominent place in the history of the Gilpin Players and the Hartford Negro Unit, her work has been obscured. While her roles as actor and writer for the Hartford Negro Unit are documented in the official FTP archive, Reed's contributions to Black theatre manuscripts have not been credited in catalogues produced by the FTP or in scholarship on the Federal Theatre. This writing out of Black contributors obscures Black creativity as well as the collaborative process of both the Living Newspaper format and the working methods of the Hartford Negro Unit.[66] Yet Reed was not an obscure figure who disappeared from view after the closing of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939. She went on to direct plays for the Hartford Community Players, an independent Black community theatre in the 1940s and 1950s and to play

63 Brooks Atkinson, "Saga of the Slums: The Openings," *The New York Times,* January 30, 1938, p.151.

64 *Stars and Bars,* title page Act II.

65 *Stars and Bars,* start of Act 1, scene 5.

66 *Stars and Bars* is not mentioned in *Arena.* For discussion on the misattribution of *Stars and Bars*, see K. Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, *op. cit.*, pp.92-93.

lead roles in for the Hartford Stage Company, a major new institution which opened with a production of *Othello* in 1962. But for sixteen years, between 1946 and 1964, Gwen Reed also played the role of Aunt Jemima for the Quaker Oats Company. One of many African American women who performed as the pancake-box cook to promote Quaker Oats, Reed and other Aunt Jemimas were anonymous. Newspaper reports and publicity announcements would record only that: "Aunt Jemima arrived in town today, brilliant in her red and white check outfit."[67] While Reed was, apparently, happy to remain anonymous in her Aunt Jemima role, as a writer on the Harlem Negro Unit, Reed made sure to record her identity, both on the manuscripts she contributed to as well as in her own account of the project which she preserved for years after the FTP closed. Such precaution was a necessity. For when it came to documenting Black authorship, the Federal Theatre Project, no less than the Quaker Oats Company, often concealed the identity of its Black creatives.

Reed's Quaker Oats career make her an awkward fit for recovery projects of the Black Arts Movement that sought to uncover a revolutionary Black tradition, and perhaps offer one explanation for why she is not better known. Yet, Reed's account of the Hartford troupe suggests that the Hartford Negro Unit was invested in and found ways to create a Black aesthetic of their own. Acquired by friends for the Hartford Public Library following her death in 1974, Reed's personal papers include a history of the Black troupe that formed the Hartford Negro Unit. Reed's account of the Federal Theatre Project has a lengthy and revealing title: "The Sincere Testimony to Anxiety, Labor, Patience, Time and Cordial, Constructive Criticism and to Memories Turbulent or Tender of Conn. Federal Theater October 1936 to May 6, 1939." Here Reed documents the company's history prior to becoming a Negro Unit and creates a picture of an experienced troupe accustomed to designing their own repertoire. For example, she emphasizes how the company developed "plans and suggestions of their own" which led to a weekly spot on the local radio station. Reed also attends to the relationship between Black and white creatives. In Reed's account, Black theatre practitioners are not under the direction of whites. Rather the established, critically acclaimed theatre company commission Courtney to write for them.[68]

67 Christopher Baker, "From Fields to Footlights: Gwen Reed," in Elizabeth J. Normen (ed.), *African American Connecticut Explored*, Middletown, Wesleyan UP, 2013, p.320.

68 This account is available digitally following the author's request for scans in 2017 ("The Sincere Testimony to Anxiety, Labor, Patience, Time and Cordial, Constructive Criticism and to Memories Turbulent or Tender of Conn. Federal Theater October 1936 to May 6, 1939," Gwen Reed Collection, Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library).

The documentation of Reed's creative labour reminds us that Black women's work is often hidden in plain sight.[69] In order to make it visible, we must start with the proposition that African Americans were creative agents, rather than disempowered subjects of Federal theatre administrators and historical archival practices. We must learn to read along the grain. Such an approach will also assist efforts to read against the grain. Federal Theatre records suggest there were no Black playwrights on the payroll of the Hartford Negro Unit. Expanding the scope of our search for the documentation of Black authorship beyond the categories and catalogues constructed by white administrators will help us to interpret clues contained within them. For example, WPA publicity notices suggest the contributions of Negro Unit members to theatre manuscripts were improvised in performance. A press release issued in May 1937 about the Hartford Negro Unit's upcoming production of French author, Andre Obey's *Noah* is a good example of how the WPA publicly acknowledged the creativity of Black troupe members in shaping theatre manuscripts even as it sought to contain and even dismiss it:

> Negroes are not content with being the best natural actors in the world—they persist in some of its best playwriting as well. They don't sit down at a typewriter to do this—it's a gift peculiar to the Negro actor which gets underway when he rehearses a play, which prompts him, in the emotional excitement of acting, to substitute his own lines and business when he forgets portion of his role. Nearly always the substitutions are so much better than the original parts that a wise director writes them into the script and they are acted that way from then on.[70]

