

Grieving the Federal Theatre:
Youth Programs and Performance from the
Project that Tried to Heal the United States

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Abstract

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In the American 1930s, the federal government subsidized programming that helped thousands of artists get back to work by mounting original plays and crafting innovative arts programs that served the children of the United States. Amidst the social turmoils of the Great Depression, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is remembered for charting new modalities of theatre making, generating storied productions, and underscoring the political tensions of the era. This dissertation seeks to amend narratives of the Federal Theatre by illuminating the undertold stories of how the Federal Theatre also supported children's resilience and learning during the FTP's four year tenure, stewarding young people's capacity for hope during their most pivotal years, amidst one of the nation's most trying times. How did the Federal Theatre offer American youth the gifts, tools, and power of theatre through changemaking pedagogical interventions? Counter to histories solely decrying the stoppage of the FTP by Congress in 1939, what should we celebrate about the Federal Theatre's nurturing of children during the epoch of its impact? This dissertation extends to the field of Theatre and Performance Studies, the American public, and children of the United States the opportunity to grieve the loss of the Federal Theatre's mission and commitment to children's welfare. Using rich archival documentation of the Federal Theatre's youth programs and performances to triangulate the theatrical, educational, and citizen-making aims of the FTP's labor, a history is unraveled alongside the words of Hallie Flanagan (the project's National Director) as she laments the loss of specific programs during the Federal Theatre's stoppage—many of which operated in direct service to children and youth. Investigating classical plays performed for schools across the country, the use of puppet theatre in hospitals to support psychoanalytic therapy for children, the emergence of queer identities for youth in state-operated wilderness camps through social performance, and dual coded instruction on racial identity with folk tales on stage, *Grieving the Federal Theatre* asks for expansion of how we remember the Federal Theatre Project—and how we care for children through the arts.

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*for Mary E. Murray, my mother,
who taught me the resilience that's behind everything worth fighting for*

*who along with Casimir Mario Rizzardi, Joan E. Rizzardi, and John F. Murray Jr.
gave all of themselves, as the first and greatest teachers I've ever had*

“the function of art is to do more than tell it
like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible”

bell hooks

Preface

I

You can see the pathology of a people in how they treat their children.

In the spring of 2021, the world had been racked for over a year by the spread, subsequent deaths, and acute fear of novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Coronavirus Disease 2019, or COVID-19). As the cumulative death totals reached over one million and government-issued national lockdowns reshaped how we as human beings associated with space, each other, and questions of mortality, sympathy for young people felt requisite to our societal responses to collective grief.¹ As early research has already detailed, the pandemic era called to question the “intimate relationship between immune function and the social landscape” experienced by human beings; that the very architecture of our brains and bodies are dependent on social relationships and how we navigate them—especially in a time of a global health crisis and cultural turmoil.² Researchers and philosophers of child development have long upheld the relational nature of social connection to felicitous growth and development, with foundational theories like Erik Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development, educational psychology’s employment of Freudian psychoanalytic frameworks, Lawrence Kohlberg’s taxonomy of moral reasoning, Jean Piaget and Lev

¹ National data indicated that on April 16th, 2022, roughly two years after the widespread intrusion of COVID-19, one million United States citizens had died from COVID-19 related causes. CDC, Trends in United States COVID-19 Hospitalizations, Deaths, Emergency Department (ED) Visits, and Test Positivity by Geographic Area https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_totaldeaths_select_00

² The clarity of argument that “presence of strong social bonds are critical to our health and well-being” as argued by Smith & Bilbo, while likely limitedly contested in psychiatric conversations, is one that was zoomed-in on during the COVID-19 pandemic—as the correlation between physical health, mental health, and community formation was paramount to the national and global managing of COVID-19. *Sickness and the Social Brain: Love in the Time of COVID* Front. Psychiatry, 22 February 202, Sec. Social Neuroscience, Volume 12 - 2021

Vygotsky’s considerations of social grounding for cognitive development and other, more contemporary, researchers richly theorize the interplay between social interaction and successful transition through stages of growth. Amidst these compounding considerations, it is my belief that the COVID-19 pandemic era crafted a social epoch not only medically dangerous for all, but structurally detrimental to the successful maturation, learning, and social development of young people. While physically entrapped in their homes, public discourse would market these conundrums as times of family-centricity for young people. However, what was happening to children with embattled or complex home lives? What about the estimated 2.5 million children in the United States alone who are unhoused; whose home life itself is marked by instability and difficulty finding provisions for basic needs?³ As a career educator in an era where the fundamental nature of health and wellness required abstaining from community—I wondered cyclically where the COVID-19 pandemic would leave young people, and how they would endure the fraying of “life as we *knew* it” amidst the emergencies of trying times, incited during their most pivotal years of learning and human connection.

II

In the spring of 2021, I was finishing my third year of doctoral study in the University of Washington School of Drama. With the furthered intensity of a backdrop that included the political rise of the global right; a surging and necessary focus on systemic oppression fueling American civil rights injustices, the balance of which were toppling following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020; an insurrection targeting the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021 led by (then) former United States President Donald J. Trump (who is, at the time of

³ “National Center on Family Homelessness.” American Institutes for Research, 2023.
<https://www.air.org/centers/national-center-family-homelessness>

this particular piece of writing, being indicted on over 91 felony counts in four criminal cases in Washington, New York, Florida, and Georgia); and, well over 100 armed conflicts across the globe. It felt obvious that the years of the COVID-19 pandemic were creating a unique flashpoint for society and self: especially for young people. With the task of curating a theatre history study to serve as my dissertation, I asked how my research could create any sliver of reflective benefit for children around the country.

Concurrently, I was witnessing and relearning—as we always do as teachers—the tangible, transformational nature of theatre and performance for young people each day in my practitioner work as a theatre educator. Working with organizations across Washington State and the country, my various teaching and research teams were bringing curricula, productions, and theatre training to children in various situations of social and personal precarity. With Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT), we brought original theatrical playtexts and opportunities to work professional theatre artists into the juvenile detention center in King County, Washington. With Centrum—an arts organization serving the Olympic Peninsula outside of Seattle—and support from the Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, we launched programs to support youth in the foster care system, using devised theatre and original storytelling as modes of drama therapy and personal reflection. Bi-coastally with professional theatre companies, we created virtual theatre programs for children whose only access to their peers (and to the arts) was through computer screens and comments sections. With the THRIVE partnership, and my innovative partners Dr. Elizabeth Coen at the University of Houston and Dr. Samora Covington Shoreline Community College, we built original interventions using socioemotional learning and arts integration to teach somatic self-regulation and mental health awareness to secondary school students in Seattle and Houston, serving hundreds of students during the pandemic era. As I

worked directly with children around the United States—witnessing their fear, and confusion, their uncertainty of what would come next—the exigencies of this sociopolitical and socio-therapeutic moment made the tools of narrativization and historicization feel too distant from the pressure of our corporal realities to justify dissertating in the dark.

III

What made these methodologies of theatrical intervention on stage and screen, in carceral spaces and residential outreach programs, for classroom and home life, so significant? In a field predicated on the defense of theatre and performance as valuable cultural and human-serving entities, it feels starkly esoteric and nepotistic to simply argue that “*theatre matters.*” However, with only mild chagrin, any study built with a desire to have direct valuation for children of the contemporary moment demanded a central question concerning theatre’s relevance.

The “why” for theatre’s relevance is a question that has been asked in perpetuity across the history of global theatrical study. In early articulations in the Western canon, Theatre and Performance Studies scholars recall Aristotle’s argument that “artists imitate men involved in action” and “man is differentiated from other animals because he is the most *imitative* of them.” For centuries, theatre practitioners have grafted meaning onto the art forms umbrellaed as “performance” based on the ability for theatre to imitate “real” life.⁴ In the interest of the structural approach of this study, the linkage to teaching and learning theory is particularly generative in regards to mimesis and acts of imitation as not only reflective but constitutive: that how and what we copy shapes who we are as people. Constructivist educational theories, most foundationally the works of Jean Piaget foreground that (using Piaget’s words) “the child learns to imitate, and this learning process, like any other, raises all the problems involved in

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, Prentice-Hall, 1968), 4-7. My italics.

sensory-motor and mental development.”⁵ Correspondingly, early 20th century approaches to arts-based learning often center on imitation, mimetic action, and character creation based on creating “realistic” images both in concordance with the burgeoning significance of Historical Realism as an aesthetic form in theatre, and as a methodology for teaching and learning in educational sciences. Walter Benjamin extends the logic of Aristotle and Piaget, philosophically grounding mimesis as one of human beings “higher order functions”—evidenced by children’s behavior as an exemplar for the manner in which mimetic action is not restricted to humans imitating each other. In what Piaget would describe as an example of formal operational cognition, Benjamin describes the way in which the “child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train.”⁶ In this way, theatre is pedagogically justifiable as not only significant, but foundational for children’s development. However, even with a “why” in tow—it became clear to me that the question that plagues this study needed to not be *why* theatre is important, but *how*.

IV

In the spring of 2021, I was reminded of the impossibility of writing a history while it is still happening. To create a project that centered on contemporary social justice in the United States, or on the COVID-19 pandemic, or the politics of Trump-era counter cultural performance felt too fresh, too early, and too to-be-seen to manufacture as the touchstones of historical inquiry. In these moments, I thought of what utility theatre history—or, in fact, any history—could offer the present moment. Thomas Postlewait’s framing of historical

⁵ Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 5-29.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On The Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 333.

understanding as “crucial to the study of the natural world as to the study of the human world” not in spite of, but because of our very human temporal consciousnesses rang in my ears; that somehow I needed to remember that through history, pedagogical intervention was still afforded for the present.⁷ Suzan-Lori Parks once explained that “a play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature;” I’ve wondered what, then, a piece of theatre history fundamentally *is*.⁸ Parks’ words remind us of the centrality that theatre and performance hold for history-making, and how history itself becomes a means of citizen-making—offering new idols on the stages and pages of America’s ground plan. Her imagining of a play as a blueprint offers the cultural reminder that theatre is not a reflection of what is, but rather (in the framework of the Brecht’s infamous “hammer with which to shape” reality) a mechanism for not only what we remember, but the manner in which we remember it.

If not a blueprint, perhaps theatre history is like a unique telescope to the world still to come. That through historical study, and especially—as noted by recalling Brecht, Aristotle, Benjamin, Piaget, and others—in the study of performance, we find ways that we as a species (and broader coalition of inhabitants of Earth, including the animals, plants, the environment, natural wonders, and everything around us) make sense of what has happened to us: that what we’ve done becomes an antecedent and logical touchstone for what we are yet to do. As a close friend working in the social sciences likes to remind me—sometimes the greatest predictor of future action is past behavior.

In the eruption of a global conundrum like those faced in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and surrounding sociopolitical disasters, the paradigms for successful mediation of

⁷ Thomas Postlewait, *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

⁸ Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play, and Other Works*, Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

crises that seemed apparent were those offered by the past. If, as argued by Horkheimer and Adorno, “humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown,” the sweeping and impatient intervention of global crisis presents (and presented) immediate unknowns—ones with mortal consequence, and therefore immediate acclimation to states of fear.⁹ How then, could the past serve a model for methods of endurance through fear and uncertainty? I began to ask what other moments of United States history offered exemplars (or at least approaches) for the young people of today in the face of such uncertainty—in the face of fears made obvious because of the pivotal immensities of the unknowns plaguing us: making us both physically, culturally, and spiritually sicker. In what ways could theatre, and the affordance of tools that our art form creates, scope the pathways for greater health, socioaffective wellness, community, and stability during this unstable era?

V

In consideration of the scope of United States theatre history, the resonances of domestic uncertainty and global conflict in the Depression era continued to surface as a viable analog where children’s experience of childhood was (seemingly) stunted; where fear and scarcity became the landscape for daily life in the United States. In considering historiographic models for our contemporary moment of suffering, I questioned how the United States social sphere might be able to learn—or at least to reflect—through parallel mediations of the difficulty between social life in the COVID-19 pandemic era and Depression era. Ironically articulates, perhaps “zooming in” on the Depressed created a fitting container for the inquiry of this study: the Federal Theatre Project.

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), edited by G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11.

The Federal Theatre's breadth of outreach and impact across cities and states throughout the U.S. allow it to house the questions of the study, grafting together separate case studies that transcend a single location, audience, or intention in order to explicate the significance of location, audience, and intention on the efficacy and impact of theatrical production. This project then attempts to triangulate various "transformations" that occur through the vehicles of spectatorship and participation in the creation of performance. By using the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), this dissertation centers its focus on four separate sites/localities over the four year tenure of the FTP in order to ask how the intentions of various outreach performance modalities were able to meet unique audience "subjects" and allow them flourish through the act and creation of theatre arts. Each case study takes up a different role of "spectators" created through performance events in the Federal Theatre: child "patients" in psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital; young adult "enrollees" in Civilian Corps Camps (CCC) as a part of the New Deal initiative for environmental citizenry under the WPA; "students" who worked with the FTP Classical Unit in arts integration programs in U.S. public high schools, and young, Black "citizens" of the United States, during an era where personhood, cultural citizenship, and rights to prosperity were not givens for many members of the global majority in the nation.

Through this organization, I hope to put in dialogue two well-trafficked frameworks for theatre and performance production: Marvin Carlson's definition of performance and the transformational nature of Austinian performatives. Scholars of theatre and performance, Carlson's definition of performance intervenes by adding a key ingredient to Eric Bentley's famed "minimal definition" for theatre ("A impersonates B while C looks on").¹⁰ For Carlson, a coherent definition also requires recognition of the theatre *space* as a core component of the act

¹⁰ Eric Bentley, *Life of the Drama* (1964), (New York: Applause, 1991), 150.

and execution of theatre. Carlson further writes that “performance is always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self.”¹¹ By asking how the audience members, “spectators,” and participants in FTP dramatic outreach projects were validating the acts of performance through their very specific participation in drama (their enjoyment of it, and the efficacy of the Federal Theatre’s intentions in bringing theatre to these particular sites and subjects), I cross read the integrality of space and subject in these moments with the Federal Theatre’s initiatives and corralled situations of performance.

Connecting this logic to Austin proposes that in each performance event, Federal Theatre project practitioners were enabling (or facilitating) transformations on the part of the subjects of each case study. Austin’s seminal reading of sociological relationship through “performative utterances” which help to found speech act theory, proposes moments that where, “to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so utter to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.”¹² Akin to this, I’m seeking to isolate the internal transformations that occur when—in the “appropriate circumstances” of space such as those manifested in hospitals, work camps, public schools, and behind bars—theatre *intervenes* in order to transform the participants from their given roles (patients, enrollees, students, juvenile offenders) to other roles. Perhaps most critically, it is my hypothesis throughout this study that in each setting where youth hold positionalities of oppression, the act of theatrical creation transforms participants into more neutral roles than their current statuses: it transforms moments of scarcity and difficulty into ones of peace and safety.

¹¹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

¹² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, William James Lectures, Harvard University Press, 1962), 6.

Evidence from each case study bolster this approach to the project's focus on role transformation. At Bellevue Hospital, Federal Theatre reports indicate that "psychiatrists carefully studied each bit of progress" experienced socioaffectively and developmentally during the Bellevue puppet performances, and that they "noted a perceptible drawing back of the dark curtains that had kept these children in their unnatural state."¹³ At a CCC camp in Tompkins Corners, New York, Capt. J. B. Anuskewicz explained that Federal Theatre Project shows were "conducive to morale building and good spirit. When the Enrollee is given an opportunity to take part in a show, he is given a chance to do something unusual and apart from routine. It gives them a chance also, to do something of an artistic nature, and this is psychologically of great value to the CCC."¹⁴ A letter on March 20th, 1939 from Department of English Chair Jeanette S. Taylor at Girls Commercial High School in Brooklyn praised Classical Unit productions of the FTP that were brought to area high schools affirming, "besides of being real assistance to us in our classrooms, the performances have cleared over one hundred and fifty dollars for our student welfare fund... it has been remarkable opportunity for them to see such good plays so adequately produced at such a low rate."¹⁵ Meanwhile, scant research has uncovered specific evidence of the footprint left during the reported engagements between the FTP and juvenile detention centers around the United States—a goal for replication and historicization in the final chapter of this project.

¹³ Report, "Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project." LAC #223, Boxes #1-3, Federal Theatre Project. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴J.B. Anuskewicz, Letter from Tompkins Corners, New York. GMU, Federal Theatre Project Collection, #C0002, Box #1.

¹⁵Jeanette S. Taylor, Letter from the Girls Commercial High School in Brooklyn, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

Which leaves the project's central thematic framing: grief. Amidst the crafting of this project, my curiosity on the Federal Theatre's impact helped me to both imagine and write on the import of the project's service to children. Well rehearsed with the well-discussed theme of a teacher's "why" I began to find my "why" as a researcher. However, I wasn't quite sure what my research was offering in service to the history of the Federal Theatre Project. Certainly, more discussion in the field is (always) necessary on the immense successes, setbacks, and stories of the Federal Theatre's relationship to children in the United States. Yet, in this dimension, the present helped to clarify the past. As grief—for lost lives, for escaping cultural stability, for the climate of planet weather, for the years we all expected to live before COVID-19—became a topic of perpetual personal and professional conversation, I asked: have we ever *grieved* the loss of the Federal Theatre Project? We've discussed the stoppage of the Federal Theatre at great length; we've narrativized the politics of the Federal Theatre (perhaps sometimes at *too* great a length); we've remembered the project. However, as a field of Theatre and Performance Studies, have we stopped to memorialize it? To honor the space it left behind that has never been filled? Have we had a proper celebration in recognition of the many, many things that the Federal Theatre did for the people—and for the *children*—of the United States?

"Grieving the Federal Theatre: Youth Programs and Performance from the Project that Tried to Heal the United States" may fall short of that lofty aim. It does, however, give an invitation to remember some of the least talked about triumphs of the Federal Theatre Project—and how they lit lanterns in the minds, eyes, and hearts of young people around the country. As in 2021-2026, that alone can be what is needed to help see through the darkness.

Introduction

“Help the child to an awareness of themselves
and their place in the world about them”

“Killed By Act of Congress”

On November 25th, 1939, Hallie Flanagan, the Director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) delivered a speech at the National Theatre Conference in New York City heralding the simultaneous legislative ending and philosophical continuity of the Federal Theatre’s mission. Flanagan stirred:

This is not the time for us to sit down and ‘tell sad stories of the death of kings.’ The Federal Theatre as an institution is dead; but not even an Act of Congress can kill an idea. What the Federal Theatre stood for and what the National Theatre Conference stands for is very much alive.¹⁶

Flanagan’s remarks reverberate in recountment of the Federal Theatre’s intention of birthing a national theatre that would provide relief for American artists in-need while establishing a United States theatre culture marked by its own identity and audience. Her words brought concord to the disheartenment felt nationwide by supporters of the FTPs when the June 30th, 1939 decision of Congress formally terminated the Federal Theatre’s funding, and relegated the existence of FTP’s contribution to American life to nostalgia, what-if’s, and the words that once-were.

¹⁶ Hallie Flanagan, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 3), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

The narrative often prescribed to Federal Theatre's stoppage—a term I borrow from Barry Witham's instrumental study of the Seattle FTP, and his argument that “the Federal Theatre did not fail. It was stopped”—is one that frequently details the desire of Congress to enact erasure of progressive, Popular Front ideals being disseminated in the United States through productions and performance texts created by the Federal Theatre Project.¹⁷ By eradicating the impact of citizen-making devices that forwarded leftist intentions, and (of interest to this study) the contamination of children's upbringing through ideologies of anti-capitalism, Congress silenced the Federal Theatre's production efforts prior to the start of the new decade. At least that is how the story goes. However, the stoppage of the Federal Theatre, and conclusion of the depression-era narrative for the FTP, is perhaps less drawn to the nuance-less lines of Hollywood imagination, and better befits a conclusion that flags the omnipresent delicacy of the FTP's discourse in relation to the federal government—as well as the Federal Theatre's reputation in the American public sphere.¹⁸

On July 5th, 1939 Samuel Grafton of the *New York Post* argued in an op-ed that it was anti-intellectualism that closed the Federal Theatre Project. Grafton's belief after the closure of the FTP that congresspersons didn't “burn the scripts they disliked. They killed the Federal Theatre by lawful act of Congress. The motivation was one that might easily have found expression in a bonfire” echoed other pro-FTP voices that spoke in defense of the Federal Theatre by positing that it was really conservative, anti-leftist politics that fueled refutation of the

¹⁷ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁸ I gesture here to the reservoirs of memory on the Federal Theatre by the American social public (in particular, non-scholarly communities) which sometimes point to the narrative of the Tim Robbins' 1999 film *Cradle Will Rock*, and its star-studded cast, as their message bearers about the narrative of the FTP. Similarly, scholarship on the Federal Theatre, though robust in articulation of the beginning and ending of the Federal Theatre's story, often trace the lines of a purely partisan narrative, sometimes overlooking—in my reading—attention to the acts of lethargy, miscommunication, red tape, and legislative ignorance that also serve the history of the Federal Theatre's stoppage.

Federal One initiative efforts.¹⁹ The op-ed comically pokes that Representative Joe Starnes of Alabama was under the impression Christopher Marlowe was a contemporary dramatist and artist under relief in the FTP; he concluded that “it is only on the score of anti-intellectualism that one can explain the curious rage which this puny little project (8,000 workers of our 3,000,000) aroused among lawgivers.”²⁰ Grafton’s piece further detailed the way that Mississippi Senator Marshal T. Adams—another conservative in opposition to the FTP—said in a “bemused” manner, “I have never seen any conferees more anxious to eliminate something than were the House men about the theatre program.”²¹ At least as far as the seats of governance were concerned, the ideological apparatus of the Federal Theatre made for “dangerous theatre,” indeed.²²

Flanagan’s correspondence corroborates a number of wide-spread beliefs of pro-FTP enthusiasts and contemporary scholarship, such as in her July 13th, 1939 personal letter to playwright Paul Green, explaining that “there was a concerted effort... to prove that we did salacious plays, which, under the cloak of lubricity, taught communism.”²³ Flanagan urges Green to write to Democratic North Carolina Senator Robert Rice Reynolds, who Flanagan’s letter indicates was a significant opponent of the Federal Theatre, stating: “I would feel much better

¹⁹ Samuel Grafton, *New York Times* article qtd. in Federal Theatre Project, clippings, Federal Theatre Project Holdings, 1938-83, MWEZ + N.C. 28,444, New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Cambridge, *Daily Worker*, undated, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY). Originally accessed through Kazacoff, George. *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2021. Hallie Flanagan’s full proclamation—given in front of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities in 1928—explains that, “Theatre, when it’s good, is always dangerous.”

²³ Flanagan, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 2), New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

about what has really been a crucifying experience...” if Green would write on the Federal Theatre’s behalf. Flanagan’s dismay at the aggressivity of the congressional opposition to the Federal Theatre pairs with her insistence that the voices arriving to support the Federal Theatre in front of Congress were suppressed and—like many of the FTP’s biggest hurdles—occurred away from the stage itself. This stage, however, was the Congress floor; and the stakes, the very existence of the Federal Theatre.²⁴

On August 20th, 1939, Flanagan would write an op-ed of her own for the *Times* defending the reputation of the Federal Theatre to the American public; public support was paralleled by proponents of the FTP in Congress like Congressman Clifton A. Woodrum of Virginia who shared Senator Adam’s surprised—but from the other side of the aisle, proclaiming: “I have been a member of many conference committees and never before have I seen such a united and determined attitude on questions as was the case of the House conferees in reference to theatre projects.”²⁵ Even President Roosevelt voiced support for the theatre project, describing the Act of Congress to the press on the same day as Senator Woodrum’s comments as “discrimination of the worst type,” as the House’s refusal to yield to the Senate led to Roosevelt referred to as “legislation against a specific class in the community.”²⁶ Meanwhile, as stances of opposition and generation of support for the FTP waged on even in remembrance of the Federal Theatre, still other congresspersons were passively unaware of the gravity of their

²⁴ Commentary on the “suppressed” voices of support drawn from Hallie Flanagan’s own op-ed in the *New York Times* on Sunday, August 20th, 1939. She asked: “Did Congress know that a great amount of testimony favorable to the Federal Theatre given by theatre experts was actually suppressed?” Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

²⁵ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 362.

²⁶ That “specific class” being the community of actors and theatre practitioners; this idea of the theatrical community as a socioeconomic class, in and of itself, is one that will be expanded on in the labor-focused New York City Project chapter of this study. Ibid, 363.

own votes against the Federal One project. Flanagan details an ironic and gutting exchange in *Arena*—her memoir on the Federal Theatre’s rise and fall:

A telephone call came in from a Congressman. I expected condolence but that was not the intent. He wanted to talk about the theatre project in his state.

“But, Congressman, there is no Federal Theatre. You voted it out of existence.”

A stunned silence and then, “*What?*”

“It was abolished on June 30 by Act of Congress.”

Again silence.

Then a shocked and heavy voice said, “Was *that* the Federal Theatre?”²⁷

Perhaps equally as ironic, yet more disheartening for the focus of this study on the impact of the Federal Theatre on children, is a December 8, 1939 letter from Dr. H. de Terra in New York City to Flanagan and her reply. de Terra ventures to ask Flanagan for advice “as a father in desperate search for a good children’s theatre. Is there such a thing in New York City?” They expand on the futility of their own search noting, “I have asked my friends but none of them knew of any. Instead there are at certain moving picture houses special children’s performances but after having attended some, I swore that I would never take my child to one again. What they show is not only the delightful type of Walt Disney humour but a great deal of rough love comics designed by grown ups for grown-up consumption.” Dr. H. de Terra’s disheartenment at the dearth of performance content for children frames corresponding rhetoric by Jack Rennick, national head of the Federal Theatre’s Children’s Unit, and Flanagan’s intentions around the Children’s Unit, arguing for a more pedagogically sound, and socioemotionally impactful

²⁷ Ibid. Author’s italics. Other recountings of this phone call from Flanagan’s papers indicate that the Congressman in question was phoning her in order to try to get a theatre practitioner friend a job for the Federal Theatre in his home state. This desire to use the Federal Theatre for its perceived benefits, yet attack and ultimately discontinue it in Congress, speak further to the relationship between the Federal Theatre and U.S. Government that outspoke the oft-cited references to the Dies Committee attacks on the FTP.

children's theatre in the United States—and intended to move forward on such a theatre through the FTP's youth productions. Flanagan woefully responds: "I regret that I am unable to tell you of a good children's theatre in New York City. The Federal Theatre during its four years of existence presented many children's plays..." before continuing her letter in lamentation on loss of the FTP's impactful programs supporting children.

Earlier in the year, Flanagan had pointed to the services offered by the Federal Theatre to children as a core point in favor of the FTPs work, and explained her dumbfounded refutation of Congress' act of termination in the face of so much good for the youth of the country. In her aforementioned *New York Times* op-ed, Flanagan writes of her phone call with the unseeing congressman saying:

It is not to be wondered that the Congressman did not recognize his own Federal Theatre from the lurid tales told on the floor of Congress... the picture painted (on the Congress floor) was so terrifying that our Congressman hastily opted to stamp out so nefarious an enterprise. What he really ended was any means of livelihood for some two hundred men and women in his own State. *What he voted to close was a series of classical plays chosen by the school boards and performed in high schools throughout the State. What he saved his constituents from was the menace of marionette shows for children, free vaudeville performances for the ill, and aged and the underprivileged.*²⁸

Flanagan's *New York Times* op-ed, letters to Dr. de Terra and Paul Green, and other post-Federal Theatre stoppage writings seem to offer the position of a leader sitting in a position of insight questioning, reflecting on, and urging recognition for the failure of sight amongst Congress and the American public that were complicit in the concluding the Federal Theatre's work. The Congressional complacency, and outright attempts to mar the FTPs reputation, are

²⁸ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY). My italics highlighting the child-centered outreach initiatives of the Federal Theatre discontinued by the decision of Congress.

made worse by Flangan's listing of various provisions that the Federal Theatre took in support of children, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) performance, school performances, and other outreach efforts created and proliferated by the Federal Theatre during its existence that placed children—not politics or leftist ideals—at the center of the FTPs labor.

As the curtain dropped on the final performance of the Federal Theatre Project's children's theatre production of *Pinocchio* at the Ritz Theatre in New York, a less performatic kind of mortality was waiting in the wings: an end to Federal Theatre's intervention in the lives of children. Significant FTP Director Yasha Frank—who was championed by Flanagan for his innovative artistic contributions in productions for young audiences—altered the ending of the production on closing night to have stagehands rip apart the sets in full view of the audience, and then lay Pinocchio to rest in a box labeled:

“BORN DECEMBER 23, 1938; KILLED BY ACT OF CONGRESS, JUNE 30, 1939”²⁹

We begin the historical close readings and undertold stories of the Federal Theatre Project contained in *Grieving the Federal Theatre* here for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons. First: while a formal act of Congress is what stopped the Federal Theatre Project legitimately, for this study's youth-facing interest in the FTP, the ending of *Pinocchio*'s figuratively penned lifespan serves as the concluding gesture of the Federal Theatre's service to children—and the timeline of this study. It also feels significant to start with the recognition that the founding, operations, and eventual ending of the Federal Theatre were always-already *about* children. Though the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Unit is often relegated to its own narrativization and scholarship that frequently weaves an image of singularity of the unit—and all productions intended for children—as separate from the prototypical operations of the Federal Theatre, it is

²⁹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 365.

misleading to think that children weren't squarely in the sights of Flanagan and other FTP organizers. Elizabeth Osbourne's 2011 study of the Federal Theatre explains that the focus of the Federal Theatre's work was bifurcated between the actor and the audience—that Flanagan argued that both entities needed “economic, physical, and psychological relief.”³⁰ I would add to the often-signaled two-part focus of the Federal Theatre that children were of perhaps the most significance of the Federal Theatre's intended audience. Hallie Flanagan's op-ed lists four Federal Theatre Project outreach initiatives as worth mourning loss—and of primacy in refuting the seemingly ridiculous fears of Congress in their act of termination; *two of the four were programs intended for children*. We begin with a re-centering of children in the narrative of the conception and conclusion, the development and delays, the life and impact of the Federal Theatre Project. Centering it instead on the loss of artistic programs that served young people.

The Federal Theatre Project

Between the years of 1935-1939, the Children's Unit of the Federal Theatre Project produced over a hundred original children's theatre productions in the midst of one of the most tumultuous periods in United States history. As the Great Depression waged on and brewing international conflicts signalled the warning signs of World War II, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was formed through the New Deal initiative's Works Projects Administration (WPA) as a work relief measure to return theatre artists of the nation to work. Over the four years of the project's tenure, America's first federally-subsidized theatre received more than 45 million dollars from the government in service of employing actors, designers, technicians and other

³⁰ Elizabeth A. Osbourne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

theatre practitioners to do the careers they were trained to do.³¹ Separate from the FTP's impact as a cultural institution, the relief measures afforded by the theatrical productions staged by the project created compensation for over 30,000 U.S. citizens during its existence. As the work relief objectives of the project continued to create opportunities for unemployed artists Hallie Flanagan, National Director of the FTP, set sights at the loftier goals of setting up local theatres with the possibility of growing into social fixtures in their communities. While the project's core goals were in the short-term, Flanagan aspired in consideration of the FTP lasting impact in crafting American citizens into invested theatrical spectators; towards creating regionally significant theatre institutions that could mold and shape the ideological considerations of their various communities. Through the often strenuous working relationships and pragmatic concerns delimited the ease experienced in FTP's production processes—many contemporary reflections reporting that it was a miracle alone that many productions even successfully opened—Flanagan and other FTP leaders envisioned a profound importance for the project: creating a theatre “worthy of its audience.”³² However, as the opening of this introduction proves, the Federal Theatre's service to children far outshone the Children's Unit, or Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) productions. Just how important was the work of the Federal Theatre for the children of the United States? Can we restate Flanagan's goal as “worthy of the children of America?”

In the eighty-two years since the closure of the FTP, theatre historians have heavily trafficked considerations for the project's legacy and impact on the American theatre. Barry Witham's seminal *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* set the stage for interrogation of the project's sociocultural influence on the nation; numerous later studies like Jane DeHart Mathew's *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* and Elizabeth A. Osborne

³¹ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

³² Flanagan quoted in Elizabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People*, 16.

Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project furthered identification of the project's successes and failures in crafting an American theatrical audience. While the Children's Unit is discussed in many studies on the FTP, it is less-often centralized as a primary steward for the ideological and cultural messages propounded during the Federal Theatre's tenancy in the cultural consciousness of the United States. Moreover, the productions that served American youth that were not TYA productions are sometimes omitted from the Federal Theatre's story entirely; perhaps, too liminal in their scope and intent to be understood retrospectively. What significance did these children's and youth-facing performances have in the thought-formation and citizen-crafting efforts of the FTP? How did children experience these productions alongside the other educational and maturational experiences of their youth during the second half of the American 1930s?

This project takes up several youth-facing programs and performances mounted by the Federal Theatre project between the years of 1936 to 1939 as a site of inquiry to facilitate a discussion of the conditions and experiences of childhood at the end of the Depression era in the United States. First bolstering conversations in theatre history scholarship on the production histories of various regional FTP sites, *Grieving the Federal Theatre* most ambitiously attempts to intertwine the narratives of national growth and change in the U.S. with the maturation of children experienced during this cultural epoch through spectatorship of the Federal Theatre's children's productions. Unlike many histories of the FTP's children's theatre which are told through the perspective of the practitioners, legislators, and organizers that made the Federal Theatre's instrumental contribution to American theatre culture possible, this study focuses on the impact of productions on children themselves. By considering the locales and experiences of learning for children of the era alongside of their theatrical spectatorship, I ask what lasting

impact the children's unit had on the lives of American children. What is perhaps most incredible in remembering the many successes of the Federal Theatre is just how varied these performances for youth were. The project crafted original children's productions, as well as park-based caravan theatre spectacles for youth. The Federal Theatre partnered with community organizations to build programs at community centers, in schools, in hospitals, and outreach settings for the most vulnerable Americans. The FTP reached into the furthest peaks of Cascadia, and the lowlands of the American South with puppet theatres, environmental impact programs, and literacy-building efforts for children. For the wide variance and sheer quantity of productions that served children, there is a large absence in the story of the Federal Theatre for the youth-centered programs that helped to get theatre artists back on their feet, while putting children into the chairs of the audience—many of them for the first time of their lives.

These cases and stories harken remembrance of what was lost when the Federal Theatre was stopped, not for the artists themselves—but for children. The sounds of a theatrical production, the colors that enraptured the eyes and put goosebumps on the skin. For children to witness theatre productions curated specifically for them in an era where joy was its own currency. It positions the FTP's works as vital not only in its successes and shortcomings as the nation's only real attempt to create a "national theatre" but in shaping the lives of children: in fueling their endurance during a social moment where children's lives and stories couldn't take center stage. This project tries to offer them, retrospectively, that spotlight.

Research Questions: Children & Grief

Children and the Federal Theatre

Writing on the impact of the Federal Theatre Project's youth programs and performances starts with recognition that theatre intended for youth is itself—separate from the whimsical and

fantasy-invested play of children's productions alone—a very serious cultural industry. *Federal One*, a publication of the Research Center for the FTP, wrote that the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Unit “operated on the two-fold assumption that children needed a theatre, and that the theatre needed the children;” of interest to this project is what constituted that *need* and how the Children's Unit's productions worked concordant with, and to fill the gaps of, the other educational initiatives of the era.³³ Using a new historicist approach by reading across the culture of late-1930s life for children, my project intends to weigh the experiences of FTP children's theatre productions as they relate to the process of growing up for children of the era. These considerations for whole-child approaches to both learning and theatrical production are present throughout the development of FTP Children's Unit productions. Contemporary research on children's theatre used by the FTP further spoke to the uniqueness of theatrical production as a medium that could foster “appreciation and the ability to appreciate” art and beauty, as writers believed “our school systems seem to have done little to develop this idea wisely.”³⁴ Research is needed to uncover the way that the FTP's plays operated to instill this, and various other tool-sets, in the minds of children.

Studies triangulating children and the Federal Theatre have been explored by researchers like Leslie Elaine Frost in her monograph *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project*. Frost's writing works to uncover and interrogate the Popular Front ideals that were communicated through FTP children's plays; the transmission of communist and anti-capitalist moral values was common to the Federal Theatre's work—and led to frequent investigation of FTP leaders by governmental organizations

³³ *Federal One*, a publication of the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University, October 1976. Qtd. in Leslie Elaine Frost, *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Montrose J. Moses, *Concerning Children's Plays* (New York: Samuel French, 1931), 10.

like the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).³⁵ Consideration of the FTP Children's Unit as disseminator of ideological beliefs follows the argument of Jack Rennick, head of the Children's Unit for the FTP, who contended that children's theatre was highly-functional and pragmatic in addressing the consciousness and intellectual growth of children. This was especially apparent in the FTP Children's Unit's older division as Rennick explained that unlike the plays for younger children that were "imaginative, humorous, or fantastical in nature," teens and older children would experience "plays with a heightened sense of realism which will help the child to an awareness of himself and his place in the world about him."³⁶ The coded messages and pedagogical missions of FTP children's plays are discussed in numerous dramatic literary and production histories of FTP plays in works like those of Drew Chappel and John Harkins who write on what individual plays—most often the famed *The Revolt of the Beavers*—taught children in the early twentieth century.³⁷ Further studies of the Federal Theatre offer ample and productive historical depictions of plays by the Children's Unit. Doreen B. Heard's research explores the New York City Children's Unit productions—easily the most robust site of children's theatre performances during the FTP's lifespan—and the conditions of

³⁵ Hallie Flanagan appeared in front of the House Special Committee when the FTP was accused of proliferating damaging material for the United States public.

³⁶ Frost, *Dreaming America*, 25.

³⁷ Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz's play—though not a focal point of this study—is frequently offered in theatre history scholarship as an exemplar for the FTP Children's Unit's ability to forward political values for children under the guise of fun, benign theatrical play. The children's theatre production is a fantasy in genre and performance, but uses a metaphorical reckoning to parallel the comical plot with contemporary labor concerns and issue a critique of greed and global capitalism legible even to young children. Wrapping class conflict inside a script that constructs community and morality, the play dutifully engages in unpacking the difficulty of depression-era daily life for children. The protagonists of the story—school-aged children named Paul and Mary—start the play desirous of going to "Beaverland" to find fun and opportunities to play; however, when the two see the inequities and class conflict debilitating the community of beavers they meet there, they give up their childish pursuit of levity in order to help lead a revolution. Mirroring the calls in the popular theatre and culture for labor strikes, the play gives view to how the responsibility of community engagement and collective action leads to a forfeit of childhood and avowal of the trials and difficulties of adulthood through Paul and Mary's coming of age journey.

production that made the plays accessible for the American public. Heard's work, and the writing of other production or site-specific histories of the FTP, assist in formulating historical recountment of the cultural impact of the Children's Unit, and give a picture of the construction and organization of productions themselves during the FTP's existence as a federally-funded public institution.

This project offers something new to these earlier studies of the Federal Theatre Project's impact on children and childhood in the United States. The contribution of *Grieving the Federal Theatre* bolsters two separately novel inquiries. Firstly, this dissertation repositions the efficacy of the Federal Theatre's youth-facing programs and productions which—alongside the acts of learning that they hybridized—operated to to impact the consciousness, maturation, and sociological development of American children. The youth-facing programs of the Federal Theatre can be seen through a pedagogy-centered argument to have sustained children during the darkness of the Great Depression, and bolstered youth resilience-through-learning in otherwise difficult times. Secondly, the project charts the afterlives of the Federal Theatre, both those matriculated and those inspired by the FTP and created to fill the abscess left by its stoppage. Much of the writing on the FTP children's theatre investigates the only dramatic texts and production histories of the Children's Unit. In contrast, my first hope is to look at the alignment of children and youth plays, programs, and productions alongside other acts of learning experienced in the days, weeks, and months surrounding children's experience with the Federal Theatre Project. That includes expanding beyond traditional genres and modalities of theatre (in particular, theatre for youth). This project intervenes in previous scholarship by bridging histories of children during the Depression era and histories of the FTP's children's plays. I'll ask how the programs and productions fit into the lives of children, how they experienced them, and

what kinds of reflections they had during and after the spectatorship of the Federal Theatre's presentations. Were these productions to be remembered? Did they change the practical nature of the American (youth) public's engagement with theatre and performance? Perhaps most importantly: did the Federal Theatre's instigating of new modalities and methods of theatre creation for youth create a change of course in the history of United States theatre?

Major studies on Federal Theatre's youth-facing programs (most predominantly, those on the Children's Unit) consider the ideals disseminated by the children's drama as important for the growth and learning of children. This project extends this research through these questions of how earning can be understood as a drive that satiated the needs of children and youth at the end of the 1930s in a way that nothing else could. Amending prevailing narratives on the Federal Theatre's youth programs and performances, I argue throughout this study that seeing the children's plays and performances of the Federal Theatre solely as ideological apparatus, is delimiting to the history of the youth programs, and to the Federal Theatre Project as a whole. Can we instead think of the Federal Theatre as a means of support for children and youth—as a product that fueled their hope for the future—during the Depression era? By framing the Federal Theatre Project's youth programs and productions *experientially* rather than purely *ideologically*, it is my intention to think of the learning (and play, and happiness) that was generated through these programs and productions as of paramount importance for the children audiences of the Federal Theatre. It is also my hope that this curtails the common impulse to narrativize youth experiences through the lens of adult perception; instead, asking what import these programs had for the children of the United States and how they, too, benefitted from the gifts of the Federal Theatre's work.

Like many studies of the Federal Theatre, such as Osborne and Witham's influential studies, questioning the FTP's efforts must take place with simultaneously regionally-specific and nationally-oriented foci. Each region, city, and community was impacted by the Federal Theatre's resources and performances in a specific way for that region, city, and community. Yet, the nature of the Federal Theatre's interwoven networks of theatre makers and quick internal sharing of great theatrical ideas means that a production could be mounted in New York City and reprised in Los Angeles just a few weeks later. A program piloted in North Carolina, and then surfaced (by replication, or with inspired elements) Oregon by year's end. Through each case study of this particular project, there are therefore triangulations of the Federal Theatre's impact both at the local and national level; recognition of the proverbial source bodies of water, and the tributaries that carried the ideas, productions, and innovations of the FTP to children nationwide.

Government resources and training-materials created by, and intended for, practitioners of the Federal Theatre Project detail the way that "wherever possible, members of a children's theatre unit should write their own plays, drawing on history and folklore of the past, legends and stories of the locality," predicting that the project's work would be best-invested in the individual journeys and growth of children by regionally-specific experience.³⁸ Using what education theories Luis C. Moll calls "cultural funds of knowledge"—or the specific regional, experiential, and cultural knowledge-bases that children experience—this project seeks to ask how the separate genres, cities, and locales of production made each site of FTP Children's Unit unique, yet fused the core and omnipresent objectives of the Federal Theatre's work. While the activities of each site and city that held these children's theatre productions were different, reading them together as performative practices that worked in conjunction with other experiences to fuel

³⁸ Children's Theatre - Suggestions, 4. Children's Theatre. [None, 964-, Monographic] Federal Theatre Project. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

children's learning and play tells a story of this epoch in American history: a story positioned from the eyes and ears of children, a story that asks how the legacy of FTP's work sculpted the minds of young audiences and program participants in the 1930s, and for years to come.

Grief and the Federal Theatre

Intentions for this study's triangulation of youth experience, national identity, and the history of the Federal Theatre Project reposition the importance of the FTP's "youth programs and performances" as central to the history of the Federal Theatre. However, a pivotal metaphor framing this study is the use of "grief" or "healing" as a mission statement for the project's contribution to the field. A core feature of the project's title, framing, and thematic goals, grief—and its concordance with a third goal for the dissertation—operates as a pedagogical tool for human beings. But what is grief, and how is it utilized as a device in this study?

Grief, bereavement, and mourning are complex adjacent affective, emotional, and sociological responses, which evade simple characterization or classification. The foundations of our contemporary understanding of grief began with research at the turn of the century, and in the theoretical formulations of psychoanalytic theory. On the most rudimentary level, psychologists articulate that "grief is a reaction to loss" that is "experience in many ways—physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and behaviorally."³⁹ Selby Jacobs, a scholar of the history of psychotherapy, uses Helene Deutsch's approaches to psychoanalytic theory, along with cross cultural studies of bereavement, to argue that "grief is universal after meaningful losses."⁴⁰ Recognizing that grief is an unavoidable result of powerful loss, the

³⁹ Kenneth J. Doka, "Introduction: Where We Grieve" in *Living with Grief: At Work, At School, At Worship*, edited by Joyce D. Davidson and Kenneth J. Doka (Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 1999), 6.

⁴⁰ Selby Jacobs, *Pathological Grief: Maladaptation to Loss* (Washington, D.C., American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 1993), 20. Deutsch was a colleague of Sigmund Freud's and built on his early research that founded psychoanalytic theory.

question is then what should humans “do” with the affective woes associated with grieving. Sigmund Freud argued that grief alone was not the deterministic value in human suffering associated with loss, but rather (as summarized by Yorick Spiegel, recounting Freud) that grief is only experienced in relation to the “reproaches and self-reproaches, to mania, to the identification process, and to psychosomatic symptoms *surrounding* grief.”⁴¹ That is to say, that how we respond to grief—how we as human subjects metabolize loss, process it, and heal from it—changes our experience of suffering.

In studying grief, at first in relation to collective trauma experienced during the Great Depression as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic, it occurred to me that we as a United States theatre culture and American social public have perhaps never grieved the loss of the Federal Theatre Project. We’ve intellectualized the loss of the Federal One program; we’ve historicized it; we’ve justified the disappearance of the FTP following its stoppage—but have we ever slowed down to celebrate, memorialize, or mourn the loss of the Federal Theatre? Psychiatrist Stephen R. Shuchter would argue that this, too, is a normal reaction to grief—further justifying my extended metaphor of grief as a modality for response to the loss of the Federal Theatre. Shuchter notes that intellectualization, rationalization, disbelief, avoidance: all are normal reactions to significant loss.⁴² Perhaps equally as evocative as the use of grief (both literally and figuratively) as a response to the loss of the Federal Theatre is asking how children would have experienced or grieving when facing the loss of the FTP. Research frames children as having a “short feeling span” and only sustaining strong emotions for short periods of time; that

⁴¹ Yorick Spiegel, *The Grief Process: Analysis and Counseling*, translated by Elsbeth Duke (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1973), 36. My italics.

⁴² Stephen R. Shuchter, *Dimensions of Grief: Adjusting to the Death of a Spouse* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), 79-89.

“children may grieve in different ways from adults.”⁴³ For the Federal Theatre Project, how would children have responded knowing that the summer entertainments they had attended for the past four years were cancelled this summer? That the school programs the federal government was paying for which offered classical plays, arts integration programs, and regional cultural performances across the country were now a thing of the not-so-distant past? This project asks how the country has responded to the loss of the Federal Theatre Project (across the ensuing century), effectively offering our history of the FTP the opportunity to properly grieve.

Why should we grieve the loss of the Federal Theatre? Nearly ninety years after the Federal Theatre’s stoppage, why intervene in the history of the Federal Theatre for a proverbial memorial service—so long after the loss, and with so many histories of the FTP already written across the late 20th and early 21st centuries? A serviceable answer is where we have been, as a national theatre culture, since the stoppage of the Federal Theatre in 1939. Psychologist Robert Romanyshyn describes grief as akin to the mood of “reverie” (i.e. lost in a dream). “In grief” writes Romanyshyn, “you inhabit a nether world between sleep and wakefulness, a place where you are neither in a dream nor fully in the world.”⁴⁴ Without claiming that great strides have not been made in the industry of theatre making and performance in the U.S. since 1939—the absence of a formal national theatre submits recognition of the only time the United States had a federally subsidised theatre: from 1935 to 1939 with the Federal Theatre Project.

What does a loss the size of the Federal Theatre do? If we look back in the history of Western culture and Western medicine, we can find some curious antecedents to this answer. Psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes writes in *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* of Dr.

⁴³ Doka, *Living with Grief: At Work, At School, At Worship*

⁴⁴ Robert Romanyshyn, *The Soul in Grief: Love, Death, and Transformation* (Berkley, CA: Frog Ltd., 1999), 31.

Heberden's Bill classifies the causes of death in London during the year of 1657, where we find "Griefe" listed as the cause of 10 deaths.⁴⁵ This concept of heartbreak leading to death is even portended in the epoch of the Iron Age, as the bible's Isaiah writes of the intention to "bind up the broken hearted," with heartbreak understood as a correlational condition of physiological, spiritual, and emotional torment.⁴⁶ Contemporary research on psychology and culture continues the thread (if not extended mythologies of death associated directly with grief) that bereavement can cause immense pain. "Whenever we lose someone who occupied a central position in our lives" writes sociologist Peter Marris, "all the activities which related to that person lose their accustomed meaning."⁴⁷ What can be made, then, of losing not a person but an organization; the loss of not human life, but institutional life for a work relief program like the Federal Theatre? It is argued in this study that without a chance to grieve the loss of the Federal Theatre Project, the United States theatre scene has been unable to chart new possibilities for the future of a national theatre, concertized federally-funded system of theatre making, or even of many of the singular program structures that met great success during the Federal Theatre's tenure. *Grieving the Federal Theatre* seeks to simultaneously write a history of the youth programs that were lost due to the Federal Theatre's stoppage—and to ask a "what if": what if the Federal Theatre had continued into the American 1940s, and beyond? Where would theatre in the U.S. be today?

Sociological overlaps with psychology contend that community, interpersonal support, and memorialization allow individuals to have a felicitous passage through bereavement, towards acceptance of a new stasis. "A sense of continuity" offers one piece of research, "can only be

⁴⁵ Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 34.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁷ Peter Marris, "General Aspects" in *Understanding Bereavement and Grief*, edited by Norman Linzer (New York: Yeshiva University Press, Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 22-29.

restored by detaching the familiar meanings of life from the relationship in which they were embodied, and reestablishing the independently of it,” naming the import of reestablishing a new manner of engagement with life following loss: crafting a new normal.⁴⁸ Intercultural researcher of death and dying Christine Valentine links concepts of empowerment, agency, and awareness (or discussion, acknowledgement) of death to the ability for individuals in “constructing a good death.”⁴⁹ Did the Federal Theatre experience a “good death” culturally, politically, and artistically? Stories from the archive, and histories of the Federal Theatre, tell a different story. The stoppage of the Federal Theatre (or perhaps, “homicide” as Hallie Flanagan herself writes of the project being “killed” by an act of Congress) was an abrupt process; productions and initiatives across the country came to a screeching halt. Some productions were promised opening nights and then immediately shut down; actors, designers, and theatre makers on relief rolls, suddenly once again out of work. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, among other professionals and practitioners of the mind, attempts to stress the importance of treating death as “a natural part of life.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, the Federal Theatre can be seen as always-already having a trajectory towards closure. After all, many other WPA programs closed without fanfare; with simply the recognition of the program’s success in serving its purpose of relief for those out of work, and then experiencing alteration amidst the war era. However, the Federal Theatre is narrativized by complication and conflict; by right-wing members of Congress attacking both the New Deal initiative, and the Popular Front ideals (and “socialist agenda”) of the artistic divisions of Federal One. Perhaps the trauma of an “unhappy” death, of the absence of the proper period of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Christine Valentine, *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing bonds in the twenty-first century* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 40-72.

⁵⁰ Therese A. Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers* (Champaign, IL, Research Press Company, 1984), 6.

grieving, has doomed the Federal Theatre's memory for the American social public—as well as the efforts to reinstate a similar national United States theatre program following its closure.

Researchers and clinicians of death and dying write how supplanting feelings of loss and suffering with celebration, recognition, and remembrance can allow “a pleasant feeling... to minimize grief.”⁵¹ Colin Murray Parkes emphasizes this concept by noting how a widow in a clinical setting had, “solved the problem of locating her dead husband in space by finding him in herself.”⁵² Likewise, this project asks us to find a space for the Federal Theatre in our cultural memory, and a recognition of the many inspiring efforts that the FTP was able to chart in service of the children of the United States during the Depression. Time and space has been held for anger about the Federal Theatre's stoppage; efforts have been made to historicize its importance; arguments have been forwarded to replace it. It is time to *celebrate* the Federal Theatre Project—starting with the very programs mourned by Hallie Flanagan in her *New York Times* op-ed. Starting with the children of the United States.

Literature Review

The History of the FTP

“Was it not our function to extend the boundaries of theatre-going, to create a vigorous new audience, to make theatre of value to more people?”⁵³

Hallie Flanagan

The Federal Theatre Project was one of four arts projects under Federal Project Number One sponsored by the New Deal's creation of the WPA. Created not as a cultural project but a

⁵¹ Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement*, 37.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 43.

relief measure to employ theatre practitioners, the Federal was able to employ more than 12,700 people at its peak. The FTP's director Hallie Flanagan explains that the project's intention was "to set up theatres which have possibilities of growing into social institutions in the communities in which they are located," extended the goals for the project beyond the depression era's artistic vacancies to create institutions that would last into the future for American communities.⁵⁴ The FTP didn't function like the Hollywood film industry or the era of bright escapist musical theatre works in their attempts to cloak the present difficulties of American life, but rather—as explained by Michael Garnett— became "an instrument for disseminating knowledge of reality."⁵⁵ Theatre scholar Barry Witham details the way the FTP created "possibilities of forging a new national audience" despite the rejection of the FTP by many throughout the nation who were affronted by the seeming excess and lack of utility of an arts-based initiative amidst the nation's austere social landscape.⁵⁶

Flanagan's goal of creating a theatre of value to more people had to bridge two objectives during the Federal Theatre's tenure: to operate as a source of income and relief during the Great Depression for out-of-work theatre artists, and to bring together a new audience, a new public for theatre in the United States. The FTP inhabited a liminal space as an organization and producer of artistic content. In some ways the FTP was seen as "amateur" theatre by many theatre professionals—a relief mechanism that was turning community theatre quality artwork into a subsidized occupation. For others, the FTP connected community and regional theatre outlets to an otherwise unknown world of commercial theatre. Productions, new works, and playtexts could circulate from New York City to small towns around the nation through the FTP's

⁵⁴ Leslie Elaine Frost, *Dreaming America*, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁶ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 6.

sprawling network of production units. Production companies had the federally subsidized affordance to become staples in their local communities. Each region was organized around a regional center, which served as a production hub for the surrounding smaller towns and theatre projects. Regional centers included Boston (in the Northeast), Chicago (Midwest), Los Angeles (West), and New Orleans (South), though the South regional site later moved to Atlanta. New York City existed as its own site, as the city engaged more than 4,000 artists in producing groups—more than double the number of participants offered relief than in any *state* of the thirty-one hosting an FTP location.⁵⁷ George Kazakoff explain that this structure was always a part of the way that Hallie Flanagan conceived the FTP: a project that would allow, for the first time, for “professional theatre to be considered regionally in a way that would encourage the commercial, educational, and community theatre in the various regions of the country to work collaboratively.” As for actors, the WPA ensured that the FTP would remain a relief measure by instituting provisions demanding that 90% of funds offered to the FTP went towards work relief.⁵⁸ This meant that the other 10% of funds could be allocated for—and had to provide for—the use of professional actors coming in as ringers, costuming, sets, space rentals, and other production costs.

Hallie Flanagan’s “hope to help build a theatre out of the fabric of American life” was not without its challenges.⁵⁹ Despite the best efforts of the Federal Theatre, productions were often wracked with turmoil and difficulty in mounting any given play. Lack of space, budgeting,

⁵⁷ Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 25.

⁵⁸ John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978), 5.

⁵⁹ Qtd. in Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People*, 3.

balancing the relief needs and productions needs of the project created financial hurdles that were often so difficult that productions reaching opening was often a miracle in and of itself; WPA organizers created rifts and held grudges against local FTP leaders in ways that stunted or slowed the progress of initiatives in each regional site, and for the project as a whole. It is no surprise that Joanne Bentley's biography of Flanagan's career includes chapters titled "Early Crises," "Mounting Oppression," and "Final Fight" section devoted to the FTP.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, returning Flanagan's original goals for the project, consideration of the successes of the Federal Theatre's work perhaps overshadow the difficulties experienced in production. Over the brief course of the FTP's existence, the project was able to bring theatre to an audience of 30 million; the productions raised by the Federal Theatre went on to raise 42 million dollars in salaries for unemployed theatre artists.⁶¹ It is hard—despite the shortcomings, the radically sudden ending, the production difficulties—not to call the Federal Theatre Project a success.

Harry Hopkins, an architect of the WPA, once famously assured Flanagan that the Federal Theatre would be "free, adult, and uncensored" when discussing the oversight that the WPA would have over the FTP's operations. Without interrogating the truth of the first two statements, it is perhaps a boldly misleading in retrospect to consider the FTP "adult." In the span of just three years, the Children's Federal Theatre (or Children's Unit) became what Nellie McCaslin calls "one of the most vigorous enterprises in children's theatre history."⁶² FTP actor Perry Bruskine similarly referred to a children's production with the Federal Theatre that he

⁶⁰ Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 183-328.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People*, 2.

⁶² Nellie McCaslin, *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 76.

performed in as “the climax of the history of the Federal Theatre.”⁶³ This assertion follows a relatively bleak period of theatre intended for children prior to the advent of the FTP. Early twentieth century commercial producers were not interested in producing children’s theatre works with any regularity or volume, fearing a lack of lucrative capital basis and unreliable audience base. Short of The Junior League tours of *The Blue Bird* (1929) and *Treasure Island* (1931) the Depression era theatre landscape for children was a barren one.⁶⁴

Aforementioned studies by Frost, Heard, and Mathews detail the significance that the FTP’s Children’s Unit had in shaping the imaginary and ideologies of children throughout the late 1930s. Lowell Swortzell further observes the way that the Federal Theatre’s children’s productions were actively engaged in consciousness-raising and sociopolitical sensitizing for children during the Great Depression, explaining that FTP children’s plays would reflect current fears “of war and aggression abroad, while other examined effects of the Depression at home.”⁶⁵ The Federal Theatre’s impact on children wasn’t solely relegated to their productions alone. Community outreach efforts, such as performances serving as benefit nights for children in settlement houses, signalled that the Federal Theatre held intentions of supporting children and local communities beyond the creation of their art, or existence of relief measures, alone.

Of the 30 million spectators who had watched an FTP performance, 60 percent had never attended live theatre. It is worth musing how many of this 18 million new theatre audience members were children; how many young Americans gained their first experiences watching

⁶³ Bonnie Nelson Schwartz, *Voices from the Federal Theatre Project* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 7.

⁶⁴ John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored*, 22.

⁶⁵ Lowell Swortzell, “Introduction” in *Six Plays for Young People from the Federal Theatre Project (1936-1939)* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 12.

live, ephemeral, immediate theatre because of the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Unit production. As Witham brilliantly contends: "The Federal Theatre did not fail. It was stopped."⁶⁶ When it did on June 30th, 1939 it was the Children's Unit that had just dropped the curtain of *Pinocchio*—a Broadway hit which had been playing to "capacity houses" since the preceding December.⁶⁷ A hit children's play—soon to be turned into an iconic motion picture—and audience after audience of sold out performances merely three years after an American theatre culture devoid of a thriving children's theatre circuit indicates that the Children's Unit of the FTP was, itself, an impactful institution.

In generating a review of literature on the Federal Theatre Project's impact on children and youth around the country, an absence speaks as loudly as a many words written on the FTP's productions, units, and intentions: what occurred in the programs and performances that were not specifically Children's Unit productions? In part due to the effort to streamline and make sense of the myriad stories and histories of the Federal Theatre, the project's impact on children and youth around the United States is frequently pigeon-holed into stories of the TYA productions mounted by the Federal Theatre. However, as this study will demonstrate, the wide reach of all Federal Theatre programs allowed children and youth to benefit from units and programs crafted without direct focus on children's *plays*; or, on *children*, a population that sometimes excludes teenagers, young adults, and youth not easily characterized by age and stage of life alone. As *Grieving the Federal Theatre* engages case studies on the Classical Unit (a school-based program, rather separate from the Children's Unit, puppet theatres and "Puppet Unit," partnership with the Civilian Conservation Corps program, and youth-facing "Negro Unit"

⁶⁶ Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, 4.

⁶⁷ Swortzell, "Introduction" in *Six Plays for Young People from the Federal Theatre Project*

programs, it will become clear that far more FTP programs and performance served children than meets the measure of former studies on the Federal Theatre.

Historical Era

Being a child during the 1930s in the United States of America was no easy role to play. A relative prosperity stabilizing American life in the 1920s following the economic surging and receding of World War I reached a point of crisis following the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929. Across the nation, losses of jobs, life savings, and homes were paralleled by the eradication of hope—of pride and of belief in a country that had already been embattled far beyond the mythological narratives of exceptionalism characterizing the country's first century and a half of existence. Continued and intensified were the labor strikes of the previous two decades; growing were racial hostilities planted into the very roots of the nation; changing were sociocultural norms and expectations for what it meant to be a woman, a worker, a government. And scampering alongside America's upheaval were the children of the nation—also trying to find their way.

The American Theatre of the 1930s was artistically situated in its own period of reinvention. As an aesthetic and genre-based renegotiation of form guided global undertakings in the theatre, the United States simultaneously imbibed the theatrical conventions of European performance and began to establish a truly "American" theatre. Following the turn-of-the-century prominence of realism, playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell introduced experimentations with an American brand of expressionism and lifted The Provincetown Players to acclaim as one of the most prominent regional theatres and new works producers of the period. Lillian Hellman, Thornton Wilder, and other authors pursued a distinctly American realism, positioning the walls of the United States home as the nexus for meaning

making in the country. Meanwhile, in New York City the Theatre Guild and The Group Theatre concretized their work (and the city) as bearers of theatrical import for the drama of the decade. The Group Theatre—self acclaimed by Harold Clurman as having brought forth “the most important theatrical accomplishment of the thirties”—also helped to turn the tide on audience and popular culture expectations of the theatre. Moving the center on what was considered acceptable content for the theatre, The Group took artistic contributions viewed as propaganda earlier in the century and fashioned them as the new norm.⁶⁸

None of these theatrical interventions could ignore the prevailing ethos of the era: a zeitgeist of deprivation and want. Following the previous decade’s decadence, women’s liberation movement, and the ongoing contention surrounding the prohibition movement, the approach European armed conflicts and aftermath of Great Stock Market crash resolutely transformed the 1930s into a period of dismality wracked by hunger and homelessness.⁶⁹ Collective action efforts throughout the country led to workers’ strikes and revolts, like those organized by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); bread lines stretched and attempted to satiate the needs of local communities. The survivalist instincts guiding American social life in many cases compelled development of local and coalition-based communities. Historian Lizabeth Cohen describes how Americans worked towards “strengthening their ethnoreligious institutions in the face of the Americanizing intentions” of religious and political organizations as

⁶⁸ In particular, the seminal and famed work *Waiting for Lefty* stands out in historical remembrance of The Group, as the workers theatre movements and labor revolution of the decade was reimagined through the theatre, allowing labor strikes and political dissent to take center stage for the company and nation. Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties*. New York: De Capo Press, Inc., (1945) 1975, 149.

⁶⁹ It is worth noting how acts of greed and capitalist overimposition propelled the crash. After the period from 1925-1929 saw a 120 percent rise in common stock value, the consistency with which common stocks were traded (even during the month of the crash itself) underscores the over-manipulation of the market that facilitated the crash’s lowest moment in November of 1929. David F. Burg, *The Great Depression* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 44.

the country sought to find aspects of unity against the backdrop of social unrest and dissent.⁷⁰

The uncomfortable social crises of the period gave way to an “unprecedented political transformation” cued by the transition from Herbert Hoover’s presidency to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s and the advent of New Deal initiatives. Roosevelt, unafraid to challenge conventional taboos and *modus operandi* guiding the terms of political jurisdiction in the executive branch, pushed the limits on what the federal government was capable of through introduction of the New Deal. The initiative subsequently created pathways for labor unionization; instituted regulation of banking and investment systems; promoted nature conservation efforts; funded and supported massive public works projects; provided oversight for interstate commerce; altered the mechanisms of agricultural production by issuing oversight for food production in the United States; and started new social welfare programs such as Social Security.⁷¹ Studies of the theatre of this period must contend with these rapid and numerous amendments to social life in the United States.

The stage is America’s laboratory for social consciousness and public ideology. The affective experiences of citizens in the United States—the strain and heartache, the joy and exuberance of existence—find their way onto the stage; it is the stage, too, that shapes a people’s understanding of their own experience. By creating a project that reads American culture through the lens and language of theatre, and focusing on the only attempt at a federally-subsidized, national theatre for children, my project aims to contribute to a conversation of how the arts have guided and supported the formation of national identity in the United States.

⁷⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 363.

⁷¹ This is, of course, only a cursory list of the economic and social initiatives offered through the New Deal. It also doesn’t account for failed initiatives and acts overlooked by the government during this era (such as revisions of welfare systems that would have supplied a national health care insurance system).

Considerations of “Childhood”

The United States—like many nations and peoples—demonstrates incredible investment in the lives of children as ideology bearers and the “future” of the nation. President Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, once called on native-born women to “prove their patriotism by bearing children” in 1903.⁷² President Franklin Delano Roosevelt placed similar futurity on the lives of children by famously claiming “we may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future.”⁷³ In discussing the intersection and cooperational relationship between the Federal Theatre Project’s children’s and youth-facing performance with the experience of childhood in the Depression era United States, background consideration on the construction and conception of childhood feels prudent.

Sweeping changes to the conception of childhood were being mediated in the United States from the beginning of WWI, through the interwar period, and to the end of WWII. Children experienced simultaneous losses of labor subjecthood and the joy of play in what seems like a contradictory push and pull on the expectations of childhood.⁷⁴ The resonances of global communism and workers’ rights movements at the start of the century were strengthened by the collective international experience of the Great Depression which magnified the disruptions in

⁷² Theodore Roosevelt’s claim characterized in Anita Hill, *Reimagining Equality: Stories of Gender, Race, and Finding Home*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 9.

⁷³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s quote taken from U.S. Army documentation. United States, The Borden Institute, Office of the U.S. Army Medical Department, *US Army Physician Assistant Handbook*, (Washington, D. C: United States Government Printing Office, 2018).

⁷⁴ This push and pull characterizing the simultaneous alteration of children’s position as labor subjects in the American workforce and the dislocation of the nature of play, schooling, and parenting in this era is a part of what James D. Schmidt writes is a “large shift in the cultural imagination of youthful labor that occurred between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Considering this shift as a part of the broader cultural movement in the 1930s is significant for the detailing of representations of childhood in this study. James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xx.

American social order that would dominate the period.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, children's position in the workforce concurrently altered as child labor laws took effect in a desire to protect children due to newfound recognitions for the lack of safety that child workers had endured through the Gilded Age.⁷⁶ A new model for childhood was produced as children moved off of the factory floor and into the classroom. Generations accustomed to the common choreography of bassinet to workplace, of slingshot to hoe, had to grapple with how compulsory education changed the actual make-up and timeline of development through a lifespan. In some ways, the new priorities at the beginning of the century for education and learning benefitted the American child, but they also stripped them of a particular form of autonomy previously germane to the experience of childhood.⁷⁷ As labor subjecthood changed for the children in the United States, an even greater strain was introduced as the depression barred children from an incubated and jovial upbringing. Perhaps the American child was "stuck" in between models of lifespan development in the 1930s; the effectual change to children's previous status as labor subjects had not yet resolved to

⁷⁵ In referencing this "collective experience" I again draw on Turner to identify the hardship experience in the United States and internationally as a form of *communitas*, or collective experience. Turner explains that the feeling of *communitas* can be recognized as a sensation of "even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority" of their collective sensation; one externality in this project could be to unpack the *communitas* of the 1930s in the United States through the lens of children's appearance in theatrical production. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" from *The Ritual Process* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1969), 98.

⁷⁶ The introduction and development of child labor laws is a facet that has helped to guide the selection of timeline and scope for this study. Though rooted in the 1930s, moving to the start of the WWI era allows for a more complete framing of the early twentieth-century change in juridical oversight for children's lives and labor starting with the Congress' attempt to regulate child labor on the federal level Keating-Owen Act of 1916 which the Supreme Court subsequently ruled unconstitutional. That later insistence and advocacy for children's rights and labor protections more fully took effect in the U.S. through The Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938 which became the first successful federal law to regulate child labor. United States, *Child Labor: Facts and Figures* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1930).

⁷⁷ Schmidt explains that "by going 'beyond their duties' to operate machines on their own accord" young workers could stake a claim to adulthood and to their own agency as producers of economic value." The subsequent removal of children from the industrial workforce certainly protected children, but it also removed their ability to "come of age" of their own volition by removing the means by which children could articulate their own readiness for adulthood: through independent, autonomous labor. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence*, 32.

the experience of childhood that would dominate the conservative turn of the American 1950s. What did it mean to be a child in this betwixt and in-between decade? Can the children's productions of the FTP help us to remember?

As children's experience of childhood changed through the period, so too did the experience *of children*—or the way that children were treated by adults, their parents, and the United States government. Growing evidence and theorization in psychoanalytic theory advancing the work Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in Europe led to revisions in global optics on the importance (and fragility) of childhood; developmental and educational psychological theories offered by Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget reimagined the progression through childhood, coming of age, and young adulthood;⁷⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois and other racial politics theorists uncovered and advocated for recognition of the racially divergent experiences of schooling and childhood for Black and African American children in the United States.⁷⁹ The impact of this circulation of ideas worked in concordance with social and juridical alterations that placed a higher valuation on the American child and childhood itself; these were evidenced by the prioritization of requisite mass immunization for children and an augmenting life expectancy for children five years and older.

⁷⁸ Though Erikson and Piaget's most significant works would not be published until after the timeline of this project by the 1930s Piaget held the position of Director for the International Bureau of Education and Erikson was a principal researcher at Harvard Medical School. Most pronounced of all educational and developmental psychological theories in this project, I hope to consider Erikson's three stages of psychosocial development pertaining to periods in life where coming of age is experienced—"Industry vs. Inferiority" (late childhood), "Identity vs. Role Confusion" (adolescence), and "Intimacy vs. Isolation" (young adulthood)—in dialogue with theatrical representations of coming of age. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

⁷⁹ Considerations of race work in connection to considerations of children as labor subjects in this study, and the optics of labor revolution pervading the period. W.E.B. Du Bois explains in his influential *The Souls of Black Folk* the way that educational institutions and ideologies that "encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black." The educational, economic, and sensorial differentiation between children in the era based on race and ethnicity will come into question in multiple chapters of this study. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, [1903] 2018), 76.