White administrators on the project often perpetuated the idea that Black Americans were *natural* performers rather than trained artists. Such paternalism was routine, shaping African Americans experiences in the 1930s and beyond. The idea that African Americans produced little original work on the Federal Theatre Project has informed the cataloguing, archiving and historical narration of Black federal theatre in the twentieth century. It has become part of a cycle: researchers do not expect to find evidence of Black authored work and therefore do not look for it in the archive. Reinforcing the idea that archives only ever reveal their secrets indirectly, "against the grain" can contribute to the silencing of those Black voices it contains. Ending this

69 D.F. Gore, J. Theoharis, and K. Woodward, *Want to Start a Revolution?*, *op. cit.*, p.3.

70 "Release to Hartford Times, Noah," pp.1-2; "Release to Hartford Courant," WPA, FTP activities in Hartford, Connecticut, WPA, RG69 in *Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Federal Government Records*, ProQuest History Vault. https://proquest.libguides.com/historyvault/bfsfed

cycle requires that we attend to the histories of archives and knowledge producing practices that have shaped histories of the Federal Theatre Project; that we learnfirst to read along the grain.

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NOTICE

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ABTRACT

This essay examines the history of the Federal Theatre archive and how it has shaped scholarly research on Federal Theatre dramas. In particular it explores how race and gender hierarchies inform the knowledge produced about the Federal Theatre, influencing both what is collected and how scholars and theatre practitioners' approach archives of dramatic literature and theatre. It argues that we need to find new ways to read the archive if we are to understand the history and significance of the FTP for African Americans and for women. Too often we turn to the most accessible archives, attempting to read "against the grain" in archives that privilege the experiences and narratives of white subjects. This chapter argues that we need first to move "along the grain," to understand how and in what contexts the archive becomes a knowledge producer, and how this has shaped the cumulative processes of cultural production from the 1930s to the present.

Keywords

Black theatre, Black drama, Federal Theatre Project, archives, archive theory, race, gender, knowledge production.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article revient sur l'histoire des archives du FTP et la manière dont cette histoire a influencé le travail des chercheurs sur les pièces de cette période. Il explore en particulier comment les hiérarchies de race et de genre ont conditionné la production des connaissances sur le FTP, en agissant tant sur les archives étudiées que sur la manière

dont les chercheurs et les praticiens de théâtre interprètent ces archives littéraires et théâtrales. Cet article avance l'hypothèse selon laquelle nous devons trouver de nouvelles manières de lire ces archives si nous voulons comprendre l'histoire et le sens du FTP pour les Afro-américains et les femmes. Trop souvent, les chercheurs se tournent vers les archives les plus accessibles, en tentant d'interpréter « à contre-courant » des archives qui privilégient les expériences et les récits des populations blanches. Cet article propose plutôt de « suivre le courant », pour comprendre comment et dans quels contextes les archives deviennent des outils de production de connaissance, et comment ce processus a façonné les procédés cumulatifs de production culturelle, des années 1930 à nos jours.

Mots-clés

Black Theatre, *Black drama*, *Federal Theatre Project*, archives, théorie des sources, race, genre, production des connaissances

CRÉDITS PHOTO

VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip adresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, «Mr. Neil's Barn»The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

QUATRIÈME PARTIE

FIGURES FÉMININES ET PROCESSUS DE LÉGITIMATION

E-THEATRUM MUNDI

Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

La collection « e-Theatrum Mundi » considère le théâtre sous tous ses angles et dans tous ses états. Dans la continuité de la collection papier à laquelle elle est adossée, elle se veut un lieu de réflexion sur les diverses manifestations d'expression théâtrale à travers le monde, et rassemble des travaux de recherche sur l'écriture, le jeu, les pratiques et les formes scéniques, la mise en scène et le spectateur. Sa particularité est de proposer uniquement des volumes interdisciplinaires, en lien avec le Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires sur le théâtre et les pratiques scéniques de Sorbonne Université (PRITEPS), dont elle reflète les activités. En croisant les angles d'approche, la collection vise à provoquer des confrontations fructueuses entre les scènes, les langues et les méthodologies, dans le domaine des études théâtrales.

DÉJÀ PARUS

L'apothéose d'Arlequin. La Comédie-Italienne de Paris : un théâtre de l'expérimentation dramatique au xviiie siècle
Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century
Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

Une œuvre en dialogue. Le théâtre de Michel-Jean Sedaine
Judith le Blanc, Raphaëlle Legrand & Marie-Cécile Schang-Norbelly (dir.)

American Musicals
Stage and screen/L'écran et la scène
Anne Martina & Julie Vatain-Corfdir (dir.)

La Haine de Shakespeare
Élisabeth Angel-Perez & François Lecercle (dir.)

La Scène en version originale
Julie Vatain-Crofdir (dir.)