Scholarship in American history and performance characterizes the post-WWII era “invention” of the American teenager: a solidification of the conventions and characteristics of coming of age and adolescent life in the United States social sphere. Other studies argue that adolescence as a stage in the country was formulated in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This study positions itself amongst the seismic waves of change in the 1930s that would alter the American public’s way of seeing children—and the spectatorship of children and young adult characters on stage—to contend with this discrepancy. It is my assertion that both prior to the first World War and following the second, childhood as an entity in the United States experienced a semblance of stability: a stasis or equilibrium of expectations and roles of the child.⁸⁰ The 1930s and broader interwar period however demanded a grand culture renegotiation of the child—a renegotiation that I postulate was rehearsed and represented through the stage. Education movements at the turn of the century, such as John Dewey’s writing on pragmatism and Progressive education reform followed shifts that mirrored the dislocation of the child as a labor subject and introduced the child to compulsory schooling. As this transition took place, Dewey and other Progressive education reformers like Ella Flagg worked to promote the school as a place where real, authentic life experiences were gained.⁸¹ These changes to American education policy corroborated the societal mission of the late nineteenth century and twentieth centuries to form a literate, intellectual citizenry in American society.

⁸⁰ As later detailed in this introduction, the emergence, cultural codification, or “invention” of the adolescent/teenager is a particularly extensive and contentious consideration. From foundational work introduced by Philippe Ariès and later writings of Aaron H. Esman and David Archard, to United States-specific studies by Joseph F. Kett and Thomas Hine, the formulation of our late twentieth/early twenty first century conception of childhood is widely debated with some scholars arguing that teenage life and enculturation was established in early twentieth century, other noting the dissidence and revolutionary aims of 1960s youth culture as a potential starting point for a contemporary conception of childhood.

⁸¹ John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902).

Contending with the depiction of children on stage starts with a recognition of how children's role in society is understood by the culture housing their performance. Beginning with the pivotal and oft-cited mid-twentieth century study on the historical grounding of concepts of childhood by Philippe Ariès—which forwarded the belief that the societies of the middle ages did not distinguish between childhood and adolescence, or even have a clear concept of childhood itself—countless studies have interrogated the the historical positionality of childhood in various eras.⁸² Though scholars such as Barbara Hanawalt and Deborah Young have largely debunked Ariès's claims by pointing to the provisions for childcare, clothing, feeding, games, and pastimes existent in medieval civilization that recognize clear demarcations for childhood, Ariès's study and others balancing the historical formulation of societal optics on children and childhood are liberally consulted throughout this study.⁸³ Also of significance is contextual research by Young that links age and developmental stage to a subject's identity formation.⁸⁴ Though consulting retroactive *classifications* of childhood such as these, of greater import to my project is the way that a society *conceptualizes* childhood and the consideration given to children (and children on stage) by adults of a cultural epoch.⁸⁵ Carolyn Steedman utilizes this method of

⁸² Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 29.

⁸³ Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The ties that bound: peasant families in medieval England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 171.

⁸⁴ Young argues that “age formed an essential part of a person's identity in late medieval Europe” countering Ariès's claims. This question of how age forms an essential part of personhood and identity is of utility for the early twentieth century moment of focus in this study. Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 12.

⁸⁵ The use of “conception” rather than “concept” throughout my project follows David Archard's articulation of the term. Archard amends Ariès's language to differentiate between a *concept* and *conception* of childhood. “The *concept* of childhood requires that children be distinguishable from adults in respect of some unspecified set of attributes” (author's italics) explains Archard noting that Ariès's insistence of medieval societies did, in fact, have a concept of childhood but lacked a *conception* of childhood (then defined by Archard as “a specification of those attributes”). David Archard, *Children: Rights and childhood*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

retelling history through the attitudes that adults have towards children, as does David Archard in his articulation (also a refutation of Ariès) that locating the specifications which create distinguishable states of adulthood and childhood is of central importance for understanding a culture.⁸⁶ Other studies position the child as an economic object by addressing the way that society is impacted by ideological investment in children and childhood, such as Viviana Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child* and Mary Water's *Coming of Age in America*.⁸⁷ Through the case studies and performance events in this project, I further attempt to view adolescence and the coming of age process as its own unique stage of life (rather than only positioning it in relationship to other ages in lifespan development), and question the historical formation of this stage in the twentieth century. Gabrielle Owen and others have similarly written on the "historically locatable logics brought together by the emergence of adolescence" in the twentieth century, and offer this study clarity on the changing conditions of adolescence through the interwar period in America.⁸⁸

Articulating characterizations of the lifespan requires not only historical recapitalization, but consideration of social science research on children and coming of age. In order for this project to question the way children's experience of the FTP and other theatre at the end of the 1930s alongside the other aspects of learning and growth in their lives, I intend to examine both how historical moments construct childhood and the sociological question: what kind of subject *is* a child? In some ways this inquiry is as well-tread and trite as "nature vs. nurture"

⁸⁶ Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 8.

⁸⁷ Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Mary C. Waters, *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-first Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁸⁸ Gabrielle Owen, *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 8.

argumentations that dominate conversations and public consciousness on child rearing and education. However, theories like those proposed by Jens Qvortrup offer scholarly intervention in the changing conception of children as imperfect adults to the societal formulation of children as “unfinished, raw materials to be processed, clay to be formed in the skilled hands of their elders.”⁸⁹ Similarly, proposed late twentieth century movements like the one spearheaded by Alan Prout, Allison James, and Chris Jenks introduce new paradigms for childhood that assist with criterion and focal points that have guided changing conditions of childhood over the past century. Beyond theoretical classification, this project investigates the features of children’s life in the United States during the 1930s and how those features connect to changing models, classifications, and conceptions of childhood. Of importance is James D. Schmidt’s study on the origins of child labor, and how changing conditions of the American workplace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought about a radical alteration in children’s role in manufacturing and U.S. commerce. Through an investigation of industrial violence and the dangers of engagement in capitalist economic production, Schmidt tracks the changing of children’s roles in family-centered trades to industrial labor, industrial labor to protected and labor-excluded young adulthood.⁹⁰ The historicization of children’s role in the workplace and American social order offers a window into the progression of the child as a labor subject that is of great use to this project through consideration for how the children of American plays would have existed outside of the *mise en scène* of dramatic narratives.

Studies implicating children’s influence on prevailing culture are offered with some regularity in theatre and performance scholarship. Using stage and performance traditions to

⁸⁹ Jens Qvortrup, “Are Children Human Beings or Human Becomings? A Critical Assessment of Outcome Thinking,” *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* 117, no. 3/4 (2009), 632.

⁹⁰ James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence*.

interrogate the kind of subjecthood children inhabit, these studies offer me models for the kind of local reading of performance events that can occur in this project. Their discourses lead to broader deductions about a local and national culture much in the way my study aspires to. In addition to the aforementioned studies by Wall and Jackson on staging domesticity and American history, I consider the way that Deanna Williams frames the meaning of childhood in early modern England as derivative of the school and stage as of significance to my study. Williams' assertion (offered in the introductory remarks of *Childhood, Education and the Stage in Early Modern England*) places weight on the mass cultural investment in children and childhood experienced by a society, and asks how the popular theatre and public schooling of an era can be triangulated to comprehend the history of that culture's views on childhood.⁹¹ I consider this mode of inquiry rich, and am curious how the addition of children's experience in labor settings and non-pedagogical communal spaces (in concordance with children's role in the home and school) could be useful in justifying and defending cultural histories of my period.

This project is also invested in the development of American national identity in the late 1930s and beyond, and how American drama informs the construction of "Americanness" in my period. For this I am grateful for the work of Oona Kersey, who writes of the child's body site as a location for the "negotiating a definition of US American national identity" in her study on children's performances as a part of the Sutter's Fort Environmental Living Program in California during the twenty first century.⁹² Kersey's contributions draw on detailed ethnographic evidence of living history performances to interpret how children's representation and performance of history is entangled with the formation of American identity. Though not

⁹¹ Deanna Williams, "Introduction," in *Childhood, Education and the Stage in Early Modern England*, edited by Richard Preiss and Deanne Williams, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁹² Oona Kersey, "Amendments to a National Narrative: Children Performing History in the Sutter's Fort Environmental Living Program 22, No. 1 (2008), 108.

ethnographic in methodology, this approach of using the casting, choreography, and modalities of performance focused on the child is a strong indicator of how my study may be able to weigh the stakes and impact of children's representation on stage as a component and expedient for the determination of American national identity.⁹³

Modes of Performance

A distinguishing feature of this project compared to other research on the Federal Theatre's youth programs and performance is the explored modes and models of performance. Though all connected to the FTP's broader network, each regional site produced a very different brand of children's engagement with theatre as an art form. On a rudimentary level, each project (local chapter of the Federal Theatre) utilized the methods and pragmatics of different theatrical genres to create original children's plays, or to adapt original iterations of Federal Theatre productions. However, this is accented in importance in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, when studied in tandem with the extension beyond traditional children's theatre alone. Accordingly, while other studies pay attention to the methods of production, and modalities of performance for adult productions of the Federal Theatre, or the specific playtexts of children's plays produced by the Federal Theatre, this study ask how children played different roles entirely as audience members of specific genres of performance in the Federal Theatre. How were children and youth separately drawn to and impacted by productions that ranged in mode of performance from classical plays brought to their high schools, to early manifestations of drama therapy utilizing puppet theatre in hospitals, to ad hoc vaudeville performances and queer identity performances in rural areas, to folk tales performed on stage with centrality of Black identity? While the scope Federal Theatre efforts analyzed in this study is wide, they are unified by Hallie Flanagan's

⁹³ Ibid, 121-123.

eulogy for the Federal Theatre (in the form of her *New York Times* penned op-ed)—as well as the intention of breathing life into children and youth experiences of both theatre and life during the Depression era. One of the ancillary objectives of this study—supporting the desire to investigate the regional-specificity and the range of this scope for the Federal Theatre Project’s programs and productions—is to look at *how* these given modes were efficacious in their given sites, and *how* the youth experienced each theatrical form in their given situations and settings.

Caravan theatre productions were one of the most popular forms of entertainment produced by the FTP in New York City—the largest and more influential Federal Theatre site. These productions were advertised on subways, spoken about around the city, and championed as perhaps the most impactful contribution by the FTP. Across all five boroughs, children and adults alike could expect these FTP to be produced in public parks using wagon-styled transportable stages. The NYC caravan productions were some of the most popular and influential of FTP’s public-facing works—performing for 1,939,100 audience members in just one summer.⁹⁴ George Kondolf, director of the Federal Theatre Project for New York City, described the Caravan Theatre productions as, “one of the most satisfying traditions I inherited when I took over the job here,” and advertisements for the productions graced local newsprint, magazines, and even the walls of the subway.⁹⁵ If there was a hope of turning the FTP’s theatre into a social institution, the Caravan productions give testament to the success of that mission. Mathews writes how “even the less ardent supporters of this ‘People’s Theatre’ agreed that it would be difficult indeed to compute in dollars and cents the social and cultural gains from

⁹⁴ Ferdinand Mann, “A People’s Traveling Theatre,” *WPA Theatre*.

⁹⁵ “Children’s Theatre,” Press Release, The Work Program. [None, 126, Monographic]. Federal Theatre Project. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

caravan performances alone,” as the productions became a yearly pastime in New York at the end of the decade.⁹⁶

Caravan Theatre wasn’t relegated to the children’s productions of New York City. From Gary, Indiana to Seattle, Washington, coast to coast, children experience outdoor, portable-stage productions staged by the FTP with some regularity. Various sites indicated that this was a production value or cost-saving necessity; others report the effervescence of summer theatre children’s theatre productions that allowed FTP audiences to swarm to outside public parks while enduring heat waves and the other hardships of Depression-era life. Fitting into a long lineage of public, outdoor, and makeshift theatre production mechanisms in the 1930s, the FTP caravan theatre productions harken connection to significant developments in workers’ theatre and pageant productions. This analogous relationship places the leftist-leaning FTP ideologies—previously mentioned as inherent in even children’s productions—to be coded alongside the production methods of other “People’s Theatres” and theatre institutions meant to serve working-class publics. Colette A. Hyman explains how consideration for the aspects of production in workers’ theatre itself “adds shades of meaning, intended and unintended” to the creation of a dramatic work.⁹⁷ Hyman’s assertion that the mode of production itself “elicits expectations from the audience” serves the recognition that these caravan productions for the FTP Children’s Unit likely carried with them a (intentional or unintentional) semiotic parallel for audience member, effectively fused the at-times liberally coded children’s theatres productions with proletarian theatre movements of the same era.⁹⁸ While not included in this study,

⁹⁶ Jane DeHart Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 141.

⁹⁷ Colette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers’ Theatre and the American Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 4.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

recognizing the centrality of the Caravan Unit is important for the four case studies of this dissertation. Firstly, doing so includes the caravan productions in the literature review of this research to articulate that much has already been made of this heavily-trafficked form of spectatorship. Secondly, and more importantly, doing so frames something that children and youth were getting from the Federal Theatre that is otherwise underexplored in the case studies: free, outdoor, family-centered entertainment. This nature of performance alone is enough to articulate importance of the Federal Theatre for children during the era; alongside the Classical Unit, the Caravan Unit helped to ensure that a new generation of American theatre-goers would have seen a play during the childhood years—a guarantee unafforded to children prior to the Federal Theatre’s tenure.

Other methods of production less familiar to scholars and readers of the Federal Theatre comprise this study, and constitute a question of how the medium of theatre both impacts children, and helped to reshape a generation’s recognition of what theatre is, and can be.. Puppet theatre scholarship, for instance, indicated the way that audiences feel protective towards puppets—making the frequent use of marionettes and puppet theatres by the FTP of particular interest. Marionette theatre in the Federal Theatre accounted for “an average of 100 shows a week” but not limited to children.⁹⁹ The use of this theatre mode for children can then be directly linked to the instruction of empathy and compassion for children’s audiences. Johanna Smith further details the benefits of puppet and marionette theatres for children utilizing scholarship by Julia Marshall and Frank R. Wilson to argue for benefits of children’s exposure to puppet theatre such as increased physical and sensory coordination, development of procedural knowledge (in line with the Progressive Theatre movement of the era), and growth of intellectual and

⁹⁹John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored*, 24.

socioemotional capacities for the child.¹⁰⁰ Puppet and marionette productions also place the works of the Children's Unit of the FTP in a line of longer historical tradition of theatre for the working class in the United States. Paul McPharlin explains that from the early arrival of European immigrants to the nation, puppet theatre was identifiable as street-side entertainment and theatre for lower classes. Few advertisements exist in early U.S. newsprint for puppet theatre performance, yet countless diaries and travel logs note the use of puppets in informal and working-class theatre.¹⁰¹ Puppet theatre, like caravan productions, connect the FTP to traditions created and implemented for the widest of American publics—theatres for and by the people. The use of puppets for entertainment, and (more central to *Grieving the Federal Theatre*) as a means of healing is discussed extensively in Chapter II.

Arts integration methods utilized for public school residencies by FTP sites across the nation represent another public-facing aspect of the Federal Theatre's work. Even prior to arts integration work being carried out in schools by the Children's Unit, the Classical Unit of the Federal Theatre project was bringing up to four shows a year into public schools. Between art integrated public school productions run by Children's Units and other modes that may be revealed through archival study, my project will consider the many ways that the FTP children's productions were frequently historically-indebted, public-facing theatrical enterprises.

Other, more novel, forms of performance are encased in the approaches to theatre unraveled and uncovered in each chapter of this study—all of which afforded a specifically actionable impact for children and youth in the communities centered in this project.

¹⁰⁰ Johanna Smith, *Puppetry in Theatre and Arts Education: Head, Hands, and Hearts* (New York: Methuen, 1988), 1-5.

¹⁰¹ Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History (1524-1948)* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1949), 3.

Chapter Breakdown

The Classical Unit in American Public Schools

In New York City, the national hub of the Federal Theatre Project became a playmaking powerhouse. As the New York City project mounted original productions, proposed modalities of performance (such as *The Living Newspaper*, and caravan productions), and wrote original texts that would be disseminated to other Federal Theatre sites around the country, New York—already the country's proverbial theatre capital—became the heart and lifeblood of the Federal Theatre's impact. For youth, in the summers of 1936-1938 the FTP children's unit staged over 12 original children's theatre productions, as well as a Children's Festival, in New York City. At least four of the productions—*The Emperor's New Clothes* adapted from the Hans Christian Anderson story by Charlotte Chorpenning, *Treasure Island*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and *Horseplay* a collaboration with the FTP Negro Unit—were produced as Caravan Theatre productions.¹⁰² "Sixty-five per cent of this people's audience," reports Louise Mitchell in contemporary newsprint, had never seen a real flesh-and-blood show until their Federal Theatre began delivering drama to their backyards and parks."¹⁰³ However, while the public-facing performances of the Caravan Theatre took center stage, a unit separate from the Children's Unit and Caravan Theatre was quietly creating a palimpsest of impact that would echo in the halls of schools, in the minds of children, and around the United States for years to come.

Chapter I of *Grieving the Federal Theatre* historicizes the impact of The Classical Unit, a division of the Federal Theatre that worked to stage original productions of classical texts to tour to United States schools. The unit's operations crafted one of the more ambitious partnerships between the Federal Theatre and outside organizations—as the unit collaborated with local

¹⁰² See Appendix A for image for Caravan production. Use of the term "Negro Unit" parallels the name of the unit and historical terming of the project's all-Black and African American production unit.

¹⁰³ Louise Mitchell. 1938. "Enjoy Free W.P.A. Shows in Parks." *Sunday Worker*. July 17.

school officials and educators around the country to curate a program of plays that would serve both educational and entertainment values. Hallie Flanagan's op-ed, which rued the loss of "plays chosen by the school boards and performed in high schools throughout the State," it was the Classical Unit she was lamenting the termination of.¹⁰⁴ The program afforded many children and teenagers in the United States their first opportunity to see a play, as the program offered the productions at free or low-cost admissions. In addition to telling the story of The Classical Unit's operations, this chapter contextualized the unit in the picture of theatre in schools across both American and transhistorical, transnational settings—proposing a narrative for how the Federal Theatre project passed the baton of bringing theatre into conversations and programmatics of schooling, and charting new possibilities for the relationship between schools and theatre as an art form worth teaching.

Bellevue Hospital's Puppet Theatre: Performance as Therapy

The Federal Theatre Project intervened in far more than the trajectories of American public schooling, theatre making, or governmental programming. In Chapter II, a case study is zoomed in on that illuminates not only the widespread impact of the Federal Theatre's labor crafting nontraditional theatrical performance modes, but in transgressing the boundaries of art making and pedagogy in service of psychological wellness. Launching from archival memory of the collaboration between Bellevue Hospital and the Federal Theatre Project, this chapter frames Federal Theatre artists as change agents who worked to offer tools of theatrical creation to medical and psychiatric professionals at Bellevue Hospital. Using the practitioner tools of puppetry offered by the FTP facilitated doctors at Bellevue who were researching new innovations in projected play, psychoanalysis, and therapy processes for children.

¹⁰⁴ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed.

Extending beyond the case study alone, this chapter again contextualizes the importance of the Federal Theatre Project's collaboration with Bellevue Hospital with contemporary advancements in psychoanalysis, as well as the future-leaning trajectories that would craft theatre as a powerful tool for wellness, healing, and social change throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This chapter asks a foundational question to the fields of Applied Theatre and psychoanalysis with children: is theatre a tool for healing? In doing so, the study signals a glaring importance of the Federal Theatre, as the project expanded impact into children's learning, growth, and development in therapy settings. "The Menace of Marionette Shows" (another referent to Flanagan's opt-ed) further serves as a stitch to place conversations of drama's efficacy in therapy processes in dialogue with public governance—arguing that the initiatives created by the Federal Theatre and other New Deal era programs made collaboration possible across domains of interest that, when working together, were able to serve children in the U.S.

Boyhood, Dramatics, and Identity in Civilian Conservation Corps Camps

As Chapter II takes us off of the stage and into the hospital, Chapter II on the collaboration between the Federal Theatre Project and the Civilian Conservation Corps program leads us even further: into the mountains, forests, and valleys of the American wilderness. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was a separate WPA program that followed up on a campaign promise by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to use federal funds in service of reforestation efforts, environmental programs, and service to the vast wilderness areas of the United States. Partnership with the Federal Theatre allowed for theatre to be brought into CCC camps around the country. Boys and youth enrolled in the CCC (with an enrollment age window of 17-24 years old) were able to take classes in drama during their free time; engage in social programs to act, sing, and perform; use scripts from a Federal Theatre Project exchange program

to mount their own informal and formal theatrical productions. This chapter, in part, offers the field one of the most comprehensive windows into the use of dramatics in the CCC camp program, using archival evidence to trace the scope of the Federal Theatre's relationship with the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The study's central aim, however, is to uncover a more secretive history of theatre and performance in the CCC camp program—one with its own significance for the pedagogies of interpersonal, social, and identity-based learning. Performance in the CCC camps gave way to an ethos of theatricality, which opened doors to drag, cross-dressing, queer and trans identity performances, and other markers of experimentation with social taboos surrounding gay identity. Chapter III argues for the symbiotic nature of theatrical performance and identity experimentation in the CCC, charting ways that gay sexuality surfaced in the camps both because of, and in tandem with, the social theatricalities of the camp program. Asking how the Federal Theatre Project's plays and productions fueled these developments, the chapter offers a critical case study of the emergence of queer and trans identities in the 20th century, and uses the literal landscape of American wilderness as a sounding board for the possibilities that the CCC and FTP connection created for youth and boys in the camp program during the Federal Theatre's tenure—and beyond.

Racial Pedagogies and the Negro Reperatory Company

The Federal Theatre Project facilitated creation of numerous theatrical divisions and units serving specific communities and racial groups across the United States. Chinese, Jewish, Black, and world-language (Spanish, French, and others) units were crafted to offer financial support for cultural plural program development, and to funnel assistance to work relief theatre makers who wanted to serve their given communities in their various regional centers. One of the most

impactful of the Black theatre divisions (frequently named in archival documents of the FTP as the Negro Units) was the Negro Reperatory Company in Seattle.

The history of the Negro Reperatory Company (NRC) is a complex story in the memory of the Federal Theatre. The NRC mounted a number of highly influential productions, and rivaled the more hegemonic (and homogenous) theatres in Seattle, crafted productions with Black actors, playwrights, and production teams that benefitted integration and changemaking in the theatre industries in the 1930s. However, some of the most storied productions of the NRC (such as *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*, historicized by Witham and others) recounts white directors and administrators from the Federal Theatre overseeing Black artists in racist and misguided ways. Through it all, the NRC was a pivotal unit for the Federal Theatre's national development, and regional artistic creation in Seattle.

In 1937, one of the NRC's greatest successes came in the form of a production of Theodore Brown's *Natural Man*: a retelling of the John Henry myth, developed and performed through the Federal Theatre. Chapter IV continued the project's investigation of pedagogical approaches impacting children and youth in the Depression by asking how children that were in the audience of *Natural Man* would have received the work. Using a horizontal glance at how Black identity was performed, and how Black children were instructed, in the social epoch of the 1930s in Seattle (and around the United States) this chapter parlays histories of *Natural Man* by centered children as the most pivotal audience for the NRC's production, and asking how pedagogies of race, society, and connection were woven into the fabric of the production's original aims, and the reception of *Natural Man* amidst the performance run of the Federal Theatre Project's hit.

Approach

Methodology, Archival Research, and Evidence

In July of 2021, I began an extensive review of national archival holdings on the Federal Theatre Project. Visiting the Library of Congress (LOC) in Washington, D.C. and New York Public Library, I was able to access archival materials from 1935-1939 regarding the history and operations of the Federal Theatre that informed the earliest stages of formation for the dissertation approach. In the subsequent years while writing this project, the Federal Theatre's rich and almost limitlessly expansive archive, became the centerpoint of the curiosities on the project, youth culture, United States governance, and antecedents of art making during the American 1930s. Immersion in the archive was fundamental to this project's understanding of both the FTP's operations in the late 1930s, and the culture of the Depression era as experienced by Federal Theatre artists and organizers.

Archival research extended from the Library of Congress and National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. and Maryland, across the Mid-Atlantic the important WPA Oral Histories Collection at George Mason University in Virginia. In New York City, use of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library and other repositories in the nation's center of theatre making afforded purview of both the New York City project for the Federal Theatre, and the institutions in partnership with the FTP across NYC (in particular, public schools and Bellevue Hospital). In Seattle, the University of Washington Special Collections offered meaningful documentation of the Seattle Federal Theatre Project, and other partnerships in the Pacific Northwest (including documentation from the NRC in Seattle, and CCC camps located across Cascadia). The Seattle Municipal Archives, Seattle Public Library, Seattle Public Schools, and Shoreline Historical Museum collections further expanded my recognition of the many tributaries of impact that the FTP flowed through—and made the

Seattle-area archives the second focal point for the study. While *Grieving the Federal Theatre* seeks to unravel arguments on the entire Federal Theatre Project, the New York City and Seattle hubs have each contributed greatly to two case studies (and chapters) each. The project therefore breathes coast to coast, with a lung each in one of the Northwest and Northeast's biggest cities.

Archival evidence discovered from many non-Federal Theatre holdings, sources, and lineages also serve the broader web of analysis supporting this project. Documents as wide-ranging as local newsprint to Depression era magazines, local ordinances to town hall meeting transcripts, source materials or inspirations for Federal productions to theatrical practitioner journals and brainstorming—all made a mark on the logics of this project. Outside of governance and theatremaking, parenting practice, pedagogical priorities, writing on children's socioemotional needs, and local reform efforts aimed at creating a more prosperous life for young people served *Grieving the Federal Theatre's* consideration of childhood during the 1930s. Materials utilized in preparation for productions by the FTP included the sourcing of children's stories and fairytales, alongside parenting magazines and advice-centered opinion columns on child rearing practices in circulation during the era.¹⁰⁵

Bringing the eye of a theatre historian, career educator, and performing artist to this project has allowed for illuminations of Federal Theatre Project archival holdings in a way unique to our field, and unique to the arguments of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*. It is this synthesizing, cross-reading of theatrical and developmental efforts of the Federal Theatre to support young people that I believe brings forth the unique positionality of children in the late 1930s, and how the Federal Theatre's youth programs and performances served as significant features of children's lives in the Great Depression; and in their processes of coming of age.

¹⁰⁵ Ann Perry, "Children Like Table Talk," *Home & Food* 2, no. 4 (1938), 1.

Chapter I

“To See is To Believe”: The Classical Unit in Public Schools and the Federal Theatre’s Intervention in American Arts Outreach

White House Flashback: May 1935

Hallie Flanagan’s Meeting with Eleanor Roosevelt

In May of 1935, when traveling to Washington, D.C. to meet with the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) lead administrator Harry Hopkins, Hallie Flanagan discussed the intentions and potential efficacy of the Federal Theatre with First Lady Elenor Roosevelt in the White House. Flanagan’s trip was initiated in order to receive Hopkin’s pitch about the formation of the Federal Theatre Project, and his intention of having Flanagan serve as the executive director of the nation’s new, and first-ever federal subsidized, theatre. Originally enticed, but not sold on the idea of helming the FTP—a role she thought was better suited to a social worker than a theatre artist/producer—Mrs. Roosevelt’s compulsion and invitation for the public good that Flanagan would be creating served as a greater casting call than Harry Hopkin’s original offer.¹⁰⁶

Sitting with Mrs. Roosevelt, Flanagan and the First Lady discussed a great many topics related to the arts, and development of American culture in ancillary but indebted ways to the European nations Hallie Flanagan had surveyed and studied while on her Guggenheim

¹⁰⁶ Use of “Mrs. Roosevelt” as a naming for Elenor Roosevelt is a brief homage to the rhetoric used by Flanagan in *Arena* when recounting her interaction with the famed First Lady.

Flanagan felt that because labor was the principal focus of the WPA & FTP, and she was an expert of the theatre not of relief measures, that she was disqualified from learning the Federal Theatre. This obviously changed, and Flanagan took up Harry Hopkin’s plea to be the FTP national director; but it is an important wrinkle in the story of the Federal Theatre to note that even Flanagan wasn’t sure how labor and theatre practitioner-hood would meld in the early days of proposal and implementation for the project.

fellowship abroad. A core point of their conversation circulated the interconnectivity between theatre and education in the United States. Flanagan posits in *Arena* that Mrs. Roosevelt posed questions about “whether the time had come when America might consider the theatre, as it was considered abroad, a part of education.”¹⁰⁷ Flanagan scoffed at the likelihood of such feats. She writes: “because of our heritage of Puritanism in its relation to the stage, the theatre would be the last of the arts to be so accepted.”¹⁰⁸ This conversation between Flanagan and Roosevelt—and the soaring significance of the question of how and when the United States could accept theatre as a feature of education, and American public schooling—poses intervening inquiries to the project of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*. How were the arts first accepted as a part of the instructional regimen in the United States? Writing from the 21st century where theatre programming is now cursory to, and nearly uniformly written into elective curricula of, U.S. public schooling, when did theatre first find its way into the structures of schooling in the United States? How might we continue to see the pages of *Grieving the Federal Theatre* as an invitation to illuminate that intervention in Arts Education around the United States that the Federal Theatre created?

Theatre as an Educative Force

Soon after leaving the White House, Flanagan decided to take up the invitation to lead the Federal Theatre. She’d later articulate that from these earliest moments of embarking on the journey of the Federal Theatre’s fours of creation and production, her core intentions for the project connected directly to this desire to build the Federal Theatre as a pedagogical apparatus, stipulated by, and serving, the state and its people. Despite the ongoing focus of the Federal

¹⁰⁷ Flanagan, *Arena*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Theatre's focus on relief, it was actually Elenore Roosevelt's intention that the Federal Theatre be a part of the educational landscape of the United States that formed a cornerstone in the logics of Flanagan, Hopkins, and and other early FTP envisioners like Elmer Rice, and Philip Barber. Flanagan writes: "(Rice, Barber) and I were in agreement; we all believe that the theatre was more than a private enterprise, that it was also a public interest which, properly fostered, might come to be a social and educative force."¹⁰⁹ In this way, not only the locale (schools, educational organizations) of some early Federal Theatre initiatives, but the intended goal (educating the American public) made the hybridity of education and performance fundamental to the Federal Theatre's early work.

It didn't take long for the Federal Theatre to walk-the-walk of Flanagan's hope that the FTP could be a vehicle for education in the United States. Building mediums in which the Federal Theatre could impact educational communities was fairly easy to springboard, due to the infrastructure already built by the Federal Theatre predecessors in the WPA and other federal government organizations. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) and Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) operating in 1933-1934 offered some ready-made pathways for educational impact. Both organizations predated the WPA, and were measures of public support during the Great Depression that were subsequently discontinued (or, perhaps, renovated and subsumed) after the WPA was created.¹¹⁰ The CWA, also helmed by Harry Hopkins before his management of wings of the WPA, and FERA sponsored "performance in hospitals, schools, CCC camps, parks, and in the streets" as relief work for actors prior to the Federal Theatre's creation.¹¹¹ By

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 54.

¹¹⁰ Kulik, Rebecca M.. "Civil Works Administration" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

¹¹¹ Lorraine Brown, "Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest, and Genius." Federal Theatre Project, 1935 to 1939. Library of Congress.

the time the FTP was founded, a number of free attractions and performance-based offerings for the public were still in existence from the CWA; this constituted one of the few moments of ease in the history of the Federal Theatre—where red tape didn't bar the operations of the FTP, but previous governmental know-how allowed the Federal Theatre to get right to work. Vaudeville units, marionette units, minstrel shows, a large Gilbert and Sullivan Company—all were already playing to bookings in schools, settlement houses, and churches. The educational mission of the Federal Theatre had already begun, even before stamps had dried on the minting of the new Federal One project.

In this first year of the Federal Theatre project, intentions of an educational mission were backed up by investment and production of educational drama. A production of *Everyman* in New York City served as both religious and educational drama, playing for schools and churches alike around the city; Shakespeare projects and educational supplements to the production took the stage across the city. Early goals of the educational nature of theatre were ratified by educational theories and professionals across the country, such as when teaching and learning pioneer John Dewey headed a list of educators that sponsored a production of *Chalk Dust*, a play written by Harold A. Clarke and Maxwell Nurnberg and produced by the FTP that centered on urban education.¹¹² It was clear from the jump that the Federal Theatre—though a relief body, and focused on labor and compensation—was not only additionally invested in bolstering national theatre making, but also a bonafide part of the educational regime of the American 1930s.

With such continuity from CWA efforts connected to education, and immediate pedagogical impact through known avenues of teaching and learning, it might be speculated that the Federal Theatre was simply carrying out an already rehearsed choreography for educational

¹¹² Flanagan, *Arena*, 69-70.

theatre in the era. However, it is important to both the project of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, and to a rightful history of the FTP's educational impact, to recognize the Federal Theatre Project's impact on education as an intervention. The Federal Theatre's productions were less torch bearers passing on known antecedents for educational theatre and production, that reinventors of how theatre as a pedagogical tool could meet learners around the country. What made the Federal Theatre's operation and connectivity to school novel, original, or unique in their crafting and student impact—and how did the Federal Theatre's work in schools during its brief tenure help to set an altered trajectory for future arts education around the country?

To answer this question, as well as the early stated inquiries raised by Hallie Flanagan's meeting with Elenore Roosevelt, this chapter will take up the Classical Unit of the Federal Theatre Project and the productions that were created as a part of the FTP's outreach into American public schools. This writing seeks to reframe the FTP Classical Unit as a moment of intervention in educational theatre, one that used the tools of previous mechanisms that allowed theatre to reach students in public education settings and classrooms, but then recharted a course for American educational theatre by offering meaningful theatrical performance that helped students in United States schools to learn—both about the theatre itself, and as supplement to other content area learning. In order to argue for the coherence of the FTPs productions in schooling as interventions, I'll start by introducing the climate and culture of arts education in the United States in the years preceding the Federal Theatre; specially, I'll ask how modes familiar to the Classical Unit, such as making oratory, rhetorics, and dramatic literature more accessible through theatrical performance were experienced in U.S. public schools prior to the FTP. This chapter will then introduce the Classical Unit and two seasons of classical play programming connected to youth audiences. The first is the formal launch of the FTP

subdivision to reach U.S. learners in their schools and the unit's original production of *Coriolanus*; the second is not an Federal Theatre season, but tracking how the closure of the FTP prior to the Classical Unit's second full season led to an off-shot of the program's intention in a season held by the Cleveland Theatre for Youth. Using period-based archival documents, Chapter I on The Classical Unit in Public Schools then relays the celebration of the Federal Theatre held through the New York City area in response to the Classical Unit, and curtails the praise for these FTP productions into acts of subsequent grief that followed the Federal Theatre's closure, and the cancellation of school programs extended through the Classical Unit. By charting ways that the Classical Unit lived on in intention and programmatics—in U.S. high schools as well as in professional theatres—this chapter ultimately argues that the medium of 20th century scholastic performance was intervened in, informed by, and scaffolded by the Federal Theatre Project's Classical Unit.

Arts Education in U.S. Public Schools

Foundations of Early 20th Century Arts Education

Early monographs of United States public education offer the insight that Roosevelt and Flanagan's musings were accurate in their concern that theatre and arts education would be contested in their acceptance as a part of U.S. schooling. Correspondingly, the earliest entry points for theatre into the public school curricula required first a welcoming of arts education as a significant part of the educational regimen (specifically disciplines of visual art and music which, due to religiocentric values of United States education, were earlier and easier integrations to public schooling) and then an acceptance of theatre as an art form—and the richness that theatre arts offered the learning experience of children. It seems counterintuitive that theatre education would need this slow scaffolding in American public schooling given the

history of theatre's integration into education throughout history. Well recognized in Western theatre history, in Greece dramatic performance was fundamental to not only entertainment but citizenship for ancient Athenians and others outside of the city center that recognized the stage as a space for learning. Theatre scholar John J. Winkler explains the well-trafficked recognition that the Greek stage was a core classroom for the young man as ephebe, in his articulation that the young soldier was most essentially a "notional learners of lessons (paideia);" learning was at the core of the utility and purpose for theatre festivals through this early era of recorded performance.¹¹³ By the medieval period, children playing games as intuitive as those involving chase-and-capture or basic physical competition were understood in their scaffolding of imagination and creativity. Joe L. Frost writes that these early recognitions of the necessity of play and physical activity, "are indications that the natural therapeutic qualities of play stimulate children to engage in war games and games related to the traumatic consequences of other man-made and natural disasters."¹¹⁴ On and on through history—be it in scholastic theatre productions at Oxford and Cambridge in Elizabethan England, or at *keban* (Peking Opera schools in China)—performance schooling and traditional national education have been connected enterprises. It may seem quizzical then that United States arts education wouldn't employ these rudimentary transhistorical tenets of theatre and arts education; however, as well explained by early 20th century education theorist Isaac Edwards Clarke, "a country's art, like all its other developments, must be based primarily upon the characteristics of it's people." Due to the anti-theatricality movements and religious opposition to theatre in England prior to the American revolution, and then the composition of early United States settler-colonizers

¹¹³ John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: Tragōidoi and Polis." *Representations*. 11, no. 2 (1985): 26-62.

¹¹⁴ Joe L. Frost, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 16.

populations with Puritanical values, arts education didn't carry over an global or European cache defending the necessity of the arts in learning. Instead, as recognized by Flanagan and E. Roosevelt, "the Puritan immigrants of New England had all the abhorrence of art which marked the followers of the Reformation"—ensuring that a century would pass before the arts were recognized as fundamental to public schooling.¹¹⁵

Beyond the religiocentric antecedents of United States schooling, alterations in commerce and the culture of education led to a more arts-infused American education system. By the time of the emerging industrial revolution, the Common School Movement started to usher in an era of arts instruction for the American public. The Common School Movement is a term given to the 19th century and early 20th century era where industrial needs (such as a citizenry that could read and follow instructions, maintain records, and manage other skills previously less important in an agriculturally centered society) gave way to compulsory schooling and access for children across the country to liberal arts education. By the middle of the 19th century, echoes of the arts as a part of this public reformation of knowledge were recognizable: Yale and Syracuse universities had programs in studio arts that supported arts students who would eventually become industrial artists; Harvard linked art history as a component of liberal arts tradition. Around the same time, Horace Mann—sometimes referred to as the father of American public education—began to argue for a number of educational values, including the *moral* necessity of arts instruction. Contrary to the anti-theatricality and anti-art principles of Puritanism, Mann argued in 1841 that “drawing may well go hand in hand with music, so may the cultivation of libraries and the cultivation of a taste for reading, etc. Every pure taste implanted in the youthful mind becomes a barrier to resist the allurements of

¹¹⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 3.

sensuality.”¹¹⁶ While the zeitgeist of 19th century considerations on children’s development in education and Puritan values had started to diverge, Mann’s logic shows that the means of education as a tool for teaching morality, and building predisposed defenses to immorality, created useful optics that made the aesthetic considerations of arts education a benefit, rather than hindrance, to children’s maturation.

Leading to the turn of the century, tools like photography (becoming commonplace by around 1860), magazine printing (1890s), and other technical skills like ceramics (1890s) began to integrate into public education methodologies as well.¹¹⁷ Theatre arts, however, was still a distant thought in the minds of reformers of public education in the United States. Drama, it seemed, would require additional philosophical changes to public schooling before its implementation in school and classroom would be possible. This shift in approaches to education occurred alongside the advent of creative dramatics in the classroom, working parallel to the early 20th century boom of the “Progressive Movement” in education through the 1920s. The Progressive Movement focused on a shift from declarative to procedural knowledge in the classroom—and the ability for learners to experience learning, rather than a predating emphasis on rote memory and fact retention. Charle R. Duke, in triangulating the connection between the Progressive Movement, children’s drama in the classroom, and English education outlines the Progressive Movement as holding three core values connected to drama’s unique approach as a form: that “(1) proficiency and learning come not only from reading and listening but from action, from doing, and from experience; (2) good work is more often the result of spontaneous effort and free interest than it is of compulsion and forced application; (3) the natural means of

¹¹⁶ Horace Mann, “Moral objects to be aimed at in school” in *Common School Journal*, no. 3 (1841), 186.

¹¹⁷ Arthur D. Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 155.

study in youth is play.”¹¹⁸ With the newfound emphasis on these values of Progressive Education throughout the country, programs like auto repair and home economics began to spring into the curricula of United States schools. Philosophically around play, action, and “doing” rather than simply retaining, the Progressive Movement was built on thematic and ideological goals directly connected to theatre as an art form, and thematically linked to the historical antecedents proposing and defending performance and drama-based instruction. Other philosophical measures altered the perception of theatre in public schooling at this same time, such as the American adoption of values held by education philosopher Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. A Swiss educator, Pestalozzi repelled the 18th century European teaching values, leading a reformation of public consciousness on the strictness and pedantic nature of public education, deeming this approach as unrealistic. Pestalozzi argued that, “the ultimate aim of education is not perfection in the accomplishments of the school, but a fitness for life; not the acquirement of habits of blind obedience, and of prescribed diligence, but a preparation for independent action.”¹¹⁹ This philosophy of education as a preparation for living—concordant with philosophies of Progressive education—were then brought to the U.S. by Edward Austin Sheldon. Sheldon was a superintendent of schools in Oswego, NY who used networking and travel as ways of proposing new methods of instruction for students in his district. Pestalozzi’s values spread through United States education, including offering students “object lessons” or experiences where an object (medium, text, approach) would be observed and then considered, discussed, problematized, and parsed by learners. In object lessons, Pestalozzi would focus on specific examples from the students’ social and physical environment—again aligned with the surges in public education

¹¹⁸ Charles R. Duke, *Creative Dramatics and English Teaching*, (National Council of Teachers of English Urbana, IL., 1973), 19.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Duke, *Creative Dramatics*, 20.

during the Progressive Movement that asked for task completion, rather than rote memory, from learners. With the stage set for the tools of drama, where does theatre itself as an art form and method of interpersonal learning enter the picture of American education in the early 20th century? How did the Federal Theatre use principles of the Progressive Movement, Pestaloozi's philosophy, or liberal arts education in creation and implementation of the Classical Unit?

Theatre in the Nation's Schools

By the first three decades of the 20th century, schools started to capitalize on the benefits of theatre instruction in and outside of the classroom to benefit students in public schooling. However, prior to the turn of the century, the legibility and applicability of theatre as an art form with potential to be an “educative force” was being weighed by institutions of higher education and public K-12 schools.¹²⁰ How did these various public schools balance the utility of theatre as an art form and grade school content area? Most important to this study: in what ways did theatre get utilized in the K-12 classroom prior to, and after, the tenure of the Federal Theatre? In summarizing the development of theatre's use in United States classrooms in this section, I'll set theatre's appearance in educational settings prior to 1935 as a control group, in order to track how the Federal Theatre's impact bookended a pre-World War II (WWII) applicability for theatre in the classroom, to ask how the Federal Theatre—and the Classical Unit in particular—created the blueprint for theatre's post-war resurgence, and transformation, in U.S. classrooms.

The first appearances of theatre as a part of educational regimens in the United States has been linked to an October 10th, 1698 diary entry by Harvard University President Increase Mather; Mather wrote of how that day, he “examined the Scholars about the comedy, etc.”

¹²⁰ Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade—or grade school public education—as it is acronymized in contemporary conversations and federal publications on U.S. education.

intimating that the structures of classical comedy or drama were likely a part of Harvard's educational programming even in the 17th century. This moment pre-dates the 1752 founding of the seminal touring circuits of The Hallam Company through the original colonies. Other higher educational settings included theatre prior to The Hallam Company and theatres frequently considered the nation's first, including William and Mary's famous "pastoral colloquy" of 1702, and a performance at their Virginia institution in 1736 by "the young Gentlemen of the Colledge" of Joseph Addison's "the tragedy of Cato."¹²¹ By the 18th century, faculty records at Harvard detailed rigid control over performances; John L. Clark writes that the faculty did, however, have to provide "evidence to show that the play" was—as listed in the faculty records—an "academical exercise" [sic] in order to prove the art form had some currency in the educational setting. Meanwhile, in non-Puritan Virginia, William and Mary could afford to more openly encourage the use of drama as an educational device without an intense burden of proof, even to the point of adapting student recreation to that end. The statutes of the college, adapted in 1738, include theatre as a component of student recreation and leisure.¹²²

It was from these antecedents in higher education that theatre was transitioned into the public education setting. In 1882, Professor Brainerd Kellog of Middlebury College in Vermont (and later in higher education settings in Brooklyn, New York) published a "Plan of Study" for "Perfect Possession" in his edition of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.¹²³ Kellog's system involved a process where educators would walk students through three separate readings of Shakespeare's playtext: the first for "pleasure;" the second to track character and plot developments; the third to distill meanings and grammar from the text. This system was grafted on primary and secondary

¹²¹ John L. Clark, "Educational Dramatic in Nineteenth-Century Colleges," in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. by Karl R. Wallace (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. 1954), 521-523.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Joseph Mersand, *Teaching the Drama in Secondary Schools* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1969) 7.

education settings. Various sourcebooks for years at the start of the 20th century echo Kellog's plan, most prominently in the teaching manual proposed in 1902 by Percival Chubb published as *The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary School*. Chubb's text similarly outlines a course in literature, and how Shakespeare should be taught. This book was then "used by thousands of high school English teachers as the methodological bible for over thirty years," or right up to the timeline of the Federal Theatre. In regards to reading plays in the classroom—exemplified by a study of teaching Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*—the book instructs:

*"Let the teacher read it through, with a minimum of comment, to the class; and it will pay to have spared no pains to become proficient in the task... the first reading of Julius Caesar by the teacher should have left upon his students a deep and lasting impression of the play in its totality, with the parts in true perspective, of its essentially dramatic and rhythmic features."*¹²⁴

Akin to Kellog's system, Chubb then asked secondary school instructors to move on to a second reading focused on character and plot study; this would be followed by various instructional exercises geared towards memorization, presentation of scenes by students, analysis of meter, historiography of Shakespeare.¹²⁵ These models were ongoingly sharpened through the era, by educators like Thomas C. Blaisdell who published a 1930 manual on *Ways to Teach English* and Lucia B. Mirrielees offered a similar manual as Blaisdell in 1937 called *Teaching Composition and Literature in Junior and Senior High School*. Blaisdell and Mirrielees saw dramatization in the English classroom as a core focus of literacy development. They added concepts to the teaching of drama such as rehearsing like visualization, which Blaisdell called "helping students to See and Hear," a tool recognized later in the 20th century as fundamental to reading and

¹²⁴ Ibid, 7-9.

¹²⁵ Other educational theorists and teaching manuals argue for a process similar to the one proposed by Chubb and Kellog. For instance, Gilbert Sykes Blakely continued argumentation for a means of instruction that was teacher-centered when publishing *Teachers Outlines for Studies in English* in 1908, stating that "one teacher lays great stress on reading the play with little or no comment." Ibid, 12.

literacy development.¹²⁶ This shift towards dramatization is further documented by the instructional tools created by Dorothy Dakin in *Talks to Beginning Teachers of English*. Dakin argued for teachers to introduce a play with dramatization. In the teaching of *Macbeth*, she offered this suggestion:

“a few days before you plan to begin the reading of Macbeth... call aside three girls with dramatic ability, and with your help, let them plan to present before the class the witches scene in which Shakespeare strikes the keynote of the play.”¹²⁷

For Dakin, oral reading by the teacher, memorization, and other character studies were still meaningful, but the introduction of a dramatization—and the act of theatre making in the classroom—took shape as of significance for learning, as well.

It is significant to note three throughlines of these early approaches to the instruction of drama, which spanned in the secondary classroom from the late 19th century to the early 20th. Firstly: that the instructional focus—or student outcomes for the learning process—was placed on students listening to the dramatic text, as well as analyzing the play as a literary work. This is aligned with earlier discussed movements in educational theory that had not yet shifted the focus of instruction from teacher to learner-centered processes of teaching and learning. Secondly: that the responsibility of transitioning the playtext from page to classroom stage was a responsibility of the educator alone. For Kellog and Chubb, the teacher needed to be a proficient reader of Shakespeare—and to do so in such a way that inherently left students with a “deep and lasting” impression of the play. This responsibility was further argued for in 1903 by Franklin T. Baker, founder of the Department of the Teaching of English at Teachers College of Columbia University. Baker was an organizer of one of the first comprehensive courses on the teaching of

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

English in an American college and wrote a chapter on Literature in Secondary Schools for Chubb's *The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary Schools*. Baker argued, "a drama is more difficult to read than a story. Action, description, and motive are usually given directly in narrative writing; in the drama they are given indirectly or left to the reader's inference;" the task difficult, for Baker and other early utilizers of drama in the classroom, necessitates that the teacher themselves were the expert not just on the literary, but the performatic, aspects of the play. The unique situation of funding in schools, as well as the early structure of public education that lasted into the early 20th century, necessitated the English teacher as sole authority on reading and performance of Shakespeare's texts. We see the early signs of the Federal Theatre's intervention here—in the hitherto unseen ability that the FTP offered to use federal funding to bring professional actors into the classroom, rather than having the teacher emulate professional performance, or train themselves to be a conditional expert on theatre and performance. Thirdly: that the source texts of most focus for instruction were Shakespeare texts in the English classroom. In addition to the use of theatre as a means of teaching speech and elocution—further detailed in Chapter 4 on the Seattle Federal Theatre Project and WPA activities—theatre was seen as the obvious way of teaching Shakespeare, and other Renaissance Drama. This status quo for the classroom also explains the Federal Theatre's insistence in the first year of The Classical Unit's programming—in addition to the already mounted production of *Coriolanus* on hand, already mounted by another unit of the FTP—for working with Shakespeare texts. Curiously, but not surprisingly, the first major alterations in a Shakespeare-specific course of study were made when interest in modern drama grew with the advent of historical Realism in the early 20th century; one act plays started to be used in this time period as well. By 1915, educator Emma Miller Bolenius published recommendations to use

Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* for the classroom—the same text that the Federal Theatre would market as a cornerstone of the second year of the Classical Unit's programming.

Participation in Drama

Around the American 1920s, theatre in public schools started to become meaningful outside of the English classroom. Educator William Wirt of Gary, Indiana explains that in his schools “students were assigned to an auditorium each day for a certain period of time” as a period of supervision in speech training by drama teachers; Charles Duke writes that with this auditorium assemblies, drama teachers, “soon found that dramatics was one of the easiest and most effective ways to involve the majority of children and at the same time meet the educational objectives of the curriculum.”¹²⁸ While this exiting of the English classroom still kept a focus on literary and speech instruction, the modality of full assembly (rather than classroom) instruction was being utilized and recognized as meaningful for student learning. This was paired by more use of theatre outside of English instruction, such as in 1927 when Charles Swain Thomas of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard revised *The Teaching of English in the Secondary School* to include exercises like building mechanical models of Elizabethan stages.¹²⁹

During this same early 20th century epoch, theatre's appearance in the classroom was primarily operated through dramatization by the instructor. However, due to the strictures on theatre's importance as a part of instruction, the other surfacing of theatre in schools was as an extracurricular supplement to performance. Much like Harvard in the 18th Century as an institution of higher education, and even in the present fabric of 21st century American schools,

¹²⁸ Duke, *Creative Dramatics and English Teaching*, 23

¹²⁹ Paul Kozelka, “Dramatics in the High Schools, 1900-1925,” in *History of Speech Education in America*, ed. by Karl R. Wallace (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. 1954), 607.

the production of plays by students was popular between 1910-1920. Pageants, festivals, and other means of student participatory drama were common. In these situations, students had rare affordances of working with actual trained theatre professionals. Paul Kozelka, a historian of dramatics in the high school classroom, writes: “in the early years of the twentieth century the production of plays was an entirely extracurricular activity directed either by a volunteer English teacher untrained in theatre work or by a professional coach hired from outside the teaching staff.”¹³⁰ These situations, much like early historical antecedents, would be connected either to the English classroom or a need for public-facing performances by the school. However, a cultural change in the theatre classroom started to occur due to the rise of “creative dramatics” in and outside of schools. Creative drama proposed the significance that drama had not only for audience, and not only for the learning of *other* content areas like English literature, but the cathartic, maturation-based, and self-reflective properties of drama itself. The importance of children and teens engaging in work of creative dramatics has been extensively documented, and the early 20th century bolstering of the field indebted to practitioners like Winifred Ward and Viola Spolin, who nearly single handedly created the subfield of theatre with children’s learning, sociocultural development, and intrapersonal growth in mind. While Ward’s practice would launch from the halls of Northwestern University and develop to impact colleges teaching educational theatre and creative dramatics between 1934-1954, Spolin’s impact was felt sooner, and more directly by the Federal Theatre.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Ibid, 602-607.

¹³¹ Robert Baird Shuman, Introduction to *Educational Drama for Today’s Schools*, ed. by R. Baird Shuman, (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1978), ix.

Starting in 1923, Viola Spolin studied at the Recreational Training School at Hull House in Chicago, Illinois run by Neva Boyd.¹³² Though the school would later be moved to Northwestern University—connecting the lineages of Spolin and Ward—it was Boyd (who would later become a Professor of Sociology at Northwestern) that started a deeper questioning of the significance for theatre beyond literary training. Boyd wrote: “play involves social values, as does no other behavior. The spirit of play develops social adaptability, ethics, mental and emotional control, and imagination.”¹³³ Spolin took the philosophy of this training and incorporated it into what would become a several decades long career, spanning from Chicago to Los Angeles and impacting theatre training and scholastic theatre interventions across the country. Boyd’s beliefs in drama and play as educational aim as not only of literary value, but in the teaching of social values, morality, collaboration, and affective regulation would continue in Spolin’s work—the latter once writing, “the effects of (Boyd’s) inspiration never left me for a single day.” In 1939, Spolin became a drama supervisor for the WPA Recreational Project in Chicago after being recommended for the position by Neva Boyd. At the end of the WPA’s tenure and through 1941, Spolin worked with children across the Midwest, locating ways that theatre could impact children in vulnerable settings, such as in service of immigrants in low-income neighborhoods. Archivists of Spolin’s legacy write through her estate that, “(Spolin) felt the need to establish a form of theater training that incorporated what she’d learned about the benefits of play from Neva Boyd, one that could reach across divisions of culture and

¹³² The significance of Hull House as a site of theatre making is well documented, most extensively by Shannon Jackson in her seminal *Lines of Activity*. Hull House, at the urging of Jane Addams who saw theatre as an important tool for the development of community, would stage Greek classics and other works of drama, alongside the instruction of Boyd, Spolin, and others Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

¹³³ Aretha Sills and Carol Sills, *Viola Spolin: Official Website*, Biography. Access date: July 23, 2024.

language.”¹³⁴ With Spolin working with the FTP—and prior to her direct involvement with the project as a theatre maker and inspirational force for drama practitioners in Chicago—these ideals of teaching citizenship through the stage spilled into the programming of the FTP that was very much aligned with the notion of an efficacious American theatre for youth.

Spolin wasn’t alone in helping a new philosophical regime for the utilization of drama in the classroom bolster around the country. Joseph Mersad, in a study of the histories of using drama in the secondary classroom, writes of educator Helen Louise Cohen who created resources for teaching classic and modern plays in the secondary classroom through the 1910s-1930s. For Cohen, it was pivotal to give secondary school students access to plays—in the form of several published anthologies—to augment the teaching of dramatic literature in American high schools. Mersad explains how Cohen’s goals began to look more and more like the Federal Theatre’s secondary education goals, explaining how Cohen’s books were, “planned to encourage an understanding attitude towards the theatre, to deepen the love that is latent in the majority of us for what is beautiful and uplifting in the drama, and to make playgoing less expensive, more regular, and more intelligent diversion for the generation that is growing up.”¹³⁵ Cohen saw the importance of building appreciation and recognition of drama in secondary school with an awareness that most students in this era of public schooling would end their educational careers at the end of high school. She accordingly argued the pupils should study drama because it offered “the young worker” “diversion, solace, and inspiration;” in the teaching of American

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Cohen served as the Chair of the English Department at Washington Irving High School in New York. Joseph Mersad, *Teaching the Drama in Secondary Schools* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1969) 43-44.

plays in particular, Cohen felt that American Drama “might inspire a patriotism in students that would contribute to ‘the welfare of the native drama,’ and also spur creativity.”¹³⁶

These shifts by Cohen and Spolin away from a pure literary theatre to one that was built on participation in drama, in appreciation of playgoing, and in a broader civilization project for America youth, set the stage for the priorities and intentions of the Federal Theatre by 1935. Factoring in the concept of patriotism in the teaching of drama is a major alteration to earlier uses of drama in the classroom; but, how would these ideals be taught? Even with the burgeoning philosophies of Spolin, Boyd, Cohen, and others being exposed to secondary school students—the implementation of a citizen-making driven drama for youth was without a blueprint for instruction; models were needed for *how* rather than *what* could be taught to America’s youth.

The Classical Unit

Origins: Drama and the Teaching of Citizenship

In 1915 Mr. W. F. Slocum, Principal of the Carl Schurz High School was asked about the significance of drama programs offered at his school, and at other secondary institutions around the country. Slocum explained that drama provided “the very last finishing touch of the art-culture of a school.”¹³⁷ As an administrator, Slocum was asked to create a broader picture of

¹³⁶ Rachelle E. Friedman, *Helen Louise Cohen: March 17, 1882–July 18, 1957*, The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, Jewish Women’s Archive. This historicization of student demonstrations of learning, or participation in drama, may flatten a much more contested (and vibrant) argumentation for learning methodologies that did happen through the late 19th and early 20th century. For instance, Francis Wayland Parker (and anti-textbook, engaged pedagogy activist at the end of the 20th century, wrote how “all education is by self-activity, and, at that same time it may be said that self-activity is an evidence of human growth beyond the threshold of the educative stage.” With that in mind, Parker’s arguments for teaching most broadly didn’t directly bring about changes in the curriculum of theatre instruction—despite setting the groundwork for classroom engagement goals and student’s attachment to the learning process (Wayland quoted in Duke, *Creative Dramatics and English Teaching*, 22).

¹³⁷ Paul Kozelka, “Dramatics in the High Schools, 1900-1925,” 602.

how “how dramatics contributed towards citizenship” for students at Carl Schurz High; with austerity and certainty, Slocum replied: “not at all... such work is trifling, non-productive, appeals to cheap egotism of a few pupils... Elocutors are trying to create jobs for themselves by boosting for Dramatic Training.” For Slocum and other education leaders in the early 20th century, drama contributed to the learning of English and Speech (thus the terming of performers of drama as “Elocutors”); it created potential job pathways through public speaking training; but as a mean of teaching and learning citizenship—drama was seen as bankrupt of utilitarian value. With education theorists and drama practitioners creating the apt moment for drama’s burgeoning value in the classroom despite the lack of recognition by many administrators and educators, how did the Federal Theatre’s add praxis to philosophy for the educational value of drama in teaching citizenship, constituting a major intervention in the efficacy of drama in the United States public school classroom?

Starting in New York City, the Federal Theatre Project began to mount full productions of works from the classical theatrical canon as a part of what project administrators would name the Classical Unit (or, the Classical Program). The Classical Unit portended three major goals—explicitly and implicitly in their interdepartmental communications, and later in marketing and booking material for the public—for the utility of the Classical Program in service of public high school students in the United States. The plays were intended “to stimulate student interest in the theatre” offering an avenue for theatrical spectatorship and interest that paralleled other goals echoed by Flanagan and other FTP administrators in the hopes that the Federal Theatre would both collect and cultivate (educate, provoke continued engagement) a theatrical public.¹³⁸ With the aforementioned histories of drama in the English classroom, FTP

¹³⁸ Classical Unit documentation, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

administrators recognized that rather than operating separate from scholastic coursework, or the intentions of school based programs in theatre and literature, the Classical Unit should have a scope of intention “to provide a program which may serve as a valuable supplement to the curriculum in literature, drama, and history.”¹³⁹ This particular emphasis on the plays, playwrights, and historical epoch already in the students’ course of study demonstrates a correlational—and, in essence, coalitional—effort to have federally subsidized programming in the form of the Federal Theatre Project and public schooling in alignment over the curricular values, works, and historical information relayed and concretized in the learning regimen of students. FTP administrators explain that connection to school programming would be “worked out with the advice, cooperation and approval of the high school division of the Board of Education” and that focus would be given on “distinguished plays of the past.”¹⁴⁰

In this way, the Federal Theatre created a program that could be generative for secondary school students—one aligned with various Board of Educations’ goals for curriculum and plan of study—but also a program that added a new shift in public schooling: the appearance of professional actors in the classroom. While walking of the nimble line between professional theatre and federally-funded relief body is often discussed in histories of the Federal Theatre as one of the complexities of the project, and as a feature that deterred certain avenues of FTP creation, it is of use to think of the Federal Theatre’s ambiguity of professionalism to be a benefit in this particular setting. For secondary schools, bringing in professional actors from the Broadway or Off-Broadway stage in New York or through Actor’s Equity agreements around the country, was a financial impossibility. However, when the funding to bring actors into the

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

classroom was generated from a federally-subsidized source—and when the body bringing in actors was itself a part of the federal government—a different kind of cooperation agreement between school and actor was suddenly tenable. The only challenge remaining alongside the (almost-always difficult, in the history of the FTP) logistic challenges of organizing and mobilizing the program in U.S. schools was ensuring that students would be engaged, interested, and enthused by the new intervention in their secondary English classrooms.

The Federal Theatre vs. The Hollywood Film Industry

Across the Works Progress Administration, enthusiasm for the Classical Unit—and desires to shore up excitement for the new Classical Unit—were recognizable, and framed as of primacy among the project’s core public-facing outreach efforts. The title of a WPA pamphlet for the Classical Unit proudly announced that, “Classics Can be Interesting!” a curious piece of documentation that clarifies the current public ethos, and youth sentiment, around Classics instruction.¹⁴¹ With the histories of drama in the classroom in mind, it’s no surprise that the American public needed convincing that learning about classical drama—a content area currently taught primarily through educator-led recitation of Renaissance works—was something worth harnessing new enthusiasm for.¹⁴² Early Federal Theatre documents like the promotional pamphlet for the new Classical Unit bring into focus an additional discrepancy that was an ongoing concern for the FTP’s productions in and outside of the Classical Unit: the preeminence

¹⁴¹ WPA Pamphlet, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY). Underlining of “Can” and lowercase “be” both retained from original article title.

¹⁴² The use “Classics” and “classical drama” here is operating in continuation of the original WPA and FTP terminology. While some scholars use “classical” in reference to works of antiquity, classical vs. contemporary drama through the 20th and early 21st centuries is often used to demarcate a division between all pre-19th century theatre (including Western antiquity, Medieval drama, Renaissance Drama, etc.) and late-19th, 20th, and 21st century drama—with canonical playwrights like George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen frequently being the turn-of-the-century dividing line for “contemporary” or “modern” drama.

of the Hollywood film industry. The WPAs pamphlet directly—and other documents and letters across the Federal Theatre internally, though often more subtly—recalls how the film industry created a hurdle of sorts for the popularity of the Federal Theatre. The concern was not necessarily one related to a fear of competition for the FTP’s productions, but rather a more seismic rewriting of the architecture of expectations of theatre audiences that was needed at the end of the 1930s. As Hollywood film began to boom in the first decades of the early 20th century, it brought with it changes to the artscape and viewing desires of the American public. War eras preceding and following the Federal Theatre’s tenure upheld values for art making aligned with the seeming-necessities of escapism and extravagance. The film form was not only popular, but immensely legible as a means of detachment from social life; movies and television, in their inexpensive dolling out of optical opulence and the creation of worlds very different from the early 20th century’s ongoing sociopolitical tension and hardship. Film as a modality was accordingly poised for mass appeal against the nature of theatre—which begs audience’s presentest focus, and desire to grapple with the hurdles of social life rather than stepping away from them. WPA officials explained their belief that “young people would get as much excitement out of the study of Shakespeare and other classic authors as they do out of the movies if they had more opportunity to see his plays in the medium for which they were written, with all the glamour of living actors, scenery, and costumes.”¹⁴³ This marketing value was then passed on to the Federal Theatre Project’s booking department in order to build relationships with local public high schools, school boards, and teachers in order to gain access to schools where the Federal Theatre productions might perform. “It is sincerely believed by the Federal Theatre officials” explained one booking coordinator from the FTP’s letter to schools, “that ‘to

¹⁴³ Classical Unit documentation, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

see is to believe,” a tag line that underwrites not only the internal endorsement of quality for the Classical Unit productions—but the generativity for student audience members believed by the Federal Theatre.¹⁴⁴

The idea of “to see is to believe” is one that places the intentions of the Classical Unit into a larger philosophical framework of other arguments for theatre over (or perhaps alongside of, in holding a belief that theatre doesn’t lose efficacy or value in a post-film society) the film industry. The seminal work of theatre scholar Peggy Phelan refers to the power of performance to “(implicate) the real through the presence of living bodies.”¹⁴⁵ Phelan’s argument—problematized and utilized by countless Theatre and Performance Studies researchers—is that the corporality of theatre gives the art form its inherent ability to foster intimacy and real-world efficacy for audiences. The FTP’s intention of pairing the living actor with the learner in a classroom space builds a fundamental alteration, too, to the logics of instruction during the era. Earlier in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, I recall Eric Bentley’s significant “minimal definition” for theatre (“A impersonates B while C looks on”).¹⁴⁶ In the era prior to the FTP, the common instructional tendency to have the classroom teacher as the core orator and “player” of the dramatic text would have been drastically changed by the Classical Unit’s presentations for secondary school students. We can imagine that the in FTP model, and subsequent outreach projects where professional actors are brought into the classroom, that a

¹⁴⁴ Ernest Forrest, Booking Department, FTP, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY). The extant attribution of a specific “Booking Department” for the FTP is a curious finding in the archives of the Federal Theatre. This simple term indicates that the Classical Unit—or the larger FTP projects in each city—had booking agents and employees focused on not mounting the productions, but selling/offering them to local schools. My italics.

¹⁴⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 148.

¹⁴⁶ Eric Bentley, *Life of the Drama* (1964), (New York: Applause, 1991), 150.

new stasis where “A impersonates B, filtered through the learning goals of D, while C looks on and learns” is created—with the classroom teacher moving from the role of actor to the role of producer, framing the learning goals of students but not holding the instructional challenge of performance by themselves. An alteration is further made in relationship to the primacy of the dramatic literary text compared to the dramatic performance text. For Phelan, the ephemerality of theatre is a core feature of its effectiveness and utility. She writes: “live performance plunges into visibility ... (and then) disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control,” explaining the here-now, gone-in-moments nature of performance texts.¹⁴⁷ In classrooms of the early 20th century without actors performing for students, the core close reading being done is a close reading of dramatic literary texts. In line with the focus on English Literature instruction, regardless of the qualities of a teacher’s performance, the instructional *text* (broadly speaking) never stops being Shakespeare’s (or whomever the given playwright of study is). The Federal Theatre’s arts outreach projects in classrooms accordingly offered an intervention bolstering the power of theatre by bringing the living actor to the students, and centering their learning content on the capabilities and affordances of the theatrical subject, rather than the dramatic literary one.

The classroom augmentation of theatre’s inherent value and differing tools compared to the Hollywood Film industry aligned with Hallie Flanagan’s broader FTP goals outside of the Classical Unit. In and outside of Federal Theatre operations, Flanagan fought for “a simplified stage” such as in her development of living newspapers and in determination of how to use FTP financial resources—where she argued for the use of money on labor rather than scenery and design properties. Flanagan argued:

¹⁴⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

“for practical purposes of touring we must have inexpensive and expressive scenery, but even more important than that, the elimination of realistic sets was necessary because plays now began to look, in their limited horizontality, like inferior movies. The Cinema had beaten realism at its own game; instead of showing only a few rooms or exteriors, it could flash kaleidoscopically in and out of the house with countless camera shots... the stage should not try to compete, but rather to develop the asset which the movie does not have: the living body of the actor, emphasized by light, seen from as many angles, massed with other bodies in as many formations as possible. Stage forms affording playing space and emphasizing theme should stress the fact that a stage is a stage and not a flat-surface movie. Like architecture, the stage should emphasize its own special materials—three-dimensional movement of three-dimensional bodies; voice, individual and choric; light and its effect on both movement and sound; and an audience with which a connection can and must be made.”¹⁴⁸

Flanagan explains here that the Federal Theatre’s focus on augmenting inherent and unique qualities of theatre (ephemerality, liveness, coalition of design and performance faculties) would be the thing that separated—and enlivened—FTP productions beyond their film competitors. In *Arena*, Flanagan extended this logic to the financial burden of going to plays, and articulates the importance of an accessible theatre industry, with an import of youth engagement as a particular focus. In discussing the reduction in youth interest in theatre during the early 20th century, Flanagan writes, “due to the depression, a great many other people who had previously regarded theatre as recreation and education were forced to give it up. Youth saw no need to pay \$2.20 or \$1.10, when for 25¢ they could buy an evening’s entertainment.”¹⁴⁹ The values of a theatre-specific, accessible performance process became not only a feature of FTP productions—from living newspapers to productions that would be mounted as commercial theatre to caravan park productions that would entertain thousands—but of the educational theatre productions that the Classical Unit would create. Much like the Children’s Unit, which

¹⁴⁸ Flanagan, *Arena*, 321.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

hoped to create a citizenry amongst American youth who would have experiences viewing live theatre productions, the Classical Unit was building viewership of theatre arts (rather than solely a series of experiences during classroom audition) into the pedagogical process of learning about drama in American public schools.

***Coriolanus* in High School Classrooms**

Choosing Coriolanus: Historical & FTP Antecedents

In a history that soon approaches its centennial—the Federal Theatre project being formally founded in August 1935, and the writing of *Grieving the Federal Theatre* nearly ninety years later in the early 2020s—some clarity is needed over timing of implementation of the FTP’s productions. With the Congressional termination of the Federal Theatre leading to the project’s stoppage on June 30th, 1939, it is worth reframing the FTP timeline (for the purposes of this chapter alone) in academic years. The Federal Theatre was in existence for four complete scholastic years. The first year (1935-1936) was the year of early foundations for the project and professional networking to name regional directors, source relief actors and designers, and establish projects outside of New York City. Through the early successes of the project by the end of 1936, the project would have been entering its second academic year during the 1936-1937 scholastic program. Despite the appearance of Federal Theatre productions in United States school classrooms during the second academic year, it wasn’t until the third academic year in the existence of the FTP that a formal “Classical Unit” was created and operated with pragmatic intentionality, or the hopes of a longer spanning unit of the Federal Theatre (rather than individual cooperative agreements and partnerships between various FTP entities and local schools). Why, then, was the 1937-1938 academic year the start of the Classical Unit, and how

does the spring of 1938 introduce archival documents announcing the Classical Unit as a fully functioning entity of the FTP to teachers, administrators, and parents?

The most obvious plausibility is that the Federal Theatre had an already-mounted, critically-approved production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* ready to take on scholastic tours. The production was originally held in Roslyn, Long Island as a part of the Federal Theatre's offerings to the suburbs outside of New York City in November 1937. In choosing *Coriolanus*, the rationale for inclusion in a high school program was likely not an initial impulse—with texts like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest* garnering more early 20th century readings in the classroom. In fact, a later recap of the first year of the Classical Unit details that working with *Coriolanus*—rather than a more curricularly-tied text and production—created difficulties in marketing the play to area high schools. However, for commercial audiences in Long Island, just far enough from the city to withhold the stronger traffic of actors and artists in New York's vibrant theatre scene, the Roslyn production satisfied public taste and popular appeal. Further, the production was one of only two stagings of *Coriolanus* in the area stretching through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One reviewer would later write in 1948 on a Fordham University in New York production that Shakespeare's play "has been produced in New York only twice in sixty-odd years. There was a production in 1885, with either McCready [sic] or Forest [sic] in the title role, and another production fifty years later by the WPA or Federal Theatre."¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Theophilus Lewis, "Theatre: CORIOLANUS" in *American Magazine: The Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture*, vol. 79, no. 20 (1948), 455-456. Lewis makes both an error in the spelling of British Shakespearean actor William Macready and American actor Edwin Forrest's names. It seems likely that these errors were intentional, as neither actor would have been alive to perform in *Coriolanus* in 1885. The late 19th century NYC production was indeed performed by a famed actor in the title role, but neither Forrest nor Macready—rather, Henry Irving. This remark is likely an attempt to comically date the 1885 *Coriolanus*, supposing that it was performed by one of the two 19th century actors famously thought to have sparked the Astor Place Riots through their feud over who could perform Shakespeare better.

Reviews of the Charles Hopkins' directed Roslyn *Coriolanus* were mixed, but the production would eventually make its way to Broadway for a short run in repertory in January and February of 1938. Clayton Hamilton, in the *New York Herald Tribune* on January 30th, 1938 would write that he had waited his whole life to see one of the greatest of Shakespeare's plays, and reflected after seeing the FTP production that he had heard lead actor Christopher Morely give "a barbaric yawp... to warn the slumberers of Manhattan that *Coriolanus* was to be seen in Roslyn, Long Island, in a production that Shakespeare himself would certainly have liked."¹⁵¹ Hallie Flanagan later wrote that "perhaps this advance enthusiasm had a ceiling effect on the reception in New York," as New York critics would rail that the production, once transferred to the big city, had clearly been reviewed by "second-string critics" from a production full of "Long Island troubadours... from another land."¹⁵² Referring to the nearby suburb of Long Island as "another land" continues the implications against Federal Theatre works outside of New York, and the era's insistence on the primacy of New York theatre making. Ultimately, other more objective reviewers would write: "Mr. Hopkins and his troupe are doing all right by the master, by themselves, and by the Federal Government." In her retelling of these reviewers, Flanagan's tone seems to question the basis of criticality—a common trope in her defense of the Federal Theatre against underdeveloped criticism of FTP productions. She countered on one reviewer, which she paraphrases as having argued: "Perhaps not the best production of this play (*Coriolanus*) that has ever been given, yet certainly not the worst" by rhetorically posing, "did the reviewer know that there had been no other, good, bad, or indifferent, in this country for half a century, and since the production of Henry Irving?"¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Hamilton quoted in Flanagan, *Arena*, 244-245.

¹⁵² Ibid. See Appendix B for archival photographs of the *Coriolanus* production.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Good, bad, or in-between—or perhaps “good for Long Island, bad for New York”—the finished production of *Coriolanus* created an easy pathway to concretize the Federal Theatre’s school outreach projects in the new Classical Unit. In a foundational way, the production can be seen as a moment where audiences were further convinced of the efficacy of the Federal Theatre’s theatre making. In Hamilton’s review, he admits, “quite frankly I scarcely knew what to expect of a W.P.A. production; but any doubts I may have had were soon dispelled and I experienced a veritably thrilling evening.”¹⁵⁴ As with many other FTP productions that detailed a different kind of ‘seeing is believing,’ *Coriolanus* convinced audiences that the Federal Theatre was a sturdy making of plays, and created theatre worth watching.

I introduce this year-by-year outline of the start of the Classical Unit—and the pilot production of *Coriolanus*—because some histories of the FTP, and archival documents themselves, confuse the order of events that brought the production into public-facing existence. For instance, in one Library of Congress file, photos of the Rosalyn *Coriolanus* are marked with the year “193?” This confusion over the dates of the Roslyn production, and the *Coriolanus* tour for schools is likely cooperational; that is, since the production opened in the November 1937, then went to Broadway in January 1938, and then on tour in schools in the March 1938, there may be misalignment of some historical documents and accounts of the production. By clarifying this historical ambiguity, we can focus on the FTP *Coriolanus* as a production that was intended for audiences outside of New York, then found its way to both Broadway and scholastic audiences afterward—charting both the intentions and lifespan of Charles Hopkin’s production.

Shifting to a question of thematics rather than production, *Coriolanus* created unique opportunities for the social efficacy of theatre, and a potentially low stakes way to carry the meaning-making ability of theatre into public schools. Hallie Flanagan—while her hand in

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

selecting the play for FTP production is not readily documented—was well aware of the cultural utility of *Coriolanus* as a text. In writing on the power of theatre to move and arouse social publics, Flanagan reflects on how “Coriolanus caused riots in the streets of Paris in 1934.”¹⁵⁵ The international attention surrounding this Parisian production of *Coriolanus* at the Comédia Française was well-documented just prior to the formation of the Federal Theatre. A February 8th, 1934 article in the New York Times reported on the French uprisings with the title: “PARIS POSTPONES SHAKESPEARE PLAY; Attacks on Parliamentary Rule in 'Coriolanus' Held to Cause Too Much Excitement.”¹⁵⁶ The *Times* article and Comédia Française production—staged less than two years before the Federal Theatre’s formation—were stimulated by the play’s inherent commentary on monarchy and democratic power. The opening performance of *Coriolanus* in Paris, held months prior to the night of in-theatre uprising, was written to have “caused disapproval among the Left Deputies, who objected strenuously to a production in which irony and abuse were heaped upon parliamentary government,” in reference to France’s leftist political party, and ongoing political disputes between the French public and their parliamentary system. During the performance, an “amateur orator who arose in the balcony and declaimed against the government between the acts;” between these individual cries against the government and full audience applaud at political sentiments in the play, the following night’s performance was cancelled, and French respondents noted how, “a cry frequently heard on the streets yesterday and today has been ‘Vive Coriolan! Vive Coriolan!’”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 220.

¹⁵⁶ Wireless to the New York Times, “PARIS POSTPONES SHAKESPEARE PLAY; Attacks on Parliamentary Rule in 'Coriolanus' Held to Cause Too Much Excitement. FABRE RETAINS HIS POST Ousted as Director of Comedie Francaise in Stavisky Shifts, He Is Reinstalled,” *New York Times* (New York: New York, 1934), 2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, “Paris Postpones Shakespeare Play”

A separate review of the New York production produced by the Federal Theatre details a rather illuminating use of rhetoric to describe the adequacy of the FTP's version of *Coriolanus*. In the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson writes that the Federal Theatre's play was "not the best that ever has been given, yet certainly not the worst."¹⁵⁸ Atkinson plays close attention to the performance event, noting that the FTP company performing *Coriolanus* was made up of primarily young actors (likely ones talented enough to make it through the FTP audition process, yet did not have established enough careers in New York to avoid falling to relief rolls). Atkinson refers to Hopkins as a director, "who knows his Bard"—and evaluates a few acting performances, including insinuation that "a pettish student might complain that while Mr. Gage has the scorn of Coriolanus he does not quite live up to the power that also was Coriolanus."¹⁵⁹ The review's use of a figurative "pettish student" here is a serendipitous one; for soon after the review, the production would be taken from the figurative students of Atkinson's imagination, to real ones in New York public schools. The production—far from perfect—was certainly good enough to accomplish the Federal Theatre's goals of exposing public school students to Shakespeare and classical works; and so, *Coriolanus* moved its way from Long Island to the City, predicating a Broadway run with performances for youth of the big city.

The First Classical Unit Tour

Following its regional and Broadway runs, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as produced by the Federal Theatre was ready to be launched in New York area public schools. Federal Theatre Project administrators hoped that by touring a production of *Coriolanus* around to area schools,

¹⁵⁸ Brooks Atkinson, "THE PLAY IN REVIEW: Francis Edwards Faragoh's 'Sunup to Sundown' Opens -- Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus' Staged by the Federal Theatre of the Four Seasons Bard and the Masses. *New York Times*. New York: New York, no. 14 (1938).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

organizers could effectively “test the value and practicability of the Classical Program.”¹⁶⁰

Despite the positive reception of the Federal Theatre’s early networking, internal correspondence noted “certain difficulties” in trying to book *Coriolanus* with area high schools.¹⁶¹ FTP officials discovered that—like the governmental red tape navigated throughout the Federal Theatre’s creation process—schools, too, had to weave through scheduling difficulties and bloated district-mandated procedures, often planning performances events well over a year in advance of their presentation to students. The Federal Theatre, however, was attempting to book productions in March of 1938, with only a few months left in the academic year—and while sending out formal invitations for booking only one month in advance of opening the touring version of *Coriolanus*. Federal Theatre organizers also realized that the spring was not an apt time to enter schools—with extracurricular engagements prior to graduation clogging many high school student’s schedules.¹⁶² At this point in the 1930s, New York had seventy-two high schools across the five boroughs; however, only thirty-five high schools had the facilities to accommodate the Federal Theatre production.

The FTP decided that their most apt pathways to reach student audiences would be by appealing to their teachers and administrators. “Do you, as a teacher find that high school pupils rarely, if ever, think of Shakespeare and other classic writers as anything but a study assignment?” opens a marketing material entitled, “A Word to Teachers” sent out by the Federal

¹⁶⁰ An Analysis of the Classical Program, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Though not detailed in any evidence from the archive, it is worth noting that the Federal Theatre’s rush in trying to book *Coriolanus* during the busy months of spring in schools likely related to the existing Rosalyn and Broadway production of *Coriolanus* being prepared and ready for consumption. To wait until the following autumn would likely mean abandoning the production (*Coriolanus*) entirely, and starting with a new production for the emerging project (the Classical Unit), as actors and production team members from the production would have moved on.

Theatre.¹⁶³ After asking other rhetorical questions of educators (“Do you remember the first stage performance of Shakespeare’s works that you saw?” among others), the briefing to teachers explains the intention of the program, and heralds the offering of *Coriolanus*, announcing: “In its effort to take the classics from between the dull pages of text-books and make them a real part of the lives of New York’s high school students, the project has planned a series of classical plays, the first of which is Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*.”¹⁶⁴ School administrators and English department chairs responded with enthusiasm in hopes of having *Coriolanus* presented at their high schools.

Despite several hurdles to marketing and mounting the production in many schools, nine New York high schools were booked for the spring run of *Coriolanus*. Resoundingly, the internal reflection on the Classical program herald success for the program. As *Coriolanus* was frequently internally referred to as a “try out” for the Classical Unit, the spring 1938 successes for the production led to correspondence announcing (in preparatory materials for the following year’s seasons), that “the basis on which this program is formulated is sound.”¹⁶⁵ FTP officially recounted how (despite audiences’ unfamiliarity with *Coriolanus*, and the FTP’s lack of organized experience in bringing performances into school buildings) students turned out in droves to attend the production, with some production dates garnering as many as thirteen hundred audience members at a time.¹⁶⁶ Alfreda Sill, in the Promotion Department of the Federal Theatre’s wrote on the Classical Unit on May 31st, 1938, that, “the eagerness with which they

¹⁶³ “A Word to Teachers,” Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY). Lack of proper punctuation [sic] the original Federal Theatre documents.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ An Analysis of the Classical Program, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

¹⁶⁶ See Appendix B.

flocked to the performances indicated that there is a tremendous potential audience for a well planned High School program.”¹⁶⁷

Even prior to receiving praise for a complete season of classical plays, the success of *Coriolanus* in the spring of 1938 demonstrated a new direction for arts outreach programs, and theatre pedagogy. The Federal Theatre had succeeded in centering student experiences of live theatrical works, and (as replicated in their marketing materials) took the previous status quo of scholastic drama from being a passive experience of classical texts, to an active one. If witnessing a Federal Theatre production mean that “to see is to believe,” the first nine school site productions of *Coriolanus* helped not only students to see the utility and excitement of classical works, but it bolstered the Federal Theatre team’s sight on a goal of an ongoing Classical Unit—and codified belief that the high school classroom could be, and was now, one of the Federal Theatre Project’s stages.

Year Two of the Classical Unit

While the Federal Theatre had been successful in forming the Classical Unit during 1937-1938 school year, the project had only reached nine of seventy-two high schools, and hoped to expand to a program with more productions, and more audiences in the following academic year. How would the Federal Theatre—ultimately, still focused as a relief body of the WPA, known for staging theatre *outside* of public education—continue to convince schools to take on, and pay for, viewings of their shows? Would the positive reception of *Coriolanus* help to promote the possibilities of the Classical Unit for the following year? The Federal Theatre decided to both extend preparations for the next school year, and to refine their processes of both booking and production to prepare for a robust 1938-1939 academic year for the Classical Unit.

¹⁶⁷ “An Analysis of the Classical Program”

Rather remarkably, the Federal Theatre worked during their few short months of planning time in the spring of 1938 to elicit support and feedback from various stakeholders in education around New York City prior to selecting their final season. Worries in the FTP permeated launching another production—as they had with *Coriolanus*—that would have “debatable value” to the curriculum of area high schools.¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, archival materials from the FTP explain that plays for the second season of the Classical Unit were selected by chairman of the English departments at New York high schools through collaboration with the First Assistants Association. The First Assistants Association appointed a Mrs. William R. Stockwell of Washington Irving High School to be liaison to the Federal Theatre Project—and with her support, the FTP was able to have “worked out with the advice, cooperation and approval of the high school division of the Board of Education” a fitting season that could be coalitional in promoting student learning alongside the English departments at various New York City public high schools.¹⁶⁹

The first step in this preparation process was to determine how many, and which, plays would be produced as a part of the 1938-1939 Classical Unit season. A particularly illuminating archival finding, I was able to locate what appears to be an early list of potential plays—as well as handwritten numbers accompanying the options of plays.¹⁷⁰ The May 31st, 1938 document—when read in tandem with an accompanying document from the Federal Theatre Project clippings at the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library—reveals

¹⁶⁸ This quote taken from internal documents at the FTP which explained that while *Coriolanus* launched the Classical Unit effectively, more focus needed to be put on curricular overlap, and marketing productions that would be synergistic with public school curricula. Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ See Appendix B

that the numbers are vote counts from the First Assistants Association dinner on May 20th, 1938, where members of the association were allowed to voice on their preferences of Federal Theatre play offerings for the next Classical Unit season. The potential year two programming options included a wide and diverse offering of classical theatre: from Renaissance Drama, to French neoclassicism, Restoration comedy, and beyond. The at-least-twenty member group voted on this curated list of plays as presented by the FTP. The options of productions included five different Shakespeare productions for potential production as a part of the Classical Unit in year two of the program's operation (*Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry VIII*, and *Henry VI*).¹⁷¹ Canonical options such as Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew's Fair*, Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, and Moliere's *Tartuffe*, received few votes—while Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* were highly preferred. The committee also included several modern plays (including John Galsworthy's *Justice* and Sidney Howard's *Yellow Jack*), should the FTP decide to include modern plays, with the contemporary authors consent, in the new Classical Unit season. The committee attempted to tool the Promotions Department to book with school sites prior to their June 24th, 1938 deadline (which was the the last day of school that year in NYC); and so, four plays were chosen for production in the 1938-1939 season: William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Henrick Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Sidney Howard's *Yellow Jack*, and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*.¹⁷²

The new season of the Classical Unit was also better outlined for schools in terms of pragmatics and organization (unlike the hasty launch of *Coriolanus*). The Federal Theatre would

¹⁷¹ The *Henry IV* option was to include only parts of one and two, and only the Falstaff scenes.

¹⁷² Despite the voting, rationale for inclusion (which is explained at greater length in archival materials), and forwarding of *Yellow Jack* for inclusion, no accounts of the 1938-1939 season mention the play—and instead a few mention Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. This leads me to believe that the Howards play was cut later into the FTP planning process—either due to royalty fees, rights of the author, or internal disagreement—and the *Twelfth Night* took its place in the four play season proposed by the Classical Unit.

present four plays, for consecutive engagements of about six weeks, with admission costs of 10¢ per audience member. The first \$25 grossed would go to the Federal Theatre, the next \$20 would go to the school site; the two entities would split any receipts above this mark. With this new financial model to market, a new season selected, organization and permission offered by school and district leaders, and student audience members awakened by the spring's pilot production, the Federal Theatre sent out booking materials introducing the second year of the unit, proclaiming:

“The Classical Program for High Schools has been established to present professional productions of distinguished plays of the past, with particular emphasis on those included in the course of study; to stimulate student interest in the theatre and to provide a program which may serve as a valuable supplement to the curriculum in literature, drama, and history. Plays in preparation include Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.”¹⁷³

With arrangements all made, the Federal Theatre's Classical Unit actors, directors, and administrators prepared to do what the FTP always held intention for: to get back to work.

Reception of Classical Unit Productions

By the conclusion of the 1938-1939 school year, the Classical Program was seen by 68,175 students in 84 performances in the New York City area alone.¹⁷⁴ Classical Units were being created as features of Federal Theatre Project programming around the nation.

Administrators and teachers around the New York City area described the positive experiences their students had—as well as the aftermath of the Federal Theatre's production on their student's

¹⁷³ Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

¹⁷⁴ Promotion Department materials, Classical Unit, Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

beliefs about theatre and popular performance. Federal Theatre archival records in New York, Washington, D.C., and Seattle all include pages upon pages of thank you letters from Department of English chairs and high school Principals who praise the work of the Classical Unit, and report back the enthusiasm of students, educators, and community members in making classical texts and drama as a form more comprehensible to the students.

Trying to summarize the archive's rich and extensive praise for the Federal Theatre's Classical Unit in the New York area along across 1937-1939 would comprise an entire chapter of its own; however, celebration of the Classical Unit can be siphoned through some representative examples, with each major indicator of success being replicated in a long line of other letters and teacher/administrator affirmations. "A large number of our pupils—devotees of the movie—never see a play [sic], and we are particularly happy that the production this year have shown them the possibilities of delightful entertainment in the theatre," explained Julia V. O'Leary from Manual Training High School in New York in a letter to Albert Vees, Producer of the Classical Program.¹⁷⁵ In February of 1939, O'Leary's students saw productions of both *Macbeth* and *She Stoops to Conquer* by the FTP. These comments echo the aforementioned centrality of American arts culture—and youth arts culture—on the Hollywood movie as a form and experience; the FTP was helping to break boundaries of what students saw as meaningful performance experiences. A Miss O'Hara—chairman of the English Department, New Dorp High School, Staten Island—ratified this claim, but focused on initial theatre experiences, rather than the project's divergence from film popularity. In a letter sent to Mercer Templeton by (Mr.) William Barlow, Principal of the New Dorp High, O'Hara would elaborate, "it is difficult for adults to realize that almost one hundred percent of the students now in High School have never

¹⁷⁵ Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

seen a play. Their introduction to the theatre is through the WPA performances.”¹⁷⁶ These testimonies—more powerful than many secondhand accounts of the efficacy of the Federal Theatre—argue for the success of Federal Theatre objectives in creating not only the Classical Unit, but in the FTP programming most broadly. In creating a (youth) theatrical public, the Classical Unit was enacting Halie Flanagan’s goals of creating a society of American theatre goers—and providing the fundamental, financially-accessible means towards that theatre going.

Another way that the Classical Unit culminated the Federal Theatre Project’s core objectives related to how socioeconomic status, and arts access, were being tended to by the unit. Not only did the Classical Unit give students of all socioeconomic divisions, and lived experiences of poverty and financial need, a chance to see live theatre—it actually helped to create pathways for school-site fundraising. In one note of praise, a school teacher reflected, “many of our pupils could not afford ever to see a real play if it were not for the work of the Theatre Theater[sic], and the choice of plays and the skill of the actors are both admirable.”¹⁷⁷ Much like the public performances of the FTP which afforded low cost or no cost tickets to all, school site sponsorship meant that students themselves (and, thereby, audiences themselves) wouldn’t have to pay a cent to see live, professional theatre. In a separate letter to the Federal Theatre Project administrators on March 20th, 1939, Jeanette S. Taylor (Chair of the Department of English at the Girls Commercial High School in Brooklyn) writes that “besides of being real assistance to us in our classrooms, the performances have cleared over one hundred and fifty dollars for our student welfare fund... it has been remarkable[sic] opportunity for them to see

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. It is worth noting here the obvious gender and power dynamics at play in the early 20th Century era. First, some English department chairs had to send letters through their school Principals in order to respond to Federal Theatre administrators. More significantly, that in the FTP archive, many documents create gendered disparities between educator, actor, and audience testimonies (such as “Mr. William Barlow” being afforded a title not spelled or monikered as “Miss O’Hara.” Similarly, in later documents terms like “Chairman” frequently altered to “Chairperson” in the 21st century use the 20th century antecedents.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

such good plays so adequately produced at such a low rate.”¹⁷⁸ On paper, the earlier outlined financial agreements between schools may not have seemed lucrative for school-site fundraising; however, Taylor’s letter supports the meaningful contribution to student welfare finances, and other student-serving school site funding—that the FTP was able to create through Classical Unit performances housed at New York area high schools.

In Taylor’s letter, she provides further verification that the goal of having Federal Theatre Project Classical Unit productions benefit the teaching and learning of drama in U.S. schools was meeting success as well. She writes that the Federal Theatre productions, “have added greatly to (the students’) appreciation of the drama.”¹⁷⁹ The utility of the productions extended beyond students alone. Anna Clinton—Chairman of English, Brooklyn High School of Women’s Garment Trades—wrote to the Federal Theatre about the impact on teachers as well.¹⁸⁰ “We feel that the performances are a real aid to us in our teaching of the drama, as well as a delightful entertainment for the girls, many of whom have never seen a play on the legitimate stage before,” explains Clinton, ratifying several components of the Federal Theatre mission.¹⁸¹ One curious note—and further proof of the impact of the Classical Unit—is that Clinton here refers to the productions as being played on a “legitimate stage.” With recognition that the productions in question were likely performed on the typical stage at this particular school: what made this production suddenly a *legitimate* stage? It is as if the presence of the Federal Theatre actors alone—and presumably the quality of the production—transformed the high school stage into a “legitimate” one for student audience consumption. This evidence also articulates some of the

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ “Chairman” is used in alignment with archival documents, not contemporary norms for gender neutrality in position titles, such as this one.

¹⁸¹ Federal Theatre Project, clippings.

earliest FTP claims to legitimacy—forming the Classical Unit productions to be received as professional tours, rather than community theatre outreach projects. By the end of the 1938-1939 season of the Classical Unit, new literature was being developed to market the Classical Unit to schools, administrators, teachers, and communities for the following year. One marketing source announced: “What has been said of the Classical Program”—with a series of testimonials accompanying the summary of the program’s aims. In that document, the Chairman of the English Department at DeWitt Clinton High School, Jaxson Knox, affirms, “subsequent classroom discussions... have shown that the performances provided a revealing and lasting experience to children for whom it was an introduction to the art of the theatre... to others, aesthetic and entertainment values of high order” summing success indicators for the varied goals of the program—most of which seemed to have come to fruition.¹⁸²

Afterlives of the Classical Program

In the spring of 1939, internal FTP documents detailed enthusiastic planning for the following year’s Classical Unit in public schools around the country. Continued expansion of the program was to include new productions of Richard Brinsely Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, and other canonical works such as *Tartuffe*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *Mary Stuart*, alongside four newly developed productions of Shakespeare for student audiences.

On June 30th, 1939, just days after the conclusion of the academic year for public secondary schools, Congress voted to close the Federal Theatre Project, once and for all.

The significant details between the termination of the Federal Theatre in Congress, and the planning for Classical Unit’s third season for the 1939-1940 school year, illuminates at least one curious overlap. In the third season of the Classical Program, a production of Christopher

¹⁸² Ibid.

Marlowe's *Dr. Fastus* was to be mounted. While the Classical Unit didn't come up as a core case study, or unit, for persecution by the Dies Committee (as, for instance, the Children's Unit did with *Revolt of the Beavers*)—this programming overlap intersected on the Congress floor in what has been historicized as one of the most anti-intellectual of the House Un-American Activities Committee's attacks. Eric Bentley and Frank Rich, for instance, chose to include a moment from the hearings in their volume *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968* which highlights the committee questioning Hallie Flanagan on the community works of a playwright they believed was working for the Federal Theatre: Christopher Marlowe. The exchange was pointed and direct, as Representative Joe Starnes attempted to trap Flanagan with details about the perceived communist philosophies of the Federal Theatre. In *Arena*, Flanagan writes that the committee was concerned with the “dangerous political affiliations of Mr. Christopher Marlowe” before she—in showstopping form—quipped that it should be written down in the hearing's transcript that Marlowe (the Renaissance England playwright, who was killed in 1593) was, in fact, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, and not a threat to contemporary American democracy.¹⁸³ In *The Playbook*—most deftly focused on the Congressional hearings surrounding the FTP, and the mechanics of subsequent right-wing propaganda that borrows logic from the House of Un-American Activities hearings during the Dies Committee years—Joe Shapiro further recreates this scene on the Congress floor. After “the loud laughter,” as *The New York Times* described it, that followed Starnes' question (“You're quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?”) Hallie Flanagan “rolling her eyes” explained, “I was quoting from Christopher

¹⁸³ Flanagan, *Arena*, 7. Flanagan's eye roll is Shapiro's description, whereas Flanagan's words are her own, documented in transcripts of the Congressional hearings.

Marlowe.”¹⁸⁴ Shapiro, who further notes the embarrassment and “reddened” face of Starnes following this interaction, tracks Starnes’ response as, “‘Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference, because that is all we want to do,’ to which Flanagan replies, ‘put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakesperae, immediately preceding Shakespeare.’”¹⁸⁵ This moment relates to an earlier Flanagan citation of Marlowe on the social efficacy of theatre, not the proposed Classical Unit production. However, the connectivity of Classical Unit play and pseudo-persecuted playwright continues to position the Classical Unit’s intentions and actions as caught in the proverbial crosshairs of Dies Committee anti-intellectualism, and foolish oversights in the philosophical backlash against the Federal Theatre, which manifested in pragmatic backlash (the subsequent refusal of *Dr. Faustus* productions) on youth in public schools around the country.

Cleveland Theatre for Youth

In the aftermath of the FTP’s stoppage the nation’s schools were left, indeed, with a period of grieving over the loss of the Classical Unit’s productions. Superfluous praise for the program indicates that much like other closed units, teachers and practitioners around the country came to the FTP asking if programs benefiting their students could continue following the project’s closure. With no hope of continuing these units’ activities after the Congressional termination, some theatres moved to copy, rather than hire, the Federal Theatre Project’s Classical Unit.

Leading into the 1940 theatre season, The Cleveland Theatre for Youth proposed a series of works to be performed in repertoire that would include touring productions to area high

¹⁸⁴ James Shapiro, *The Playbook: A Story of Theater, Democracy, and the Making of a Culture War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024), 12.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

schools. Cleveland Theatre for Youth sought to fill the hole created by the closure of the FTP with a program that could operate similarly in Ohio schools. Officials for the company reached out to Hallie Flanagan to ask for guidance on how to create a season that would parallel the offerings and impact of the FTP—one of the earliest indications that Federal Theatre programs were being grieved nationwide, and trying to be replicated. Flanagan wrote back, commending the company’s initial planning (which included polling local stakeholders on both the content and operations of their new programming), praising the Cleveland Theatre for Youth, noting: “in drawing your council from social, educational and cultural groups in Cleveland you are following exactly the right idea, and I also think your repertory sounds extremely interesting.”¹⁸⁶ The Cleveland Theatre for Youth’s season would include other cultural interlocation through its selection of plays—such as Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* and a work by Dion Boucicault—as well as replications of Shakespeare productions previously trafficked by the Federal Theatre’s Classical Unit, based on the triangulation between theatre seasons and high school English classroom curricular previously developed by the Federal Theatre. In Cleveland, at least, the trajectory—if not the programming—of the Classical Unit would live on.

However, the proposed benefits of the Cleveland Theatre for Youth would still carve out huge spaces of the Federal Theatre’s impact that remained grief matter. While the Cleveland Theatre for Youth could create programming in line with the FTP intentions, they lacked the governmental backing (and national funding sources) the Federal Theatre had access to. In a letter to Flanagan from Wilson A. Brooks and Gordon Roberts, the Executive Secretary and Treasurer of the Cleveland Theatre for Youth, the two administrators articulate the financial difficulties plaguing their new FTP-aligned projects. “We are attempting to operate without subscribed or donated funds relying entirely upon admissions from the audience,” explains the

¹⁸⁶ Hallie Flanagan Papers, New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

letter from the Ohio playmakers, “we are prompted by the thought that in this way the children themselves prove their desire for the theatre.”¹⁸⁷ In elaboration, the letter explains that while programming could reach schools and communities with economic resources (due to the audience donations and admission costs for audiences being their sole source of funding), many economically disenfranchised youth in Cleveland would miss out on their season, and both classical and youth theatre offerings. Brooks and Roberts explain that, “in talking to school principals regarding bookings we have found a number of the schools in the Cleveland area will be unable to present our performances. This is due solely to the economic status of the children enrolled. We have cut our production budget until it can be cut no further, and we are still not able to perform for those children who lack most vitally those important factors: *‘Beauty, excitement and education’ in the theatre.*” And so, young people in Cleveland would continue receiving the offer of touring works—but the most vulnerable youth of the city would remain without performances to serve them.

For all of the historical narrativization that (justly) describes miles upon miles of red tape that the Federal Theatre had to navigate to secure and actually use its government funding, the somehow often-understated recognition is that the Federal Theatre *had* these funding sources to begin with. The Cleveland Theatre for Youth’s continuation of the program shows that without government support, innovative and impactful theatre wouldn’t be afforded service to the very audiences that it most needed to serve. In the oft-quoted tagline spoken by Henry Hopkins that the Federal Theatre was to offer commissions of “free, adult, and uncensored” works, the “free” aspect is (most opaquely) the component that tools children and youth to engage with the theatre

¹⁸⁷ Letter from Wilson A. Brooks and Gordon Roberts on behalf of the Cleveland Theatre for Youth to Hallie Flanagan. Hallie Flanagan, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 1), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

in ways, and in quantities, perhaps never experienced in the United States.¹⁸⁸ By putting the burden of cost on the viewer, the Cleveland Theatre for Youth was doing all they could to both continue and sustain FTP-like programming; however, even still, American youth and their families would have to grieve the loss of the government's offering of a low-to-no-cost theatre.

United States Public Theatre Foundation

Similar to the Cleveland Theatre for Youth, school officials and theatre makers in New York City sought to continue the spirit of the Federal Theatre's Classical Unit through the proposition of a 1939-1940 season of plays to tour area high schools. Planning documents in the Federal Theatre archives explain that, though the proposed program for the year was "abandoned when the [Federal Theatre] Project went into dissolution... It is recommended that the basic principle of the plan be retained for the operation of a newly organized project, especially in the matter of selection of plays, booking, and financial arrangement."¹⁸⁹ The impulse to continue the work of the FTP in NYC high schools and colleges—the goal to have a project to perform "dramatic plays by professional performers in the public schools of New York City"—indicates that though discontinued, the Federal Theatre's youth missions were not only alive and well, but being sought after by the local communities touched by the FTP. The insatiability of schools and their students for these touring classical plays credentials the impact of the FTP Classical Unit, and the objective of bringing theatre directly to the doorstep of schools and students around the country. This new project was originally positioned as an initiative for a "Governmental Department of Fine Arts" that could "prepare a definite answer to the old Federal Theatre

¹⁸⁸ John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978), 2.

¹⁸⁹ Hallie Flanagan, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 1), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

mistakes” and revise them in the proposition of a thriving new program.¹⁹⁰ Planning documents show that educators and administrators in New York were attempting to gain access to the financial records of the Federal Theatre, in order to learn from them for their own season of programming. These sources articulate that, “despite these handicaps... the old Federal Theatre achieved a new high for itself in 1938 and 1939 right up to its discontinuance...”). The closure of the FTP was, then, a stoppage that cut off the Classical Unit at its peak of influence, financial success, and networking of resources throughout the New York City area.

Documents reveal that this internal planning led to a formal proposal entitled, “A Plan for a United States Theatre Foundation.” The new program opened with an essential question for programming: “AMERICA LEADS MATERIALLY. WHY NOT CULTURALLY?”¹⁹¹ The proposal introduces a dilemma of the United States’ leadership globally (in building “better bath-tubs, bridges, buildings, and machinery than any other country in the world”) and an attempt to “match” that leadership in cultural fields.¹⁹² The impetus for this project, beyond the grieving acts in loss of the Federal Theatre, related to the war era, and an attempt to see how theatre “may continue to make a practical contribution to the general welfare” of American citizens impacted by, and seeking to live happily through, the WWII era.

Why doesn't the United States have a national theatre in the first place? This question was asked directly in the “United States Theatre Foundation” proposal, echoing some of the earliest conversations helmed and responded to by Hallie Flanagan during the Federal Theatre’s formation. The Theatre Foundation proposal writers believed that the United States was too large

¹⁹⁰ “A Plan for a United States Public Theatre Foundation.” Hallie Flanagan Papers. Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondences (Box 6). New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division. New York, NY.

¹⁹¹ Capitalization and underlining retained from original subtitle. “A Plan for a United States Public Theatre Foundation.” Hallie Flanagan Papers. Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondences (Box 6). New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division. New York, NY.

¹⁹² Ibid.

to have one single ideological or cultural image in the form of a national theatre (such as the over 40 countries that did promote national theatres at this moment in the 20th century); they also argued that “America’s traditional spirit of individual enterprise” promoted various professional theatres across the country building community and regionally-specific theatre programs (which would not serve the whole of the country if espoused on a national level). However, these points were—in many ways—contradicted by the successes of the Federal Theatre. Shapiro argues that there were two other reasons pre-dating, and concurrent, with the life of the Federal Theatre that withheld Hallie Flanagan and the FTP from attempting to refer to the Federal Theatre using the terminology, “National Theatre.” First, in 1935 a not-for-profit bill authorized sole and exclusive rights to the name of “National Theatre” to a new organization to be called the “American National Theatre and Academy.”¹⁹³ Secondly, Flanagan wrote in correspondence that she “had no intention of using what would be an inaccurate title” in calling the Federal Theatre a National Theatre. Federal versus National may seem like a trivial matter of semantics, but for Flanagan, a “national theatre in the European sense of a group of artists chosen to represent the government” would not meet the FTP (or subsequent analog) models.¹⁹⁴ While keeping distance from the European antecedents of a national theatre, as the FTP did, the later United States Public Theatre Foundation in name alone could continue to avoid the name of National Theatre, which could also shore up political backlash through the word “national” alone; an argument proposed by Shapiro notes that this rhetoric might “(conjure) up—especially for Southern congressmen like Starnes of Alabama and Dies in Texas—the threat of a centralized government encroaching on states’ rights.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Shapiro, *The Playbook*, 8.

¹⁹⁴ Flanagan qtd. in Shapiro, *The Playbook*, 8.

¹⁹⁵ Shapiro, *The Playbook*, 8.

Regardless of name and scope, the efforts following the Federal Theatre's termination to launch a "foundation" with hopes of accomplishing similar touring classical productions for New York City area high schools serves as a reminder of the efficacy and significance of the Classical Unit productions. With the Federal Theatre terminated, how would students receive these highly-valued performance events at their schools? Had a tide turned in the logic of arts instruction and initiatives, in the United States? Was the Federal Theatre Project a beginning or an ending to these changing rationales for arts instruction across the United States of America?

An Intervention in Arts Outreach

Consideration of programs like the Cleveland Theatre for Youth, and the proposed United States Public Theatre Foundation, demonstrates that the Federal Theatre's programming was certainly missed by audiences, young people, and the national public across the United States. While that archival certainty answers one major question outlined at the onset in this chapter, another intention of the classical program case study in *Grieving the Federal Theatre* is to argue that the FTP's Classical Unit constituted an intervention—a pivot point, a moment of philosophical alteration—in the approaches of arts outreach and theatre pedagogy across the country. In order to prove or historically render the topography of this intervention, it would have to be clear that approaches to teaching of theatre in public schools, and/or the importance of theatre education in United States schooling, had changed following the closure of the FTP. By 1954, Paul Kozelka would argue that "in some respects the picture of high-school dramatics has not changed since 1925; in other respects it has greatly improved."¹⁹⁶ What improvements were made? Were any of them concordant with the intentions or approaches of the Federal Theatre?

¹⁹⁶ Paul Kozelka, "Dramatics in the High Schools, 1900-1925," 602-607.

Some of the more obvious evidence that would argue against the FTP provoking an intervention for schooling might gesture to claims that little had changed in thirty years for theatre pedagogy. In Kozelka's era and writing, the pragmatics of theatre instruction in school indicated that "dramatics is not yet universally accepted as a curricular subject nor do admissions offices of institutions of higher learning accept all dramatics courses equally."¹⁹⁷ However, in the *philosophy* of arts outreach, clearly much had been altered by, and in the years following, the Federal Theatre. As explained earlier in this chapter, prior to the Federal Theatre's tenure, theatre was seen as lacking efficacy and impact on student learning; the theatre classroom was not a place to teach citizenship or civics, but a performance form and artistic craft alone. By the mid-1940s, this had changed dramatically. Some of this alteration—which includes a newfound centrality of teaching themes of teaching democracy, citizenship, and morality through theatre—could be credited to World War II era exigencies of thought. By the early autumn following the stoppage of the Federal Theatre in 1939, WWII had formally begun internationally; by 1941, the United States was thrust into the conflict, too. Education scholar Gerard Giordano tracks the changes through this era that saw arts educators proposing new models of teaching, such as Kirby (1942) who outlined ways to have students construct wartime items in art classes; or Roy (1942) and Young (1943) who recommended that the training of art teachers prepare them to instruct persons in the community about democracy and wartime issues.¹⁹⁸ In the midwest, a 1943 headline announced that "Children Like Real Jobs;" the article documented ways the prose, art, and dramatic play of their students incorporated wartime motifs such as weapons, concentration camps, and hostile enemies. This perspective that war-era

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Gerard Giordano, *Wartime Schools: How World War II Changed American Education* (Peter Lang Copyright AG, 2005), 170.

occupations and combat-related motifs were more appealing to students takes the pulse of two features of arts education. First: that children are drawn to the adult-like features of the world around them, and seek to replicate and subsume these qualities in their own play, learning, and art-making. This concept works alongside later developments in education theory and praxis that would found theories of Cultural Funds of Knowledge, a focus on transferable knowledge sets in the classroom, and various job-training logics that were inherent in the post-Progressive Movement of education. Secondly: by the mid-1940s, schools not only allowed, but encouraged dramatic play and theatre making that wrestled with ideas of citizenship, democracy, and war. This change was a seismic one. It also predates a logic of theatre for social change often cursorily connected to practitioners like Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed. While the war era culture certainly created the canvas on which these changes in thematic schooling could be fostered, is it possible that the Federal Theatre was a stimulant—or even causal agent—in these changes? The optics of grief and replacement, again, illuminate that possibility.

In 1945, Verona Rothenbush took a different temperature check than Kozelka for the import of contemporary drama classes and arts programming. In her article, “Dramatics Glass: Proving Ground for Democracy” Rothenbush recommends that drama classes primarily serve to foster high morale, transmit wartime information, and provide the “proving ground for democracy.”¹⁹⁹ Rothenbush poses the essential question of her instruction—working with 9th grade high school students, with limited (or as she posits, “nil”) resources—by looking at this unique environment and epoch of teaching theatre as a “test.” In “Dramatics Glass” Rothenbush asks: “could my pupils through their dramatics work to learn democracy?”²⁰⁰ In arguing for this

¹⁹⁹ Rothenbush, Verona F, “Dramatics Glass: Proving Ground for Democracy,” *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 19 (9), 1945: 561–64.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. “Dramatics Glass: Proving Ground for Democracy.”

social efficacy of theatre, Rothenbush makes a small but hugely significant gesture towards the rationale for the need of this kind of democracy-focused programming in public schools. In precursory justification for the approach, Rothenbush writes that drama programming at the school she served was “largely supported by the WPA during the depression days.” This simple articulation of need highlights that the WPA’s Federal Theatre, in only a few short years, had created high school based programming through the Classical Unit and their other public school offerings that had become essential to school sites. The Federal Theatre had also created a new expectation of what theatre accomplishes *for* the high school drama classroom.

By programming *Coriolanus*, and other sociopolitically engaged plays, the Federal Theatre had created a new baseline of what theatre does and can accomplish for the consciousness industry of student-citizens. The Federal Theatre—and the Classical Unit, in particular—had effectively convinced the American public that theatre was a significant part of schooling; and a component of the learning regimen (or “diet”) of schools that was specifically tools to teach civic engagement, democracy, and the precepts of an “American” social order.

Perhaps Rothenbush’s article, and the teaching that founded it, could be seen as a singularity. However, other documents outlining curriculum and philosophy in the mid-1940s echo these sentiments of the newfound significance of theatre in United States public schools as a device for social consciousness. In the introduction to Ernest Bavely’s *Teaching Dramatic Arts in the Secondary Schools* published in 1945, Bavely explains that the changes in American schooling would, “force the elimination of many old principles and concepts affecting subject content, instruction methods, and goals.”²⁰¹ “In this new program,” expands Bavely, “the teaching of dramatic arts on a broad basis to the majority of our young people must be

²⁰¹ Ernest Bavely, Introduction to *Teaching Dramatic Arts in the Secondary Schools* (Meadville, PA: American Educational Theatre Association, 1945) 1.

recognized. This addition to our educational process must not be viewed as a product forced by some pressure group, but accepted as the answer to modern social and educational demands which confront our youth.”²⁰² Within a decade, an art form (theatre, performance, and dramatic literature) that was written about by education theorists and teachers as being insignificant for any core learning goals was now *the answer* to modern social and educational demands.

Beverly’s proposal goes on to consider expansion of theatre programs, and the way that public schools articulate the art form itself for instruction and participation. This meant including a “consumer’s” study of performance; expanding theatre instruction in schools to include motion pictures, television, radio, and stagecraft.

By the late 20th century, all of these would factor into school curricular programs, and elective classes, for secondary school students. Beverly’s 1945 arguments ratify Rothenbush’s philosophy of education (asking first, “What direction should this study and research take?”, and then outlining: “First, consideration should be given to recreational needs in postwar America. Closely associated with this social problem is that of giving expression to creative impulses as the foundation for happier and greater living by our people. Equally essential is the need of teaching democratic principles, attitudes, and ideas to our young people. Fourth stands the need of establishing standards of evaluation and appreciation of the dramatic arts.”²⁰³

Grieving the Classical Unit

Baverly’s four part philosophy of teaching theatre articulates the innovative nature of mid-century contemporary theatre pedagogy in comparison to the pre-1935 antecedents of drama programming in public schools. Now, theatre was to teach democracy; include arts appreciation,

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

effectively fostering the creation of a theatre-going public in United States schools; creative expression was to be seen as a core part of wellbeing. I argue that this expansive shift in support for the importance, and belief in the efficacy, of theatre was launched by the Federal Theatre. By generating avenues where young people (and their parents alike, in other units of the program) would get to see their first plays, mounted by the Classical Unit, the Classical Unit not only doubled down on Hallie Flanagan's core goals of creating an American theatre public—but extended that goal. Students in the second half of the twentieth century would come to not only be viewers of theatre in their public schools, but would create their own theatre with a focus on social value; take courses that factored theatre into the broader artistic value of performance as a modality of learning. The Federal Theatre reimaged not just the scope, but the fabric of teaching theatre in American public schools.

Recalling First Lady Elenor Roosevelt's question for Hallie Flanagan ("whether the time had come when American might consider the theatre, as it was considered abroad, a part of education"), it tracks to argue that in order to view the Federal Theatre as an inflection point in the logic of American arts education, the program would have had to answer the First Lady's question.²⁰⁴ Beverly's outline for the teaching of drama in public schools decries a rather synonymous observation, and mission: "we have accepted the teaching of music, graphic arts, and sports as a part of our educational process. Let us add, in the postwar program, the teaching of dramatic arts."²⁰⁵

Through the implementation of a two year, publicly celebrated, series of classical plays for youth in secondary schools, the Federal Theatre's Classical Unit fundamentally changed the expected cursory programming of plays in public high schools in the United States. Moreover,

²⁰⁴ Flanagan, *Arena*, 12.

²⁰⁵ Beverly, *Teaching Dramatic Arts*, 1.

the FTP helped the nation to rewrite codes that had long barred theatre from being instituted as a feature of American schooling. The labor of Flanagan, FTP officials, and Classical Unit actors, designers, directors, and artists had, indeed, made theatre a part of education. The Classical Unit's productions and the palimpsestic memory of these Federal Theatre shows lived on surrogates that continued the structure of the unit in the aftermath of the program—and in the very policies and practices that would constitute the future of 20th century secondary school theatre programming. In doing so, more than being grieved the Classical Unit created a new culture of theatre pedagogy, and imprint on American theatre schooling, that would live on long after the “death” of the Federal Theatre.

Chapter II

“The Menace of Marionette Shows”: Psychoanalytic Puppet Theatre at Bellevue Hospital and Awakening Children’s Imagination

Bellevue Hospital “Turns to Drama as a Mental ‘Cure’”

Within the first two years of the Federal Theatre’s operations, the project had already gained national attention as a performance purveyor, relief program, and community unifier. By 1937, the original intentions and jurisdiction as a government subsidy for theatre artists had already been far outshone. With unexpected theatrical successes and Hallie Flanagan’s peerless leadership steering the initiative, the FTP—despite a surplus of managerial red tape, toothpick productions, and funding conundrums—appeared to be national project whose actions could live up to the daunting public and governmental expectations placed on the Federal One program.

On Wednesday, April 7th 1937, a New York Times headline heralded an even more ambitious impact of the Federal Theatre Project in New York City, and of the well-deep untapped power of theatre and performance. “Mental Patients Find Aid in Drama” read the headline, announcing to the American public an underrecognized service offered by the Federal Theatre to people in need.²⁰⁶ What were medical patients doing engaging in drama as a means to assuage their maladies? How was mental health and wellness fused to the apparatus of theatre making, and the genre(s) and form(s) of performance? In the headline alone, it becomes clear that the Works Progress Administration’s entity was undertaking a far different brand of “relief” than

²⁰⁶ Newsprint, “Mental Patients Find Aid in Drama,” 7 April, 1937, *New York Times*, C0002, Box #1, Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

helping actors and other theatre makers get off relief roles, and find resilience in endurance through the Depression's harsh social and economic realities. How did they chart this impact?

A section headline from the *Times* for the same story elaborates that the famed Bellevue Hospital, “Turns to Drama as a Mental ‘Cure’” as “Girls in Psychiatric Ward Stage Plays as Aid to Diagnosis and Treatment.”²⁰⁷ Digging through national and site-specific New York City archives on the Federal Theatre, drama therapeutic and public-serving activist efforts like the productions staged at Bellevue Hospital are widely overshadowed by public parks shows, Caravan productions, and other enterprises of joy staged in all five boroughs (and eventually nationwide). The archive indicates that public consciousness of the Federal Theatre had zoomed in on the widely marketed, highly attended works of pageantry and theatrical zeal offered by the project—especially during the four summers of its tenure. However, the 1937 *New York Times* headline portending the project's work as a “cure” for mental illness indicates that behind the curtain, the Federal Theatre was undertaking a particular scope in the efficacy of performance beyond levity and laughter; that healing, helping, and “curing” were a part of the Federal Theatre's mission as well. Hallie Flanagan's epitaph for the Federal Theatre in her own *Times* op-ed announced “performances for the ill” as worth grieving by the then-stopped program; but what did those performances look like?²⁰⁸ How does the Federal Theatre's contribution to the business of healing, as well as theatre and performance, fit into the untold narrative of the Federal Theatre Project as an artistic and national loss worth grieving?

²⁰⁷ Newsprint, “Bellevue Turns to Drama as a Mental ‘Cure.’” C0002, Box #1, Federal Theatre Project Collection. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

²⁰⁸ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

“A proved and demonstrable need”

A few months following this New York Times report on the Federal Theatre’s efforts of recovery in the Bellevue Hospital children’s psychology ward, an article for the *New York Daily News* on June 20th, 1937 written by contemporary theatre critic Burns Mantle argued for the recognition that “the theatre is a proved and demonstrated need. The theatre appeals not to groups, but to multitudes; to the mass at the base of the pyramid.... (it) is a definite and important factor in any social security program that aims at the salvation of democracy.”²⁰⁹ In this first chapter of this study, theatre as a means of “salvation” for democracy was questioned through the values espoused in Federal Theatre Classical Unit productions that were viewed by secondary school students across the United States. The citizen making apparatus of theatre—imagined, produced, and staged for live audiences of youth by the FTP—and the educational intervention of performance are framed in that chapter as a vital part of the learning experience for young people in the country. Mantle’s writing in defense of theatre’s import raises a different question, too, in the articulation of theatre as a “definite and important factor in any *social security program*.”²¹⁰ The nature of the FTP as a service agency outlines the centerpoint of this chapter, moving from scholastic to medical performances staged by the Federal Theatre.

The Federal Theatre’s operation serves in many ways as an exemplar of Mantle’s argument. The project didn’t operate solely as an educational entity for youth, but as a clear developmental aspect of the social, political, and mental well being of children and young adults. To extend an argument for theatre as efficacious for the mental or physical well being of children, it would have to be clear that theatre and performance itself generates an intervention;

²⁰⁹ Burns Mantle, 20 June, 1937, *New York Daily News*. C0002, Box #1, Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

²¹⁰ Ibid, My italics.

that a clear, notable change in a group's medical wellness alters through theatre. Theatre History is full of these examples: moments where the act of theatre making through ritual, religion, or as condolence serves as a meaningful component in the process of metabolization of pain—that is, of grief—or of direct physical benefit. The case study of the Bellevue Hospital use of puppets in psychoanalytic processes supporting children creates a unique flashpoint amongst these historical examples of theatre's potency. The direct intention of these performances was not necessarily to generate healing, but to extend an offering of theatre to the infirmed or psychologically unwell youth at Bellevue Hospital, which they might take and use for whatever they chose. That healing was the youth's choice, or that healing was made possible through the affective doors opened by the theatrical process, is a phenomenon worth better understanding.

Is Healing through theatre a need, too?

Theatre can move beyond the performatic, and beyond educational, to the medicinal. That is one of the founding observations of the Bellevue Hospital case study that will be analyzed in the Chapter II of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*. Pivotally, in the case of the Federal Theatre Project's Bellevue puppet shows (and participatory drama with puppets), it is through the educational domain that the medical domain is accessed. However, is healing a necessary function of theatre—as it is for learning, argued earlier by Elenor Roosevelt in chapter one; or of democracy and learning, as framed by Burns Mantle and demonstrated by the Classical Unit productions? One of the strongest historical paradigms for theatre as a healing agent is crafted by Augusto Boal, and articulated in his writing for *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. A social activist and theatre maker in revolutionary and war era Brazil, Boal's argumentation and practical actions in promotion of theatre as a tool for social justice are touchstones in theatre history for the might of theatre as a catalyst for change. Creating several

methodologies for using theatre as a reflective device—as well as hundreds of creative drama, social drama, and acting exercises to be engaged by actors and non-actors alike—Boal’s contribution to theatre is not only significant, but one that reshapes public and academic reception of what theatre fundamentally is. In his landmark *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1973), Boal extends Paolo Freire’s educational theories in the analog *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) to image theatre as a tool for internal recognition of external power and dominance. For Freire, opposition to the “Banking Model” of education and mechanics of teaching and learning that can become structures of reification for hegemonic order was essential. For Boal, Freire’s urging for the utility of education as a means for developing conscientization (or, critical consciousness of the means and programmatics of social power surrounding the individual), is a process carried out not only through education, but through education of and in theatre. Boal’s system uses various methodologies—often staged in city squares and high poverty areas with non-actors—to urge individuals and the broader social public to refuse, refute, and morally combat with both various physical and cognitive means of social power and oppression.

In *Rainbow of Desire*, written in the later years of Boal’s life and career, Boal adds a system of logic and practitioner tools to the framework of Theatre of the Oppressed (TotO). In this model, Boal argues for “the extraordinary power, the intense and effective energy, of the theatrical event in domains outside of the theatre: the political, the social, and the fields of education and psychotherapy.”²¹¹ This extension, rather than departure, from Boal’s original intentions of Theatre of the Oppressed worked in line with his newfound recognition that not all oppressive forces are physical and violence. Akin to Louis Althusser’s articulation of the different means for maintaining hegemonic order through repressive and ideological state

²¹¹ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, translated by Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

apparatuses—Boal explains in *Rainbow of Desire* that his original focus on the utility of theatre was in recognizing and fighting against state power; he admits, “because I was used to working with concrete, visible oppressions.”²¹² However, unlike Althusser, who famously articulated an essential framing between ideological and repressive state apparatuses, (“the Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence’, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function ‘by ideology’”), Boal’s position in favor of an educational and psychotherapeutic theatre expanded his nexus from using theatre as a teaching tool for recognizing *both* ideological and violent oppressions, to using theatre as a teaching tool for recognizing and healing personalized, affective, and cognitive oppressions.²¹³ Boal writes of workshops where he was working with, “people who suffered oppressions with which I was well acquainted in Latin America: racism, sexism, intolerable working conditions, insufficient wages, police abuses of power, and so on. But in these Theatre of the Oppressed workshops there are also appeared oppression which were new to me: ‘loneliness’, the ‘impossibility of communicating with others’, feelings of emptiness.”²¹⁴ If loneliness, heartache, and grief were—as Boal enumerated to his social parishioners—societal oppressions too, theatre stood evident as a way to heal these non-medical, non-violent woes for both the individual and, in an ambitious sense, the social public.

Boal’s framework in *Rainbow of Desire* images loneliness, despair, hurt, loss, grief, all as tools of a certain nature of societal oppression—ones, too, that could be served by the power of theatre. Using this framing, I’m curious about the ways that the Federal Theatre’s interventions

²¹² Ibid. In his writing, Boal amidst that, “it was as if I was always asking, mechanically: ‘But where are the cops?’” *Rainbow of Desire*, and the commitment to theatre as a tool for waging against internal maladies as well as violent and/or ideological means of power, marks a concretization of the extensive scope that Boal’s model offers theatre practitioners and society-at-large during and after the 20th century.

²¹³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, (Hoboken, N.J.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 80.

²¹⁴ Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 8.

of services at Bellevue Hospital worked similarly to heal—to “find aid in drama” or to “(turn) to drama as a cure”—youth suffering from mental illnesses and psychological affiliations at the hospital. How did these performances serve children at the hospital—and in what ways do the Bellevue puppet shows bolster or alter the legacy, and facilitate our ability to properly grieve the loss of the Federal Theatre Project?

Intentions of the Bellevue Hospital Case Study

In order to effectively trace scope of the personal, social, and project infrastructural importance of the Federal Theatre Project’s performance events in Bellevue Hospital, this chapter seeks to illuminate the Bellevue puppet shows as exemplars in the early 20th century formulation of therapeutic drama—and of theatre’s utility as an agent of healing. In order to do so, this case study of the children and youth served by the FTP’s outreach-based productions, and the teaching artistry that occurred to actualize these performances, will be parsed for both the artistic (creative, pedagogical, programmatic) interventions sought and the affective (medical, spiritual, emotional) impacts of puppet theatre performance at Bellevue. I’ll first use various Federal Theatre Project archives and a review of theatre history evidence to outline the perceptions of similar forms of drama crafted up to the FTP’s tenure in the late 1930s. This necessitates questioning the constitution of performance as a means of healing through-and-as social theatre, dramatherapy, psychodrama, and medical drama. Attention will also be turned to the use of marionette and puppet theatres in the Federal Theatre Project, as well as the prevalence of the genre during the early 20th century, especially in educational theatre settings and in theatre for youth.

With historical and Federal Theatre Project antecedents of theatre making of similar intentions and forms in mind, this study then utilizes internal notes and reports from the FTP and

WPA to imagine a performance reconstruction of the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows and puppetry programs for youth. Those performances, and the rich extant documentation of their impact, testify to the efficacy of the puppet theatre performances, and the communal care being extended by the Federal Theatre's practitioners. Having positioned the Federal Theatre performances in the broader landscape of theatre for the purpose of medical and emotional impact, and imagined the pragmatics of the performances themselves, I'll conclude by arguing that the Bellevue Hospital puppetry processes are a missing feature in the Federal Theatre Project narrative. Sketching a narrativization that factors these performances, and their afterlives following the FTP's stoppage, into my intention of grieving the loss of the the Federal Theatre centers the "awakening" of children's curiosity—and, ultimately, personhood—in our remembrance of the Federal Theatre Project. It intervenes in our memory of the project, asking us to see the Federal Theatre's efforts as theatre that heals.

Relief, Performance, and Healing through the Federal Theatre

The history of theatre and performance is riddled with not only examples of theatre that impacts the health and wellbeing of its participants and makers alike but, further, augmentations that the core purpose of theatre is to craft these personal and societal recuperations. Short-sighted framings of theatre as a field that envision it as a medium of frivolity and crowd-chasing misunderstand the centuries-old efficacy of the field. Counternarrativisations, and examples of these framings, have been offered through the introduction and Chapter I of this project. Rather than exerting more attention on what naysayers argue theatre isn't, it is helpful to approach the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows case study with a cursory imposition of the practitioner and theoretical outlines of what theatre is—and what it accomplishes.

What is Healing?

Before expanding into the various efficacies of theatre expounded in this chapter's case studies, focus should be given to the core concept guiding the work of applied theatre in hospital, outreach, and medical settings and framings: the concept of healing. Healing—a component of the title of *Grieving the Federal Theatre: Youth Programs and Performances from the Project that Tried to Heal the United States*—is an expansive, transnationally and transculturally contaminated concept. Seemingly simple as an article of study, healing itself proves more obscure and evasive to definition than one may think when attempting to reach a totalizing rhetoric for the myriad applications of the word. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first uses of “healing” as a noun, designated “restoration to health; recovery from sickness; curing, cure.”²¹⁵ However, whereas the Western biomedical concept of healing has a more precise, consensus meaning—which Jeff Levin, medical scientist and religious scholar, refers to as “curing of disease or restoration of health among medically ill individuals or populations” or, more formally, as the “outcome of secondary-preventive actions directed at people who have crossed the clinical horizon within the pathogenic stage of the natural history of disease and have presented symptomatically”—the epistemological expansiveness of the concept may extend beyond biomedical definition. In line with the various potential actualizations of healing beyond the medical domain, Jill E. Vihos writes of five variants for healing—aligned with Webster's contemporary definitions. *Physical healing* in acute care practice (overall physical rehabilitation, wound care practices) matches the aforementioned medical stasis of healing; *psychological healing* (listening, validating patients' feelings) is a subsection devoted to not biomedical, but psychological healing; *social healing* (providing support and encouragement) reaches the

²¹⁵ Jeff Levin, “What Is ‘Healing’?: Reflections on Diagnostic Criteria, Nosology, and Etiology,” *Explore (New York, N.Y.)* 13, no. 4 (2017): 244–56. doi:10.1016/j.explore.2017.04.005.

socioaffective states of rupture, repair, and care; and *cultural healing* practices and *spiritual healing* speak to ways that healing operates in metaphysical and psychosocial mediums, as well.²¹⁶

In the powerful work authored by Catherine M. Cole in examination of both performance artworks and performance studies readings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) during the afterlives of apartheid, these concepts of cultural, social, spiritual, and psychological healing converge with the medical and physical conceptions of the term. In the long, reparative process of responding to crimes against humanity following South Africa's regime of apartheid—a bitterly stratified means of legalized racial oppression and segregation between colonizing Dutch and other white European forces and the indigenous Black populations of South Africa—cultural repair was turned to legislators, mediators, and even artists.²¹⁷ Cole writes of the East London TRC hearings in 1995, where Chairperson Archbishop Desmond Tutu struggled to subdue unruly spectators by admonishing: "We have been given a very important task: this is not a show what we are doing. We are trying to get medicines to heal up our wounds."²¹⁸ Cole notes that Tutu substitutes a medical metaphor for the healing of wounds for a theatrical one, a *show*. The performance events, and performances, surrounding the TRC give not only one important precedent for theatre's place in conversations on cultural healing but, definitionally, offer recognition of how the extended metaphor for the "wounds" of apartheid make healing an act that is beyond biomedical cures—and rather points to address, recovery, and life after various cultural and personal maladies.

²¹⁶ Jill E. Vihos, "What Is Healing?" *Canadian Nurse* (1924) 101, no. 3 (2005): 4.

²¹⁷ The concept of "crimes against humanity," first articulated in the charter of the International Military Tribunal that authorized the war crimes trials held in Nuremberg, Germany following World War II.

²¹⁸ Cited in Catherine M. Cole, "Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Theatre Journal* (Washington, D.C.) 59, no. 2 (2007), 176.

Returning to the earlier aporia of definition, we can see that the concept of spiritual healing is not only sub-categorical, but also, in some sectors, constitutional to the nature of healing. Levin writes that the earliest uses of the word may relate to appearances in the Gospel of Nicodemus and *Cursor Mundi*—triangulating these religious terminologies to the first medical use in Lanfranc’s *Science of Chirurgie*.²¹⁹ Similarly, SJ McCarren uses a moment in the Christian Bible where Jesus of Nazareth articulates, “Why do you mull over evil in your hearts? What’s easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”²²⁰ In this parable, McCarren points out the religiocentric (and, specifically Christian) conceptions of healing bridge the biomedical and spiritual; that spiritual healing is directly linked to the repair of the body. Similar conceptions of the healing body are offered, too, in Buddhist and Daoist logics of faith. The body as a somatic apparatus of faithfulness, virtue, and mental serenity becomes, then, a trope and hinging point of faith for a number religious traditions.

Given the focus of this study on mental health and wellness, as well as the national posture of the Federal Theatre in deputizing community outreach on behalf of a national entity (the United States government), an even more poignant overlap of social and psychological healings may be utilized—one spoken by John F. Kennedy. On October 31st, 1963 upon signing the Community Mental Health Act, Kennedy wrote of the achievement of the legislation for Americans with mental disabilities. The 35th President of the United States wrote: “It was said, in an earlier age, that the mind of a man is a far country which can neither be approached nor explored. But, today, under present conditions of scientific achievement, it will be possible for a

²¹⁹ Jeff Levin, “What Is ‘Healing’?”, 250. Levin’s accountability, while valuable in this conversation, is also focused through a religiocentric gaze. The dates listed for these gospels and other writings (around “c. 1000”) are also questioned in other sources for the writings that place them closer to the 4th century C.E.

²²⁰ SJ McCarren, “What Is Healing, and Why Do We Need It?” in *A Simple Guide to Matthew*, Vol. 1 (United States: Rowman & Littlefield Unlimited Model, 2012), 44. McCarren uses another moment in the Gospel of Matthew to illuminate how “Your sins are forgiven” correlationally articulates “Your body is healed.”

nation as rich in human and material resources as ours to make the remote reaches of the mind accessible. The mentally ill and the mentally retarded need no longer be alien to our affections or beyond the help of our communities.”²²¹ In the case of the legislation forwarded and celebrated by Kennedy the allocation of funds, scientific focus, cultural energies, and other resources in support of individuals with disabilities is spoken of as a measure of cultural growth. This legislation—appearing nearly 25 years after the stoppage of the Federal Theatre, and almost 30 years prior to the penning of The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990—names an ongoing 20th century priority for mental health and mental healing as intersecting with national interests. Thomas Insel extends this logic of healing, writing that “recovery is both a goal for an individual and the soul of our nation.” Insel and Kennedy gather that personal, psychological, and physical healings don’t only impact the individual, but rather allow for broader cultural and social healings—creating a felicity of both cultural awareness, and cultural growth, through the recovery and healthiness of individuals in a nation.

Amidst contemporary 21st century strides in mental health awareness and destigmatization, growth of school-based and community Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula and conversation, and in the fabric of broad means of anti-dualistic cultural logics, it is clear that initiatives to promote healing as a multifaceted process were ahead of their time in the early 20th century. How then should we consider healing in relationship to the Federal Theatre Project’s performances at Bellevue Hospital in the late 1930s? The overlap of the FTP’s labor and performance undertakings at Bellevue demonstrates a co-operational relationship between the various natures of healing as a process of diagnosis of ill, treatment and care, and recovery. The project created theatre in a hospital setting (with lineages in biomedical healing); with

²²¹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks Upon Signing a Bill for the Construction of Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers, 31 October 1963.”

populations experiencing psychological trauma and recovery; and in doing so, played a part in the broader national and sociocultural healing of American stigmatization of mental wellness. These efforts image theatre as more than an entertainment pursuit, but as a medium for strong social efficacy and creation. As this chapter will outline, healing most certainly occurred at Bellevue Hospital; but, a question of the study introduced here is the asking: what kind? Further, how did the domain or ontological state of healing that occurred impact, or inspire the theatrical creations by the Federal Theatre Project at Bellevue Hospital?

Social Theatre: Scheicher, Boal, and the function of theatre

To answer this question, frameworks for thinking of theatre outside of popular entertainment—and in outreach or applied theatre settings—must be used to scaffold recognition of the FTP’s performance events in the Bellevue puppet shows. Theatre as a means or mechanism that serves beyond the capacities of popular reception has long been articulated and actualized on stages (as well as theorized through performance criticism). However, popular theatre as it appeared at the beginning of the 20th century during the Federal Theatre Project’s tenure was heavily influenced—as it is during the writing of this project in the early 21st century—by financial aims and end goals of popular entertainment. In opposition to this intention of theatre making (which they refer to as the “commercial theatre”) Richard Schechner and James Thompson have articulated the broader value and function of theatre and performance by naming domains of performance outside of purely commercial and mainstream as “Social Theatre.”²²² Through the moniker and pragmatics of social theatre, Schechner has long argued for the centrality of the performance event, and theatre art making, as a “major forum for public

²²² James Thompson and Richard Schechner, “Why ‘Social Theatre’?” *TDR (1988-)* 48, no. 3 (2004): 11.

discourse.”²²³ In a reflective essay, “Why ‘Social Theatre’” published in 2004 in Schechner’s *The Drama Review (TDR)*, the two write: “not so long ago, roughly from the last decades of the 19th century through to the 1970s, the *aesthetic theatre* was dominant—at least in the great cities of the West and their colonial and postcolonial counterparts. In these theatres, matters of social importance were presented and debated; new ways of approaching and experiencing both personal and social realities were tested; and new means of expression were put before the public.”²²⁴ This aesthetic theatre was still one that allows members of the social public an object, location, and framework for discursive exploration. For Schechner, challenging the presuppositions of what theatre is, and what it accomplishes, has been a career-long journey; one manifested through his creation of New York University’s alternative approach to theatre studies, and early terminology behind Performance Studies as a field—as well as through experimental theatre making in New York for decades. Schechner’s belief in theatre frames the art form as a device affording peoples of various classes, religions, perspectives, and desires to approach discussion and reflection collectively. The aesthetic theatre, in Schechner’s theorization, started to decline in the American 1970s due to the might of the commercial theatre, and the means of money-making pursuits of theatre makers by the mid-20th century. The Federal Theatre project then lives in a flashpoint moment in the arc of aesthetic, commercial, and social theatre’s dominance(s) for the American public. The Federal Theatre had to wrestle with the emerging power of commercial theatre; the business of the American stage, as well as the surging influence (and argument) of the film form as a commercial medium, continued to eclipse the social significance of theatre during the 1930s. However, despite that moment of decline in the

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid. My italics.

aesthetic or social theatres, the Federal Theatre was operating in an epoch where the social efficacy of theatre was still seen publicly as not ancillary to the purpose of the craft, but central.

In Schechner's work, seeing performance as a broader realm of creation than simply theatre (that is, tracking the mimetic, social, and communal efficacy of performance alongside the presentation aspects of performance) is essential in acknowledging, and harnessing, the power of theatre. This belief brought forth an outline for social theatre, which sought to categorize the application of the aesthetic theatre in various settings (prior to, during, and after the commercial theatre took precedence socially). Social theatre is said to be a theatre with four separate aims: 1) theatre for healing, 2) theatre for action, 3) theatre for community, and 4) theatre for transforming experience into art. By creating this frame for the non-presentational domain of theatre, Schechner (and Thompson) give voice to the power of theatre as a change agent, and as one that directly engages acts of intrapersonal reflection—rather than simply aspects of audience reflection, such as the Aristotelian argument for catharsis through the tragic stage. This categorization explains how location and intention manifest aesthetic (rather than commercial) theatre into social theatre(s) of various social, communal, ideological, and personal import. "Social theatre draws on theory that pertains to the particular locations where the projects happen" explain Schechner and Thompson, "for example, theatre in schools has used educational theories to interrogate its work; theatre for development has used development theory to guide its analysis; theatre in prisons has used different models of criminology or rehabilitation theory to explain its practice. The act of applying theatre to the issue or situation at hand means that the social theatre worker enters a practical and a discursive space already full of psychological and/or sociological reference points."²²⁵ This argument dramaturgically centers the given circumstances (to use Konstantin Stanislavski's diegetic practitioner phrase for the non-diegetic

²²⁵ Ibid.

intentions of the theatre making practice) of the performance event as significant for the results of that performance event. The location, audience, and methodology of performance is then just as important as—and, in fact, causal to—what is actually created through that performance for the recipients (and makers of theatre).

Classifying the Federal Theatre Project's work as beyond entertainment and commercial value is naturally well-understood of the project's aim and impact. This sociological significance is, no doubt, part of the staying power of the project through its first few years in the WPA, and in Harry Hopkins' early intentions in creating the relief project as one with obvious cultural impact implications. However, often that aim is categorized in alignment with the Popular Front ideologies of the Federal Theatre, rather than through metacognition on the apparatus and locale of theatre making itself (or, how the caravan theatres, for example, and psychiatric ward performances both supported the social public, but in very different ways). I argue that by seeing the Federal Theatre project's legacy as inextricably tied to their social theatre making, the field can recognize that the felt-sense impact of the project's work far outperformed the discourse stimulated by heralded features of the project such as the Living Newspaper plays like *One Third of a Nation*, and in other notable productions like *Cradle Will Rock*, *Spirochete*, or *It Can't Happen Here*. Focusing on the educational intentions and efficacy of theatre in Chapter I, Chapter II asks how the medical intentions and efficacy of theatre—as well as the very location of theatre making in hospitals and psychiatric wards—make the Federal Theatre's social theatre worth remembering, grieving, and memorializing.

New York City Social Outreach Initiatives

The puppet theatre productions in Bellevue Hospital would have reached only the tiniest fraction of spectatorship as the New York City caravan productions; a significantly smaller

sample of youth than the many of the musicals, vibrant children's theatre productions, and vaudeville group performances for youth found around the country. However, Flanagan's holding up of the "performances for the ill" as a central piece of grieving matter was no mistake: it was a microscope slide that augmented the legibility of the Federal Theatre's socially impactful work.²²⁶ Federal Theatre reports indicate that "psychiatrists carefully studied each bit of progress" experienced socioaffectively and developmentally during Bellevue Hospital's use of puppet performance, and that they "noted a perceptible drawing back of the dark curtains that had kept these children in their unnatural state."²²⁷ The use of puppets as serviceable surrogates for characterization, and identity-based experimentation for children in New York City expanded beyond the performances supporting mental health and wellbeing held at Bellevue Hospital.

However, the hospital and psychiatric performances were not anomalies in the Federal Theatre Project's work—nor were they the only social theatres, or social-impact focused theatres, run by the FTP. Inside of public schools, school officials and administrators recognized and remembered the Federal Theatre through the use of puppets to support instruction for multi-language learners (MLLs).²²⁸ An internal report of the Federal Theatre boasts that "much recognition" had been gained by school authorities in using marionettes for "teaching English to foreigners[sic] and in aiding them to understand the duties of citizenship."²²⁹ Correspondingly, a version of *Oliver Twist* was prepared in New York within a vocabulary of only nine hundred

²²⁶ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

²²⁷ Report, "Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project." LAC #223, Boxes #1-3, Federal Theatre Project. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²²⁸ An ongoing rhetoric shift in public education in the United States, current practices in 2025 frequently dictate use of "multi-language learners" or "MLL" as a term for students learning multiple languages in schools—and those who are learning English as a second language, as English is the primary language of instruction in U.S. school. Separate era and program initiatives in the 21st century have also used ESOL (English as a Second Language) and ELL (English Language Learners) as codings for learners and their course programs in U.S. public schooling.

²²⁹ "Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project"

words common in English colloquial speech, in order to boost literacy and language comprehension rates for children in the city. These programs show—along with the extensive Classical Unit productions subject in Chapter I, and other school and TYA centered performances—that the FTP was heavily invested in the educational domain. In alignment with Schnecher’s definition of social theatre, these could also be seen as performances in promotion of theatre as community, creating avenues for students on the margins of the educational regime and social community of U.S. schools a way to connect to the U.S. classroom—and to find slowly integrate more wholly in language and learning instruction of their new home and school-site communities.

The utility of marionette shows and puppet drama extended from the New York City Federal Theatre project to other projects around the country. The nearby upstate New York project in Buffalo, for instance, also used marionettes and puppets for social issues and outreach programming. The *Federal Theatre* magazine notes that the Police Chief’s Association of the United States was “especially interested in” ongoing projects in Buffalo staging shows named “And Sudden Death” and “Drive Safely.”²³⁰ The driver’s education-like productions operated by using puppets to present the tragedies possible when driving neglectfully or while under the influence of alcohol. In doing so, the puppet theatre productions in upstate New York paralleled the implementation tactics of the puppet performances at Bellevue Hospital by allowing surrogacy with puppets to create an avenue where socially significant concepts and—as named in programming for MLLs—the “duties” of citizenship could be taught, while upholding a safe aesthetic distance for child participants. FTP officials report that the Buffalo “puppet show spares none of the horrors of reckless automobile driving” and celebrates that the police chief of

²³⁰ Ibid.

Buffalo would ask the performances to be played over and over again for police officers, citizen groups, and students to support his local initiative for safe driving.²³¹ These programs dictate a theatre for action focus, creating social change and ideological shifts of thought through the mode and medium of theatrical performance.

Meanwhile, back in New York City, radio play performances were being given as a part of the Federal Theatre of the Air program offered through CBS studios. Radio plays included education-centered programming on topics such as the “History of Inventions” and “Pioneers of Science.” The features were presented by the Federal Theatre in cooperation with the United States Department of Education, and oversaw not a social activist intention, but an instructional one—reaching thousands of children in New York City, and eventually in eleven other states through separate FTP projects. These instructional programs matched the pedagogical intention of performances given by the Federal Theatre’s Classical Unit in public high schools, where the FTP actors were being paid to bring the speech, rhetoric, and performance measures of Shakespeare and other classical texts to teenagers in their English classrooms. The educational programming in outreach realms also promotes a more holistic framing of theatre as not purely entertainment, but as invested in the experiential domain of student’s experiences—connected to their experiences of history, pop media, scientific innovation, and corporeal realities of the era.

Boal’s Four Catharses

While Schechner’s conceptualization of social theatre assists in framing the various programs and intentions of the Federal Theatre’s above work as socially efficacious, returning to Boal’s philosophy in *The Rainbow of Desire* allows for expansion of Schechner’s “theatre for healing” category as it pertains to the Bellevue puppet shows. As mentioned earlier, healing is an

²³¹ Ibid.

affective and sociological state with divergent experiences and nexuses of action or definition. In thinking of the theatre as an agent of internal and external change, it is useful to employ Boal's classification of the various efficacies of theatre; further, unlike Schecner, Boal asks not what type of theatre is being created, but what function of healing the theatre serves.

Boal lists four catharses that are central to the action and implementation of theatre as a form: medical, Morenian, Aristotelian, and Theatre of the Oppressed. For medial catharsis, Boal details the focus of theatre "to eliminate causes of physical, psychological or psychosomatic suffering."²³² For the more traditionally conceived form of theatrical catharsis—where a theatrically consumed heroic desire to violate the law is eliminated, allowing for reintegration of self and/or society—Boal used the term "Aristotelian" catharsis. This naturally stems from Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the critical analysis of Greek tragedy in 5th century BCE Athens, where Aristotle wrote to define catharsis in the theatre as a vehicle for communal, societal, and personal purging through theatre. Unlike the Aristotelian form, Boal's intervention in theatrical catharsis—or the catharsis intended and implied in Theatre of the Oppressed—was a purging reached through the creation of disequilibrium via intervention that "dynamises" and therefore destroys blocks prohibiting realisation on part of the individual or social group.²³³ This form of catharsis pairs Boal with Brecht, as both "famously rejected the notion of catharsis as socially retrograde, one that merely pacified an audience, leaving them emotionally neutralised and therefore reconciled to the status quo."²³⁴ For Boal's variation, the Theatre of the Oppressed as a

²³² Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, translated by Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 69.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, education and the making of meanings: Art or instrument?* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 34. Jackson, here, cites Boal's writing in *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre*—and succinctly notes the point of comparison that allowed Brecht and Boal to use anti-representational theatre to not passively perform *for* audiences, but *with* and *at* audiences to force a brand of

form allowed for audiences to directly participate in the creation of drama, and the intervention patterns that could bring about personal and collective purgings or relief.

The final of Boal's catharses is the one most in question for the Bellevue puppet show case study. "Morenian" catharsis is the purging of an internal poison through mimesis. Boal's concept that "In the 'Morenian' catharsis, what is expelled is, in a kind of way, a poison" is a useful overlap over medical and Morenian catharses—framing both forms as purgings of an internal, "agent of disturbance."²³⁵ This could be akin, Boal explains, to an actor playing a part similar to them, and ridding themselves of those negative similarities. Correspondingly, for the Bellevue puppet shows, the creation of surrogate characters representing the patient's self—what I'll co-define later in close reading of the performance event through Peter Slade's conception of "Projected Play"—allowed for purging of these "internal poisons" that held patients in a state of psychological unwellness.

Using Boal's model, the Bellevue Hospital case study can be categorized and analyzed as Morenian catharsis, and the stipulations of impact in the performance considered alongside J.L. Moreno's contribution to drama in therapeutics settings. It is worth stating here that for Boal, theatre was always a theatre of solutions; that societal and personal ills, through these four catharses, were being intervened in. Boal's theatre of easing troubles links the four catharsis as processes of purging, of ridding, and of purifying. Boal's philosophy of theatre was in this way indebted to Che Guevara, the Argentine revolutionary who served as a major player in the Cuban revolution. In performing for rural publics in impoverished Brazil, Boal witnessed and wrote of "extreme opulence" existing "alongside the most abject misery."²³⁶ Boal thought of theatre as the

recognition for disequilibrium (what Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or translated in English as the "Alienation Effect.")

²³⁵ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 70.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

intervening force, articulating how, “as idealistic artists, we could not be accomplices to such cruelty... it seems right to us, indeed a matter of great urgency, to exhort the oppressed to struggle against oppression. Which oppressed? All of them. The oppressed in a general sense. Too general a sense. And we made use of our art to tell Truths, to bring Solutions.”²³⁷ The last part of this theorization—that art is used “to tell Truths, to bring Solutions” is a paraphrasing of Guevara’s intentions of revolt during the Cuban revolution. In this way, Boal’s theatre, the theatre’s that Schechner theorized and created, and (earlier) theatres of impact that preceded the Federal Theatre’s tenure are unified by the purpose of theatre as change agent. The connections between Boal’s approach and Guevara, as well as his indebtedness to Paolo Freire’s belief in conscientization through education, fit theatre into a web of socially reformatory practices emerging during the mid-century era. While the Federal Theatre Project preceded many of these movements, the efficacy of their actions serves as early models for the power of theatre to sway and sustain public ideological change.

Before expanding on the form of Morenian catharsis illuminated in the Bellevue case study, hospital drama as a form and genre, and the use of puppets in the FTP and at Bellevue Hospital, a counter narrativization of Boal’s theatre can be gestured to. While theatre across time, transnationally and transhistorically, positions theatre as a change agent and powerful force of intervention, there are theatre practitioners and theorists who have sought to negate the claim of theatre’s efficacy to heal or alter human lives. Theatre practitioners from Brandon Jacob Jenkins to musical theatre warehouse workers have referred to the centrality of theatre as an entertainment form and storytelling device, not as a world altering form of art.²³⁸ Perhaps most famously and

²³⁷ Ibid. Punctuation is Boal’s.

²³⁸ I include Jenkins directly in this cataloging after hearing the influential playwright of *An Octoroon* and *Inappropriate* speak at the 2021 convening of the American Society of Theatre Research annual conference in San Diego. Jenkins’ spoke emphatically about theatre as ‘not accomplishing much’ beyond storytelling—paralleling theatre makers to medical doctors to highlight the low stakes of theatre practitionerhood as a profession.

iconoclastically, playwright David Mamet wrote at the end of the 20th century that, “people have tried for centuries to use drama to change people’s lives, to influence, to comment, to express themselves. *It doesn’t work*. It might be nice if it worked, but it doesn’t. The only thing dramatic form is good for is telling a story.”²³⁹ Highly criticized in the era of his most produced works between the American 1970s-1990s, and even more booming amidst the rise of intersectional political awareness the 21st century, Mamet’s argument against the impact of theatre beyond the audience’s reception of story serves as a counter narrative to the socially efficacious theatres discussed in this chapter. What I find valuable in Mamet’s argument against theatre as a change agent is the speed with which practitioners, theorists, and critics seek to categorize monolithic distinctions upon theatre as an art form. Framing theatre in a binary (theatre that simply tells a story vs. theatre that seeks to change lives) and as a monolith (theatre can only be, do, or serve the function of one intention) belittles the expansive properties and subjective realities of the art form for various individuals and diverse communities across the United States, and globe. In the Federal Theatre alone, this project works to find change influence among four highly different productions and projects. The FTP created and served as testament to caravan productions, Living Newspapers, TYA performance, mainstream popular theatres—none of which sought to accomplish a singular goal, beyond economic relief for the practitioners involved. The reductions of theatre portended by Mamet also reveal markings of theatre’s pollution by capitalism, in the credentialing of certain theaters over others; they further illuminate the reductive intentions of practitioners like Mamet, who reached financial and career success by innovating the aesthetics of theatre, while negating the work of theatre practitioners who dream even bigger. In this chapter and beyond, I argue for the labor of theatre practitioners who open doors to a power of theatre that is perhaps incomprehensible to them, but abundantly meaningful for patients, clients,

²³⁹ David Mamet, *A Whore’s Profession: Notes and Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 386. My italics.

recoverers, healers, and audience members who have experienced their own (and their community's) personal change through theatre, rather than pathologizing the impact of theatre in order to create a box small enough for only their personal works to fit inside of.

Morenian Catharsis, Psychodrama, and Drama Therapy

Psychodrama & the tools for purging of illness

Boal's conception of "Morenian catharsis" is entitled after Jacob L. Moreno, frequently considered the originator of psychodrama. Psychodrama, a form of therapy that uses role playing as its central means of discourse and discovery, was conceptualized in the years following the turn of the century, and grew into prominence amidst therapy practices over the following decades. Moreno focused on an "active, highly personalized, group-oriented" therapy practice—one where the individual clients did not exist inside of an isolated subjecthood, or where talk therapy dominated the mining of unconscious desires (as did many other forms of psychoanalysis in the post-Freud intervention era).²⁴⁰ In doing so, Moreno shoehorned in a "radical turn for psychiatry in the 1920s and 1930s," one that expanded therapy practice from individual to the full community's development (patients, assistants, and audience alike).²⁴¹ During a psychodrama session led by Morena—and in the subsequent variations on his methodology—patients could expect to role play through areas of fixedness, or through scenarios that had caused them complications. In this way, Moreno's psychodrama became a model for extensive variations on role playing, inhabiting of alternative perspectives, and play as a means of catharsis or purging on psychological ills during the early 20th century.

²⁴⁰ Jonathan Fox, "Introduction," in *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, edited by Jonathan Fox (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1987), xii.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Over time in the early 20th century, psychodrama as a form gave way to the creation of drama therapy. Drama therapy borrows the logic of role playing from psychodrama and its theatrical antecedents, as well as from acts of ritual, symbolic performance, and other antiquitous (indigenous, informal, primitive) arts, to support students in and out of therapy settings. Unlike psychodrama, which seeks to purge internal “poisons” (to use Boal’s rhetoric) or past traumas, drama therapy frequently is “concerned with the creative development of the whole person, physically, mentally and emotionally, through the drama process.”²⁴² Using this proactive rather than reparative model, drama therapists seek to teach patients social skills, problem solving tactics, and coping mechanisms, focusing on how the patient can be benefitted by drama, not how drama can operate as an intervention in the harms inflicted on the individual. Peter Slade—aforementioned specialist in children’s therapy, and drama therapy with youth populations—frames the proactive nature of drama therapy in what he terms the three main “divisions” of drama; the last of which is “prevention” of future ills, or as in the learning of somatic and embodied tools that can aid in crises when it arises.²⁴³ Both models are richly anti-Cartesian in logic—integrating mind, body, and spirit through the art making process (and the therapeutic process) to allow the patient access to a holistic and unified sense of wellness.

Moreno’s philosophy, and the developments of drama therapy in the wake of psychodrama’s mass appeal, effectively align with the beliefs of Boal and other practitioners and

²⁴² Sue Jennings, “Drama Therapy: Origins and the Physically Disabled,” in *Drama in Therapy*, edited by Gertrud Schattner and Richard Courtney, vol 1, *Children* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981), 57.

²⁴³ Peter Slade, “Dramatherapy,” in *Drama in Therapy*, edited by Gertrud Schattner and Richard Courtney, Vol 1, *Children* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981), 77. Slide lists the three divisions of drama in therapy settings as, “a) conscious and intended therapy, b) constructive education, and c) prevention.” Slade’s views on psychoanalytic properties touched in drama therapy—such as what he saw as an innate and normal process of children killing in their dramas as a form of gaining control—are somewhat antiquated. That said, his conceptions and methodology for children’s therapy practice are highly useful, in tracking the influence they had on future generations of drama therapists and children’s drama practitioners.

social activists who saw drama as a means towards personal reformation. Jonathan Fox writes that Moreno's model was pivotally concerned with "the importance of living one's truth in action; the validity of subjective reality; the premise of living here-and-now encounter between individuals (including client and therapist); and a deep egalitarianism."²⁴⁴ Moreno himself wrote in search of a definition for psychodrama that, "psychodrama can be defined as the science which explores the 'truth' by dramatic methods. It deals with interpersonal relations and private worlds."²⁴⁵ The relationship between these articulations and Boal and Guevara's pursuit of a theatre that would "bring Solutions" and "tell Truths" can't be overstated. It's clear that during the concurrent and (in fact) co-development of psychodrama, drama therapy, and social theatres for action during the early 20th century that the means of theatre to heal were reaching a climax in global, and certainly in American, settings.

Drama Therapy & self-reflective growth

In drama therapy, the constitution of what Moreno calls "private" worlds can be explored in safe and generative settings, and under the guidance of mental health professionals. As psychodrama and drama therapy grew in prominence, so too was using the forms with children's population development. An example of how the therapist serves as guide and interpreter for the embattlement and negotiation of a child's internal world can be seen, in one mode, through the work of Richard A. Garner. Garner writes of the histories of drama therapy application by the mid-century that demonstrate how "making the unconscious conscious can itself be

²⁴⁴ Jonathan Fox, introduction to "Psychodrama and Sociodrama," in *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, edited by Jonathan Fox (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1987), 13.

²⁴⁵ Jacob L. Moreno, "Psychodrama and Sociodrama," in *The Essential Moreno*, 13.

therapeutic.”²⁴⁶ “Eliciting stories” elaborates Gardner, in detailing the psychotherapy and drama therapy processes of provoking client-told stories to create platforms for the therapy’s drama enactment with children, as “a time-honored practice in child psychotherapy.” In detailing his own methodology, Garner elaborates on what he referred to as Mutual Storytelling Technique: “in this method the child first tells a story; the therapist surmises its psychodynamic meaning and then tells one of his own. The therapist’s story contains the same characters in a similar setting, but he introduced *healthier adaptations and resolutions* of the conflicts that have been exhibited in the child’s story.”²⁴⁷ Garner’s process for drama therapy bridges the tools of psychodrama with children’s psychology, allowing for a dramatic process to emerge that centers storytelling as a mode of internal discovery for the youth.

Distancing further from the antecedents of psychodrama, some drama therapy practitioners—such as therapist and drama therapy innovator Renée Emunah—use a wider array of interdisciplinary approaches in creating client-centered interactions through drama therapy. For Emunah, “although drama therapy can be practiced within the theoretical framework of almost any existing school of psychotherapy, it also has its own unique heritage; its conceptual roots can be traced to various multidisciplinary sources,” expanding drama therapy’s heritage to include equal indebtedness to psychodrama as theatre, ritual, dramatic play, and role play.²⁴⁸ Emunah’s drama therapy, crafted from years of client relationships and unique settings of drama therapy application, is a more intrapersonal approach. Whereas other pioneers of drama therapy and psychodrama focus on the clinician’s ability to interpret and support the client through the

²⁴⁶ Richard A. Gardner, “Dramatized Storytelling in Child Psychotherapy,” in *Drama in Therapy*, edited by Gertrud Schattner and Richard Courtney, vol 1, *Children* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981), 212.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Renée Emunah, *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xiii.

creation of stories that the client creates and clinician deciphers, Emunah's writing indicates a focus on the client's growth and self-reflection. Emunah writes that, "the use of drama therapy fosters liberation, expansion and perspective. Drama therapy invites us to uncover and integrate dormant aspects of ourselves, to stretch our conception of who we are, and to experience our intrinsic connection with others."²⁴⁹ This logic frames drama therapy not as a mode of psychoanalysis alone, but also crafts drama as a tool of self-discovery.

The drama therapy process used by Emunah—and emulated by various other drama therapy practitioners—follows a five stage process for the client-practitioner session. First, *Dramatic Play* is used to stimulate spontaneous, improvised play and structured dramatic games. Once the capacities and instruments of the client are activated, a second stage of *Scenework* is used to create sustained dramatic scenes, composing developed roles and characters. The third stage is "marked by the shifting of the dramatizations from the imaginary to the actual; clients are now ready to make sure of the dramatic medium to explore situations in their own lives;" this stage of *Role Play* allows for the tools of the first two stages to be employed in response to real life settings and scenarios chosen by the client.²⁵⁰ Perhaps the most pivotal moment in the drama therapy process as proposed by Emunah, a stage of *Culminating Enactments* harkens a "shift from concrete, present-day issues to more core issues in one's life."²⁵¹ Emunah details that this could be a shift towards childhood traumas, significant events, or processing of unconscious desires and actions, on the part of the client. Each drama therapy session then ends with a *Dramatic Ritual* period; unlike the broader conception of dramatic ritual, Emunah gestures here to a closing and grounding ceremonial action that allows for reintegration following the

²⁴⁹ Ibid, xvii.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 39.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 41.

Culminating Enactment. As clients move from various degrees of play, to direct responses and imagined responses to components of their own lives, it is this final stage which assists the clients “in carrying the changes made within the context of drama therapy into the real world.”²⁵²

Emunah’s focus for drama therapy, less hinged to psychodrama’s medium of psychoanalysis, then creates a platform on which the client is allowed to rehearse, unpack, and conceptualize alternatives for their own actions in day to day life. She writes of one client’s self-reflection, that “I can play scenes in drama better than I can play scenes in my life,” responding, “I can understand both his satisfaction and his concern; it is true that the stage offers the freedom to surpass our usual limitations. But I know that my client’s dramatic performances signify possibilities for real life. And sure enough, six months later, he says to me: ‘The way I’m acting in my life now is catching up with the way I act in drama.’”²⁵³ Emunah and other similarly oriented drama therapists create the intervention where drama therapy is not simply a means of surrogacy through drama to analyze the unconscious, but rather a mode where the therapy room is transformed into the rehearsal room. However, these rehearsals are *for* daily life; the clients are not actors, but players in the omnipresent world’s stage.

Variations on models of drama therapy are eclectic and widely diverse. For many practices and practitioners, individualized methodologies are utilized. In other cases, adaptations of drama therapy have been created for specific audiences, for specific modalities of theatrical performance, or inspired by drama therapy and conducted in alternative modes of therapy or theatre making. One of the most popularized (now taught and operated worldwide) and highly influential forms of theatre making adjacent to drama therapy, for instance, is Playback Theatre. Playback is a form of improvised drama that creates a platform for individual audience members

²⁵² Ibid, 44.

²⁵³ Ibid, xiii.

to step forward with stories to share with an acting troupe, and the performance's audience. Once selected, an audience member steps into the playing space—a stage with various performance accoutrements, including a “tree” of fabric cloths, musical instruments and musicians, specific playing space for the actors, and two chairs—and joined the troupe's “conductor” in the chairs (often downstage right). There, the audience member shares their story with the conductor—who subsequently clarifies points of the story through dialogue, and then enacts a performance by saying, “Let's Watch.” The actors in a Playback Troupe work to manifest the teller's story through improvisation, rhythm and music, gesture, soundscape, and dialogue—ultimately seeking to retell the story in a way that illuminates the core emotional and narrative values espoused by the teller. Created in 1975 near Poughkeepsie, New York by Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas, and their ensemble, the form has generated influence, as today Playback Theatre troupes internationally play for outreach groups (hospitals, spaces of incarceration, drug rehabilitation centers, schools) worldwide. Fox has argued that the “ultimate purpose of playback theatre” is to promote a “radical social encounter;” these encounters, in their nature of reflected performance, mirror aspects of dramatic ritual and other mimetic theatrical performance modes outside of the realm of drama therapy.²⁵⁴ However, the utility of Playback Theatre as a means of therapy, treatment, and social action is illuminated due to the form's ability to allow for interpretation and reinterpretation of complex socio-personal narratives in front of theatrical audiences. In a study of Playback Theatre, Playback practitioner and writer Nick Rowe explains this efficacy, articulating how, “amongst playback practitioners there seem to be three main claims that support playback's capacity to intervene politically and socially, namely, that playback provides an opportunity (i) for marginalized groups to tell their story; (ii) for opposing voices to be heard,

²⁵⁴ Nick Rowe, *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre*, (London; Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 29.

and (iii) for groups and communities to remember collectively and create/recreate their own history.”²⁵⁵ Bridging drama therapy and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback offers just one model of the myriad permutations of drama therapy modalities practices across the globe, testifying to not only the significance of drama therapy—but the affordability for the logic of drama therapy to be adjusted and extended for an array of audiences and purposes.

Puppet Theatre & Hospital Outreach in the FTP

As this chapter triangulates the various forms and mediums of theatre making, therapy, and education used to reach efficacious youth stewardship with the FTP’s Bellevue Hospital puppet productions, the fusion of different theatrical elements that made these performances possible is important to track. Having outlined the nature of psychodrama and drama therapy as vehicles for what Boal terms Morenean catharsis in the performance event, I’ll now introduce early interventions in the history of puppets in contemporary Western therapy practices. Then, I’ll ask how the Federal Theatre used puppets in non-therapeutic settings, before returning to the setting of the Bellevue performances (hospital dramas), and the Bellevue puppet theatre case study itself. In doing so, it is my hope that a disassembly and reassembly of the various practitioner tools being used to craft the Bellevue performance event assists historization of the potential impact of these productions. Given the limited extant evidence of testimonials or client-voiced endorsements of the Bellevue puppet shows that could be located in the writing of this study, analyzing the concord intentions and implementations of adjacent theatrical genres and performances contemporary, and leading to, this performance event serves a history of the FTP in outlining the circumstances that created, and fostered successful action for, the Bellevue puppet shows.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

Therapeutic Puppet Theatres: Efficacy and Intention

In a Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre Project officials wrote to articulate support for what they saw as spellbinding results of their work in Bellevue Hospital. Working with youth in the mental health facility, teaching artists from the FTP taught theatre to the clients at Bellevue, detailing the effects of their sessions with the youth. “It was a strange” explains the FTP artists’ report of the introductory moments of the performance to “see an audience of silent and listless children with dull eyes; no gayety, no laughter, no sense of play, no sense of illusion in the make-believe of the normal child’s world” as theatre artists began their programming for a group of still and perceptively inattentive children.²⁵⁶ The report continues, that “in time, however, the puppets began to take on identity and character for these children.”²⁵⁷ Before expanding on this Preliminary Report’s findings, or the testimonies of the Federal Theatre’s impact at Bellevue Hospital, it is worth singling out a few of these lines to consider the given circumstances of the Federal Theatre’s presentation at Bellevue Hospital. It is clear from the administrator’s writings that the key to successful therapeutic intervention for the Federal Theatre Project’s performance event in Bellevue Hospital was linking the tools of Morenean catharsis with the practitioners’ tools of crafting and performing with dolls and puppets. How else had this convention been used at the start of the 20th century? What antecedents for the Federal Theatre’s work had already been proposed by other practitioners of psychodrama, puppet theatre, and drama therapy?

One of the earliest pioneers in the use of puppets for therapeutic means with children was Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud, the famed originator of psychoanalytic theory. S.

²⁵⁶ Report, “Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project.” LAC #223, Boxes #1-3, Federal Theatre Project. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

Freud's development of psychoanalysis—based on his own clinical work as a psychiatrist and researcher of brain science—helped to coin and reconceptualize global understandings of the “unconscious” mind; id, ego, and superego formation; the primacy of dreams as meaning-making agents for human beings; unconscious and repressed desires. 20th century psychiatrist Simone Marcus, a practitioner and international expert on working with childhood victims of war, wrote in a detailing of the early history of trauma informed care for young psychiatric patients of how Anna Freud had “discovered the way to adapt her father's methods to children. She knew that a child has an Ego in formation, a judgement in the bud, so that an analyst could not base his therapy on the patient's own intellectual possibilities.”²⁵⁸ Presented with the issue of mining recent neurosis in the life of the children, without the directness or cognitive awareness that adult patients would have, A. Freud had to find a way to address the child's psychology in line with her father's approaches, but more delicately and with expectation on the patient themselves. Marcus writes that A. Freud's epiphany was that most children's concerns could be “healed mostly by ‘dramatisation’ - that is, by dramatic and imaginative play, expressing the emotion in action so that the moral pressure can be eased and the repression made more bearable. She invented the ‘play therapy’ where children could tell the analyst all their inner conflicts by the way of toys, dolls, sand, plasticine, etc. most of the time without realising at all what was being revealed.”²⁵⁹ A. Freud's tactic of using surrogate play, allowing the child to create and articulate thoughts (unconscious and conscious) through puppets and external mediums, allowed her and other early children psychoanalysts to safely learn more about children's mental health maladies—as well as to promote Moreno-like psychodrama interventions—in ways that were both innovative and

²⁵⁸ Simone Marcus, “Therapeutic Puppetry,” in *Puppets and Therapy*, edited by A. R. Philpott (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1977), 11.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

age-appropriate for children. Similar processes in children's psychology can be traced to the use of glove puppets by Madelaine Rambert in Switzerland. Rambert first used dolls in her clinical practice, but found that puppets were far more useful, determining that, "a child can completely disappear behind the guignol's (puppet's) personality, as he enters it completely, inhabits it, so to speak. Even without a curtain to hide behind - a formal stage - a child identifies himself easily with a puppet, or gives it the personality of one of the family and makes it move and talk in a great variety of characterizations."²⁶⁰ Rambert's interventions—alongside A. Freud's—were pivotal for early formulations in psychoanalysis with children; so much so that her field defining work *Children in Conflict: Twelve Years of Psychoanalytic Practice* (1945) included a preface by significant educational theorist Jean Piaget. It is worth noting that Rambert's earlier writings on her methods in children's psychology were published in 1938; A. Freud's practices were written into several books between 1942-1943. This means that as the Federal Theatre was creating performances using puppets and dolls for the means therapeutic theatre in 1937, the project was operating horizontally—likely being inspired by, and inspiring—a burgeoning practice in the development of children's psychiatry.

The use of puppets in early 20th century psychiatric work with children using Freudian-inspired psychoanalysis, and children's creative and dramatic play in therapy settings, gave way to permutations of the implementations of puppets as therapeutic vehicles by the mid-century. Psychologist Lawry Hawkey, among likely others, connected the practice of puppets in child therapy to C.G. Jung's approaches through the School of Analytical Psychology. Jung's approach to psychoanalysis—while foremost next to Freud's in the growth of reception and legibility for theories of the unconscious mind—differed from Freudian psychoanalysis in its

²⁶⁰ Ibid. Ramet was actually advised to prioritize the hand puppet over the doll by Horace de Saussure, a prominent Swiss naturalist, geologist, and mountaineer known for his explorations of the Alps. Horace de Saussure's grandson was Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist often considered the founder of semiotics.

emphasis on spiritual and collective symbolic elements present in the unconscious mind.

Hawkey employed Jungian methodologies, reporting that in the therapy process, “the children play with any of the material in my room and I play with them when they wish me to do so. The choice of the play is always left to the child. During the past few years I have included amongst my material a set of glove puppets... they have proved extremely useful for the expression of fantasy.”²⁶¹ The unique import of play through puppets can then be understood as of emerging significance to the field of psychology—creating a window of opportunity for the practice that directly co-aligned with the tenure of the Federal Theatre Project.

Puppet Performance in the Federal Theatre

The Bellevue Hospital puppet theatres operate alongside growing trends for commercial puppet theatres and the aforementioned development of puppet use in therapy setting. While not newly invented these performance practices, the Federal Theatre’s use of puppets in outreach settings is a marked use of the mode of theatre for causal efficacy. The use of puppets by the FTP was supported by earlier performance iterations, where the Federal Theatre had been crafting and promoting puppet theatre nationwide prior to the Bellevue case studies. Digital and in-person Federal Theatre Project archives detail the fairly extensive use of puppet theatre by the project throughout the years of its operation—in a multitudinous series of possible applications, audiences, and settings. The most rudimentary of these performances show, as one might expect, in entertainment settings; a narrator would be presenting a puppet show to a group of children, as actors operate hand puppets behind the small proscenium created for the puppet’s creations.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Lawry Hawkey, “Puppets in Child Psycho-Therapy,” in *Puppets and Therapy*, edited by A. R. Philpott (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1977), 17-24.

²⁶² See Appendix C, Figure 1. Photograph(s), Federal Theatre Project, 1935 to 1939. Production Records, 1934 to 1943: Photographic Prints File, 1934 to 1939 (1 of 2,641). Library of Congress, digital archive.

Across the country, other applications and performance events with puppets were crowd favorites of the performance modalities forwarded by the FTP. In North Carolina, the Carolina Playmakers—working in conjunction with the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, a hub of FTP activities in the South—staged hand-puppet productions. In one archival photo, two Carolina Playmaker actors hold up their hand puppets, displaying how the puppets would fit inside of a small proscenium to create the marionette show for children.²⁶³

Hand puppets were only one type of puppet theatre extended by the Federal Theatre. References to Flanagan’s “menace of marionette shows” are found in the archive’s ongoing mention of marionette puppets in Children’s Units around the country. To remind readers, in Flanagan’s pivotal *New York Times* op-ed in defence of the Federal Theatre, she sardonically wrote of a Congressman who opposed the project was, “what he saved his constituents from was the menace of marionette shows for children, free vaudeville performances for the ill, and aged and the underprivileged.”²⁶⁴ In one photo from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, DC—one of the largest repositories for Federal Theatre Project remnants and remains—marionette dolls are shown.²⁶⁵ The image details two child-like marionette dolls appearing to play “hide-and-seek” around a tree on the right side of the frame, while a bird-like creature looks on from the left side of the image; the bird’s beak is craftily fashioned, and the children—costumes and all—are highly detailed design creations.

Similar to the Children’s Unit’s collection of TYA performers and theatre practitioners, and the troupes of vaudeville actors in Vaudeville Units around the country curated by the

²⁶³ See Appendix C, Figure 2. Photograph, The Caroline Playmakers. C0002, Box #1, Federal Theatre Project Collection. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

²⁶⁴ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

²⁶⁵ See Appendix C, Figure 3. Photograph. Marionette production. Federal Theatre Project. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

Federal Theatre, the archive indicates that—while often not listed or remembered as formal “units” in the FTP—the project also housed a number of marionette theatre troupes. In one photo, dated September 27th, 1937—directly aligned with the year of the Bellevue Hospital puppet productions—a group of marionette operators and actors stand posing with their puppets. Over a dozen puppeteers smile with a collection of marionette puppets; the troupe contains both men and women practitioners—many of whom are wearing white aprons in what appears to be either a costume, or design preparation. The photo’s description reads: “Assistant Supervisor, M.B. Elyott, in charge of marionette productions... in this group of the puppet units of the WPA New York State Federal Theatre Project.”²⁶⁶ This is a curious extant document for a number of reasons. First, the photo’s description indicated the “puppet units” as *units* in the WPA, New York State FTP division. Which is to say that, while not often formalize in histories of the Federal Theatre, the Puppet Units are perhaps worth remembering with the same contemporary status as the Children’s, Negro, Vaudeville, Classical, Living Newspaper, and other units of the Federal Theatre. Secondly, the highlighting of the Assistant Supervisor indicates the FTP infrastructure—and, therefore, Federal Theatre appropriation of funding—was being designed to include the puppet theatres as prominent features of the WPA operations. Lastly, the fact this is the New York State grouping of puppeteers for the Federal Theatre in the year 1937 presupposes that this is likely the group (or, at least members of this group) that served the Bellevue Hospital puppet theatre productions. With limited-to-no documentation of the Bellevue Hospital puppet theatre performance events published, or appearing outside of the FTP archives, the triangulation of this photo as containing members of the Bellevue Hospital casts brings forward an important remembering of the productions themselves, and the prominence that puppet theatres had in the Federal Theatre.

²⁶⁶ Federal Theatre Project, U.S. Marionettes—Puppeteers. Photograph. Library of Congress, digital archive. 1934.

With antecedents for the Bellevue Hospital puppet theatres clearly documented, a remaining question is how these earlier iterations of puppet theatre worked to promote the type of theatre (therapeutic and otherwise) that occurred at Bellevue. One indication of this returns to a reading of the Preliminary Report—analyzing it in conjunction with similar puppet theatres that operated elsewhere in the FTP. The report indicates that at Bellevue Hospital, the FTP program operators watched young patients of the psychiatric ward as, “clumsy fingers learned how to make clothes for the dolls and finally how to make the puppets walk and run and move their arms about.”²⁶⁷ The report testifies that patients didn’t just *watch* the performances (as discussed earlier), but that the children were involved in the actual theatre making itself as participatory drama. The actual performed actions of the patients and puppets will constitute the final arguments of this chapter, but let’s first look closer at the cursory components of this documentation. Prior to even playing with, as, or through the puppets, children had a chance to *construct* the puppets in their performances. Crafting the clothing and figures of these dolls has obvious implications for the actual performance efficacy; that patients could have been creating dolls to represent themselves (separate, still, from the performance play). It also demonstrates ways the Federal Theatre’s outreach programs worked to not only send performances to local institutions in need, but to craft theatre experiences: shifting audience members into participants.

Participatory Action in FTP Puppet Shows

The children were also given agency over their contributions to the doll making process. This aspect of the performance is aligned with what 21st century studies of trauma informed care, and trauma informed pedagogy, frame as a vital feature for outreach instruction. In the study “Trauma Informed Social Work Practice” researchers in the field of social work outlined

²⁶⁷ “Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project”

agency and choice—like the offerings of choice given to the Bellevue cast study youth—as a core pillar of trauma informed care. Citing a long line of social work researchers, Jill Levenson writes that "rather than focusing on specific interventions, TIC seeks to create a safe environment for clients that enables trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment across treatment modalities so that clients can experience healthy relationships with others."²⁶⁸ Levensen's list aligns with numerous other resources (pedagogical, therapeutic, and social outreach oriented) that describe the tenets of trauma informed care—including other indicators, such as predictability, sensory-safe spaces, and building of mutual trust. These core features of trauma informed care, are featured beyond social work settings, such as in the field-adjacent domain of museum studies. In a contribution to the *Journal of Museum Education*, Jackie Armstrong and their team detail how (for their own study), "in a trauma-informed teaching practice, visitors are given choice and agency in how they respond to a prompt, allowing them to reveal as much or as little of themselves as feels safe in the moment."²⁶⁹ Given that the Bellevue study works in a teaching and learning setting, other recent studies are useful for noting how trauma informed care operates and trauma informed instruction (or, trauma informed pedagogy). One such study is Ming-Te Wang and Jacquelynne S. Eccles' research on "School Context, Achievement Motivation, and Academic Engagement," where the two researchers argue for "provision of choice" as a core feature of instruction that can promote student's engagement and learning

²⁶⁸ Jill Levenson, "Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice," *Social Work (New York)* 62, no. 2 (2017): 106. doi:10.1093/sw/swx001. TIC in this citation indicated "Trauma Informed Care." Levensen cites this quotation in their own article with several other studies, not reviewed for this chapter, including: Elliott, Bjelajac, Fallot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005; Harris & Fallot, 2001.

²⁶⁹ Jackie Armstrong, et al., 2021, "Weaving Trauma Awareness into Museum Education," *Journal of Museum Education* 46 (4): 461, doi:10.1080/10598650.2021.1981045.

capacity during a regimen of instruction.²⁷⁰ Given all of this 21st century research, the ability for students to operate with choice and agency over the crafting and creation of their own puppets during the Bellevue study intimates ways that the performance event—as well as the instruction and client stewardship being offered by the Federal Theatre—were ahead of their time in operations of care for a vulnerable patient population in the late 1930s.

Was there a precedent of this kind of stewardship and instruction in the Federal Theatre Project? A particularly fascinating article entitled “But Is It Art?” that appeared in the *Federal Theatre Magazine* clues us into other ways that doll construction took place with educational populations in the Federal Theatre prior to the Bellevue Hospital shows. A photo accompanying the brief article/description shows two hand puppets—one sitting, one “standing”—as well as a small wagon-like apparatus carrying small blocks and cubes next to them. The description details how, “the WPA Arts Projects have tapped a vein of artistic ability the existence of which no art critic in America had even expected.”²⁷¹ This opening of doors for artistic abilities relates to the dolls as craft-your-own creations taken to various youth populations across the country. It is valuable to mention that one of the two dolls depicted a young Black girl—forwarding other activist intentions, and cultural pluralism, frequently undervalued or absent in the programmatic of instruction during the American 1930s. Other archival materials and previous research on the Federal Theatre indicate this was a cyclical practice; that doll and puppet creation would accompany workshops and classes taught by Federal Theatre units focused on puppet theatre.

²⁷⁰ Ming-Te Wang and Jacquelynne S Eccles, “School Context, Achievement Motivation, and Academic Engagement: A Longitudinal Study of School Engagement Using a Multidimensional Perspective,” *Learning and Instruction* 28 (2013): 12–23. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2013.04.002.

²⁷¹ See Appendix C, Figure 5. “But Is It Art?” Bureau of Research and Publication, *Federal Theatre* (New York: New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division). For this particular photo/article, the archival location was a clipping—which precluded citation of the specific volume/edition of the *Federal Theatre* publication that the photo was originally published in.

This use of physical manipulatives, of crafting dolls and puppets themselves for the performances that youth would later take place in during their Federal Theatre Project workshops at Bellevue Hospital creates a detailed psychological attachment to the physical objects that even the therapy or performance practices would otherwise not include. Similar arguments have been made by researchers and therapy practitioners like Nadia Ferrara, who in *Healing through Art: Ritualized Space and Cree Identity* describes clinical work with Cree indigenous populations in Canada. In Ferrara's practice, physical space and physical touch become of significance for the patient's experiences in therapy practice. Ferrara writes "applying Lefebvre's framework on the production of social space, the art therapy milieu can be viewed as constituting three interrelated dimensions: (1) physical space; (2) mental space; and (3) social space."²⁷² The physical space and physical materials of the therapy process at Bellevue Hospital can then be understood as central to the FTP's workshops. Ferrara invokes the research of Edith Kramer to claim that "art and the creative process involve a complex comprehension of both the physical handling of art materials in order to form them so that they serve as symbolic equivalents for human experience and the psychic processes that motivate creative work."²⁷³ Using the logic of Ferrara and Kramer, the Federal Theatre teaching artists working at Bellevue Hospital were—in ways understood by the practitioners, and in ways would only be fuller conceptualized in later research on drama therapy, art therapy, and trauma informed care—were implementing a rather sophisticated process of instruction and therapy during their performance events. Allowing young people to create their own dolls, with choice and control over the construction process and intentions of their artworks; then, to play with those dolls as puppets inside of a therapeutic setting set the

²⁷² Nadia Ferrara, *Healing through Art: Ritualized Space and Cree Identity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 92.

²⁷³ Ibid. Original logic drawn from seminal art therapy work conducted by Edith Kramer. Edith Kramer, *Art as Therapy with Children*. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

stage for meaningful interventions in the therapy process—ones that could only have been created through the modalities, tools, and intentions of a theatre program.

Hospital Performances: History & WPA Context

Theatre in Medical Settings

In order to fuse this analysis of the tools and design process of the Bellevue Hospital puppet theatre case study to the theatrical, therapeutic, and affect domains of the performance event, one final component of the performances must be considered: the setting. Theatre in hospitals, psychiatric institutions, and other centers of healing has long been a locality of theatrical creation. If the who, why, and when of the Bellevue puppet theatres has already been unpacked in this chapter, I'll next argue for the significance of the "where" (in a hospital setting), before expounding the "what" (the purported "awakening" of children's senses) through the medium of theatrical performance.

Astutely aware of the power of theatre to generate physiological, psychological, and spiritual change, Renée Emunah (aforementioned as a major voice in the development of drama therapy) has explained that "theatre and performance artists are increasingly cognizant of the healing dimensions—for themselves and for their audiences—of their work."²⁷⁴ However, the theatres of the mind and body enumerated earlier in this chapter are ones operating as genre and methodology dependent; both the healing and the theatrical creating of forms like drama therapy, psychodrama, and Playback Theatre are fused to the dramatic process undertaken by practitioners and instructional leaders. Other healing theatres focus their efficacy and impact on the site of creation—building theatre productions, workshops, and participatory drama classes in hospitals themselves. Long prior to the implementation of theatre in hospitals, the intertwined

²⁷⁴ Renée Emunah, *Acting for Real*, 11.

and symbiotic relationship between theatre as a form and healing centers as spaces was explored by theatre practitioners.

The relationship between theatre and medical observation is one that can be understood as bilateral across these centuries old traditions of performance. Divergent, but adjacent, to the logics of religiocentric “healing” mentioned earlier, some performances of cure and healing were documented in Western culture as earlier as in the 5th Century B.C.E. in Greece. The Greek god of healing, Asklepios, was said to have “restored patients to health in many ways.”²⁷⁵ Rituals and rites given at the sanctuary of Asklepios would have given Ancient Greeks a way to use performance to harken, or to ask for, healing from the gods. Aristophanes’ comedy *Ploutos* gives detailed recount of how ritual would have taken place at god’s sanctuaries, such as the rites undertaken at the sanctuary of Asklepios.

Further accounts of healing, pain, and ritual in Ancient Greece can be found in an analysis of performances of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* in 409 B.C.E. Angela Belli argues that the experience of viewing the human body in pain was, at times, central to the performance of Ancient Greek theatre. In Sophocles’ drama, emissaries of the Greeks arrive on Lemnos to retrieve Philoctetes. Still suffering from an unhealed wound, and experiencing social trauma of abandonment and betrayal by his former comrades, Philoctetes enters the space with cries, groans, howls of immense pain. Using theoretical framing from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body In Pain*, Belli writes that in Ancient Athens the ability for “a sensitive observer (to) interpret, if not feel, the pain of the sufferer” would have been a central component of the empathetic, and cathartic, mechanics for the Greek polis as spectators.²⁷⁶ Belli elaborates, “such is often the case

²⁷⁵ Karelisa Hartigan, *Performance and Cure: Drama and Healing in Ancient Greece and Contemporary America* (London: Duckworth, 2009), 23

²⁷⁶ Angela Belli, “Introduction,” in *Bodies and Barriers: Dramas of Dis-Ease*, edited by Angela Belli (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2008), x. Belli’s writing heavily influenced and citation to Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

in medicine, when the physician who trusts the patient as a reliable narrator of his own sentient needs can interpret such expression as an aid in restoring health,” comparing the audience member in Ancient Greece to the medical doctor—and noting how in the act of pain, clarity for a patient’s experience of suffering is offered (separately) through both medical and spectatorial interventions.²⁷⁷ In this way—and in myriads of dramaturgical referents—embodied suffering and need for medical assistance are served by theatrical rendering, throughout cultural theatre history.

Correspondingly, the theatre *of* medicine is a field in and of itself. Drawing lineage in early civilization, mimetic actions and communal viewing of medical procedure, and altered in significance as a theatrical (rather than ritualistic or drama) form, history is replete with examples of spectators of medical procedure. By the 16th century, medical doctors would complete dissections for paying audiences. In more medicinal rather than capitalistic modalities, the “operating theatre”—or, medical operating theatres that are built with non-sterile spaces for viewers, family members, and medical students to watch the procedure/surgery—grew in prominence through the 19th century. Bolstered as a medical training apparatus, and a way for relatives to observe significant surgery processes, Chraibi et al. write literally and figuratively that “The operating theater (OT) is the heart of any hospital having a surgical operation unit.”²⁷⁸ With these notes of recognition, even prior to the advent of what are now referred to as “bedside theatres” (the circumstances where theatre groups are brought in as emotional and therapeutic services for patients in hospitals), the mutually dependent relationship between medical spaces and theatre as a form has a rich and extensive history.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Chraibi, Abdelahad, Ibrahim H Osman, and Said Kharraja. “Adaptive Layout for Operating Theatre in Hospitals: Different Mathematical Models for Optimal Layouts.” *Annals of Operations Research* 272, no. 1–2 (2019): 494.

Significant work in this field has been undertaken by Greek applied theatre practitioner Persephone Sextou. Working across several decades serving (in particular) children in hospital settings, Sextou identifies benefits for viewing and participatory drama with children in hospitals. Drawing from case studies and review of histories of other hospital dramas, Sextou writes that children viewing theatre in hospitals are served, as the performances offer aid in various domains, including: a) distraction from illness, b) helping with preoperative stress, and c) building trust and belief in the hospital and medical professionals serving them.²⁷⁹ Theatre has even been found to serve as pedagogy for procedural tasks such as taking medications. Ultimately, through theatre, youth in hospital spaces are empowered through acts and engagements of imagination—transporting the youth from objecthood in the daunting medical systems, and as a victim of the even-more-daunting medical ailments, to subjecthood in pieces of theatre, and as viewers of theatrical creation.

By the 1990s, creation of theatre in and for populations in hospitals started to be grouped under the burgeoning classification of “applied theatre.” An umbrella term for a number of different social theatres, Helen Nicholson defines applied theatre in the seminal *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* as theatrical processes that are “undertaken by those who want to touch the lives of others, who hope that participants and audiences will extend their perception of how life is, and imagine how it might be different.”²⁸⁰ Acknowledging that many theatres adhere to this intention and model, Nicholson elaborates that it is a central concern of applied theatre to “encourage people to use the experience of participating in theatre to move beyond what they already know.”²⁸¹ The core verb in Nicholson’s definition is “participating.” In both a

²⁷⁹ Persephone Sextou and Claire Monk, “Bedside theatre performances and its effects on hospitalised children’s well-being,” in *Arts & Health*, Vol. 5(1), 81.

²⁸⁰ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke, England; Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 166.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

participatory action (research) and Brechtian sense, applied theatre demands engagement by the theatrical audience. That engagement could be in the form of a Brechtian critical consciousness during the performance—often illuminated due to the shared positionalities of the audience members and the subject matter of applied theatre works—or, in direct involvement in the creation of theatre. In this way, applied theatre is often directed towards a perfunctory realignment as “applied drama.” Nicholson, opting for the use of “applied drama” in title and focus, uses the Greek word “*dran*” meaning “to make or do” to credential “drama” as preferred for applied drama settings, arguing that drama characterizes “a practice oriented by process” compared to theatre was “an aesthetic practice characterized by performance.”²⁸² Sexou and Claire Monk extend this logic, arguing that in their practitioner work, “we use applied drama as a diverse range of both process-led and performance-based interactive practices that rely on both pedagogy and aesthetic engagement, take place in non-traditional theatre contexts and spaces and, aim to transform and improve the lives of individuals and communities.”²⁸³ Accordingly, we can consider a working definition for applied theatre in this chapter to be theatre used in outreach or high-impact settings where the viewership and participation in theatre allows for transcendence beyond a typical audience role—instead utilizing the intersection of unique given circumstances (hospitals, prisons, drug rehabilitation) and patient/audience-focused performance to generate change for the spectatorial populations.

What makes hospital drama—as a form of applied drama—useful for patient populations? The answer to that question is multiplicitous and complex, permuting and augmenting depending on the specific contest and application of the applied drama in hospital

²⁸² Ibid, 4.

²⁸³ Sexou and Monk, “Bedside theatre performances and its effects on hospitalised children’s well-being,” 81.

settings. While the theatre practitioner arguments for theatre are concordant or adjacent to a number of rationales for the other healing theatres in this chapter, one dimension of the use for applied drama in hospitals is related to the hospitals and medical professionals themselves, rather than the benefits for patients. In a study on cultures of safety in hospitals, Gail Mitchell and Julia Gray highlight two concepts relation to these goals. Mitchell and Gray introduce a concept of “*blinding familiarity*” that plagues medical professionals in hospitals. “*Blinding familiarity* can be linked with the perceptual phenomenon called inattentional blindness” explains the study, elaborating that this secondary term can be “understood as people not being able to see what they are not attending to.”²⁸⁴ In hospital contexts, this would mean that medical professionals don’t pay attention to aspects of a patient’s health and wellbeing that are not directly connected to diagnosis or treatment plan. In the Bellevue Hospital puppet show case study, this can be seen as significant due to testimonies by Federal Theatre practitioners that the FTP actors and medical professionals alike were shocked by certain capacities of the patients enlivened by the puppet shows. Focusing on the patients monolithically as patients led the medical practitioners to have *blinding familiarity* with the youth, and to ignore ways that child-like spirits could emerge from the youth in the right context, and given advantageous prompting. Mitchell and Gray expand to a second definition: characterizing a phenomenon they term *dismissive urgency*. “*Dismissive urgency* can be understood as health professionals becoming so intent on getting through their work tasks with speed beyond mere efficiency that a kind of work-urgency emerges” explains their study; “urgent dismissiveness health professionals communicate through their words and body language actually increases danger because patients and families do ‘not want to bother’

²⁸⁴ Julia Gray and Gail Mitchell, “Considering Aesthetics: Bringing New Awareness to Patient Safety Culture in Hospitals,” in *Research-based Theatre: An Artistic Methodology*, edited by George Belliveau and Graham W. Lea (Chicago: Intellect, 2016), 77-88.

the busy workers, despite that their stories might provide insight into their health and care.”²⁸⁵

While direct evidence from the Bellevue case study can’t be used to triangulate aspects of dismissive urgency with the youth psychiatric ward patients, what is useful is noting that the aspects of agency, autonomy, and choice previously noted as aspects of trauma informed care in the FTP workshops are—in traditional medical procedure—stripped from the patient. Patients in the youth ward would likely not only have little choice, but little voice amidst *dismissive urgency* in the mechanics of the hospital system providing for their care. In these ways, aspects of hospital safety can be seen as being augmented, created, and promoted through in the applied drama process—where theatre practitioners and the applied drama they bring into these settings serve as expedients and mechanisms for more ready (faster, more concerted) address of their care than would otherwise exist outside of, or without, the applied drama intervention.

In the hospital setting, specific modalities of theatre have served as particularly poignant in serving patient populations. One particularly ratified means of support for patients—and specifically youth patients—in hospitals is germane to the collected research of this chapter: puppetry. In a study focusing on puppet theatre in hospitals, Persephone Sextou and Anatoli Karypidou write of how the expansive genre of puppetry, as well as the affective surrogacy of the form, make it particularly useful in working with youth in hospitals. “Puppetry is presented as a multi-medium that enhances communication, contact and connection and as a form that encourages play, creative expression and engagement in both performance and therapy in health-care environments” write the two applied drama researchers.²⁸⁶ The benefits of the use of

²⁸⁵ Ibid. Expanded description of *dismissive urgency* notes that it “has the potential to be harmful to patients when health professionals assume that another professional is responsible for that particular part of the patient’s overall care.”

²⁸⁶ Persephone Sextou and Anatoli Karypidou, “Applied theatre, puppetry and emotional skills in healthcare: A cross-disciplinary pedagogical framework,” in *Applied Theatre Research*, Vol. 8(1), 2020, 96.

puppets for applied drama can be seen as directly therapeutic and efficacious for youth populations, as Sextou and Karypidou note. “for the purpose of exploring the perception of emotional skills by the participants, we also asked them what emotional skills were necessary in their profession. The top significant categories that were demonstrated were empathy, emotional safety, emotional resilience, reflective openness and social awareness, self-awareness and self-reflection, and active listening.”²⁸⁷With varied and extensive arguments for applied drama, puppetry, and therapeutic theatres in hospitals, it may be wondered why there isn’t more extensive use and popular culture conversation on these forms. The same is true for scholarly arguments in service of applied drama in hospitals. The easiest logic for this abscess is that without major classification (as “applied drama”) for these programs, theatre practitioners who created in this form during the early 20th century and in other outreach programs predating the emergence of the vocabulary for applied drama in the 1990s may have created this form of theatre, but without extensive documentation—or without credentialing for the form that allowed it to be seen as simultaneously theatre, therapy, and social outreach.

How did the Federal Theatre Project use the approaches of applied theatre in hospitals to serve those healing, through performance and patient stewardship? There seems to be an archival conundrum in answering this question. A number of Federal Theatre studies raise and recognize that the FTP was working inside of hospital settings through the late 1930s. However, few detail the exact nature of that work, and what kinds of performances were brought into the hospital settings. Most clearly, it seems that vaudeville and other small-act groups would come into hospitals to perform for patients, for all of the reasons aforementioned—as well as to employ actors and theatre artists for a reliable venue/audience, alongside the relief goals of the Federal Theatre. However, as public outreach performances, extant materials are limited—or, likely,

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

scattered across the various repositories and localized archives of the Federal Theatre. These performances were also unlikely to have had programs, extensive costumes, or other material artifacts, which—unlike other FTP productions documented by those materials—makes it more difficult to record exactitudes of the performance events in FTP hospital performances.

Some of the most fascinating pieces of evidence of these shows that are held in Federal Theatre archives, however, are photographs of the patients themselves during FTP hospital shows. In the Library of Congress records, several photos remain of members of hospital audiences—clearly maligned and recovering—while they watch performances held by various subsections of the Federal Theatre Project. In one such photo, a large group of young to old men are gathered on one side of a room—seemingly having had their beds and chairs moved to create a playing space in the hospital room—and look on to the left side of the photo frame, perceivably at a performance.²⁸⁸ Wheeled up in wheelchairs, some clapping, the photographic negatives from the archive detail the rich affective reactions by audience members, and show that the Federal Theatre performances most certainly brought joy and levity into the otherwise mundane hospital settings. In another photograph, three young children (approximately between the ages of 8-12 years old) are in the foreground. One, claps along to a performance—while the countless others (all in wheelchairs, or on hospital beds at the rear of the photo) look on at the FTP performance.²⁸⁹ The performances were also clearly not monolithic in hospital sites, or in localized communities. In another photo, children sit in hospital beds while teenagers and adults stand around the room; audience members are again seen clapping along with the Federal Theatre performances.²⁹⁰ This last photo is curious, as at least two of the members of the patient

²⁸⁸ See Appendix C, Figure 6. Production Records, Photographic Negatives File. Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project Collection. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸⁹ See Appendix C, Figure 7. Ibid.

²⁹⁰ See Appendix A, Figure 8. Ibid.

audience are young Black women—more than 25 years prior to uniform desegregation of public spaces in the United States. In this way, the hospital shows undertaken by the Federal Theatre add to the legacy of the project's impact, as well as to the wide-reaching community and social services bolstered through Federal Theatre performance mechanisms.

Theatre in Psychiatric Institutions

The robust transnational and transhistorical body of evidence for theatre as a change agent in hospitals and spaces of biomedical healing opens doors for asking how theatre and performance have also been imaged as a means of psychological healing in psychiatric and mental health institutions. Even prior to the development of formal settings of psychiatric care, forms of applied arts and healing-based drama were occurring in mental health-focused therapies around the globe. Like forms of biomedical healing, the genesis point for theatre supporting psychiatric wellness did not launch with theatre as a direct art form for patient engagement—but as other art forms were used, entry paths were created for theatre's use of multiplicitous and multi-intentional mental health spaces in cultures around the world.

One such early historical example—leading to the more common practices of psychiatric care through the arts that set the stage for the Federal Theatre's performances—can be found in 18th England. In an analysis of the work of 18th century poet Christopher Smart, and William Battie—the “mad doctor” who treated him—and, in particular, a literary study of Battie's *A Treatise on Madness* (1758) and Smart's poem *Jubilate Agno* (1758/1759), Richard Stern notes the metaphysical, spiritual, and psychological healings (as well as intrapersonal mediatings) offered through the artistic medium of poetry for Smart. In *Jubilate Agno*, “Smart provides a

moving critique of the madhouse, and of what he perceives to be a wider spiritual malaise.”²⁹¹

Smart and Battie’s writings document a burgeoning practice in 18th century England of forming “madhouses” and other spaces of clinical care for those suffering from mental maladies. Smart, who in 1795 was admitted to the “curable” ward of St. Luke’s Hospital for Lunatics on Windmill Hill in London, used poetry and the writing of *Jubilate Agno* as an outlet for his experience in the “madhouse.”²⁹² Stern writes the Smart, “asserts the roles of the ‘mad’ prophet by utilising a representation of the bleak life within a madhouse. From a position on the margins of society, Smart finds self-legitimation [*sic*] by drawing a parallel with Christ.”²⁹³ As Smart balances questions of metaphysics, spirituality, God’s will, and, yes, his Cat Jeoffry (“For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry. For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him”), Smart is able to use artistic rendering as a means and mediation of mental crisis.²⁹⁴ The use of poetry and writing as a tool for therapy wasn’t exclusive; as early as the 18th century, spaces specifically utilized for the therapy and care of patients’ with mental illness utilized drama as a means of entertainment as care, as well. For example, psychiatrists Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine—a mother and son tandem—worked in the early 20th century to make reference to plays being performed by patients in asylums near Paris. The use of theatre in this way then far predates the more cyclically discussed contemporary examples of drama therapy and applied drama in

²⁹¹ Richard Stern, “Smart’s Authority and the Eighteenth-Century Mad-Business,” in *Performance, Madness, and Psychiatry: Isolated Acts*, edited by Anna Harpin and Juliet Foster (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 29.

²⁹² The use of pejorative terms such as “lunatic” and “mad” is rather common—from the Renaissance to 18th century, across cultures and nations—in references to individuals suffering from mental illness. Similar to outdated terms referenced in Chapter 1 regarding disability and language acquisition, and in Chapter 4 for racial pejorative, I’ll often use the archival or original authored title or name (such as, St. Luke’s Hospital for Lunatics) while using more 21st century culturally responsive verbiage in my own narration elsewhere in the chapter

²⁹³ Ibid, 25.

²⁹⁴ Christopher Smart, from “Jubilate Agno,” *Poetry Foundation*, 1795, accessed 2025.

settings supporting patients with mental illnesses, and creates a broader lineage of the practice, both theatrically and therapeutically.

Following the century of Smart's being admitted to St. Luke's, a boom was experienced in the existence and operations of asylums for the mentally unwell in England and throughout Europe. In Great Britain, the end of the 18th century documented around 5,000 patients suffering from mental illnesses in asylums in the region; by 1900, that number would have climbed to 100,000 patients.²⁹⁵ Accompanying the pragmatic asylum population increases over the course of the 19th century, and cultural shifts regarding care for the mentally unwell, the century's growing service for patients of mental illness saw a growth in both the logics for, and use of, theatre in spaces of psychiatric care. By the early 19th century, a renowned British asylum doctor named Dr. William A.F. Browne helped to articulate and legitimize the efficacy of theatre in mental health spaces. Juliet Foster, in a study of the performances, fêtes, and sporting shows in psychiatric spaces in England, explains how by the 1830s Browne was "already well known for his thoughts on psychiatric reform and the author;" Browne had by that time authored a series of lectures titled "What Asylums Were, Are and Ought to Be," and had become Medical Superintendent of the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries and Galloway when the hospital opened in 1838.²⁹⁶ In one of his lectures, Browne discusses the utility of theatre as a therapeutic method; this writing was later published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*. Browne wrote endorsing not only the methodologies of theatre integration with wellness practices, but specific plays and production triumphs as well—including a production of Molière's *Tartuffe* performed at the famous French asylum La Salpêtrière, in 1842, which was said to have been met "with

²⁹⁵ Richard Stern, "Smart's Authority and the Eighteenth-Century Mad-Business," 29.

²⁹⁶ Juliet Foster, "Performance in Bethlem, Fulbourn and Brookwood Hospitals: A Social Psychological and Social Historical Examination," in *Performance, Madness, and Psychiatry: Isolated Acts*, edited by Anna Harpin and Juliet Foster (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 44.

better success” than other productions.²⁹⁷ The rhetoric here indicates that Browne and his colleagues in the early and mid-19th century were already using theatre, and asylum performances, with some cyclical regularity. Other extant archival holdings at Bethlem Royal Hospital in Beckenham, England contain programs and performance documentation for concerts and plays dating back to 1879—offering further clarity that through the Victorian Era, psychiatric hospitals, asylums, and spaces of healing across Europe were using theatre with and for patients.

As Browne and other trailblazers in alternative modalities of psychiatric care were building relationships between local communities and their asylums, so too were they working to communicate the effectiveness of the arts in spaces of psychiatric healing to the broader social public. Browne writes on theatre in asylum spaces that, “the attempt is no longer an experiment,” citing a list of psychiatric hospitals all over Europe that were indebted to the logics and approaches of the practice. In description of a performance at Crichton Royal, Browne writes: “Convalescents and monomaniacs had repeatedly attended public theatres; but that hundreds of patients, of all classes, should with perfect propriety of deportment, and with keen appreciation of the merits and mirth of the performance, witness the representation of farces, vaudevilles, comedies, by members of their own community, by those participating in their own infirmities, is assuredly a noble conquest over the sorrows and intractableness of disease — a miracle if we reflect upon the past, an augury of success if we look to the future.”²⁹⁸

The pursuit of this “noble conquest over the sorrows and intractableness of disease” through theatre was emulated in institutions in the United States by the late 19th century. The

²⁹⁷ Dr. William A.F. Browne quoted in Juliet Foster, “Performance in Bethlem, Fulbourn and Brookwood Hospitals, 45.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

transatlantic crossing of the practice of theatre in psychiatric hospitals was a testament to the legitimacy of theatre as treatment experiences in psychiatric care facilities in Europe. Moreover, the practice had gained traction in public opinion (both to credential the arts-based methods of treatment, and in the stigmatization of mental illness. This is evidenced by a letter written by the 13th United States President, Millard Fillmore. In 1850, almost immediately after ascending to the presidency following the death of Zachary Taylor, Fillmore was preoccupied by debates on the extension of slavery into the new territories gained in the Mexican American War. Despite the exigencies of domestic policy, and the swooping shift into the nation's highest office, Fillmore took time to write to Dorethea Dix. Dix was a reformer and major advocate in support of mentally ill patients, as well as public policy generating support for Americans in asylums. After writing to Fillmore to advocate for state and federal construction of asylums to support those suffering from mental afflictions across the U.S., Fillmore responded by expressing horror about the large number of folks in asylums—and to praise a Trenton, New Jersey asylum he had been acquainted with. With her letter, Dix had also sent a “lunatic’s poetry;” Fillmore’s response letter adjudicated the poem as “a very creditable production,” before writing more philosophically on the condition of mental wellness: “I am not certain but the partition which separates madness from genius is much thinner than most of us suspect.”²⁹⁹ Fillmore’s letter is significant for a few reasons. First, Dix’s original writing showcases another example of poetry and the arts uses in 19th century asylums—this time, not as a means of cure, but as an artifact that (to the highest status position in the United States, the President) was able to credential mental stability, clarity, and artistic voice. Secondly, Fillmore’s argument on the thin line between sanity and “madness” shows that the mid-19th century was an era of great change for

²⁹⁹ Benjamin Reiss, *Theatres of Madness: Insane Asylums & Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

sociocultural (in addition to medical) understandings of mental illness; as well as imaging the era as one where destigmatization and social advocacy for the mentally unwell were growing in philosophy, articulation, and coalition across the United States.

Fillmore and Dix's letters are hardly the only accounts of 19th century use of the arts in asylums. In Columbia County, New York, the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica was producing the *Opal*. The *Opal* was a literary journal and resident-focused news source of sorts that was being written by patients at the asylum in Utica. Literary scholar Benjamin Reiss (who writes with frequency on the intersection of 19th century literary cultures and disability studies) writes that the Utica asylum had, at this point in its history, "quickly became the nerve center of the newly emerging psychiatric profession and one of the most innovative centers of the 'moral treatment' movement."³⁰⁰ Under the direction of superintendent Amariah Brigham, the Utica asylum grew in prestige and offered a model for other U.S. asylums. Reiss writes on how the "Theatrical amusements, ceremonies... dramatic cures of insanity" were written of in the *Opal*, as patients and doctors alike found performance as a means of remedy, growth, and cure for the residents of the Utica asylum. While the immense success of the productions documented in the *Opal* were farfetched—Reiss and others write on the the *Opal* was "beyond credibility" due to the documentation of cheery lives of patients—the journal's existence and archives shows that, a) writing and literary arts were being used as a means of life and creative output by the residents at Utica, and b) the asylum had "theatre amusements" which were created and witnessed by the asylum residents.³⁰¹ Further, Reiss' other research on the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, and other asylums, shows that many asylums contained stages for these

³⁰⁰ Benjamin Reiss, "Letters from Asylumia: The *Opal* and the Cultural Work of the Lunatic Asylum, 1851-1860," *American Literary History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 1.

³⁰¹ Reiss, *Theatres of Madness*, 24-25.

performances—matching a medical/methodological means of support with an architectural alteration in asylum layout entirely dedicated to bringing theatrical performances to (and by) the asylum populations.

It is useful to note that in this late 19th century moment, the relationship between theatre and psychiatric health was uniquely bilateral. As evidence of theatre being used globally as a means of healing began to accrue in this epoch, so too did medical journals and practitioner research cite theatre as an authority on mental health. Reiss' research further expounds how “in the first three decades of American asylum medicine, no figures was cited as an authority on insanity and mental functioning more frequently than Shakespeare.”³⁰² In the *American Journal of Insanity*—referred to by some psychiatric scholars as, “the official organ of the nascent psychiatric profession”—no fewer than thirteen lengthy articles of Shakespearean criticism were published from 1844 to 1864, and in other psychiatric writings his name was regularly involved in matters concerning diagnosis, nosology, and treatment.”³⁰³ As puzzling as the authority given to Shakespeare may be to a contemporary reader, the gestalt framing of Renaissance era fears, maladies, and superstitions curated by Shakespeare and other poets and playwrights of the era operated as a rather credentialled voice in their cultural epoch. Correspondingly, Bridgham wrote from Utica that “there is scarcely a form of mental disorder,” that Shakespeare “has not alluded to, and pointed out the causes and method of treatment,” doctors like A.O. Kellogg (the Superintendent of Port Hope Asylum at Canada West) agreed, referring to ways that “a very complete system of psychological medicine could be compiled from the works of Shakspeare

³⁰² Ibid, 81.

³⁰³ Ibid.

[sic].”³⁰⁴ In drawing from Shakespeare’s cannon for not only performance, but cure, psychiatric hospitals were endowing Shakespeare (and, therefore, theatre) with a particularly intra-profession might of authority. By the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th century, asylum models around the United States were using drama and the arts and integrative therapies for patients suffering from mental illness, as well as introducing theatre as a means of entertainment amidst asylum populations, with frequency and psychological relevance.

The Bellevue Hospital Puppet Performances

A particularly innovative means of drama as a tool for therapy was being used in the 1930s in New York City. Gustav Woltmann, a psychologist and assistant to Dr. Lauretta Bender in the ward Bender ran for “maladjusted and neurotic children” introduced a form of therapy, reaching through the various lineages of theatre arts integration, therapy, and psychiatric care for children and youth detailed in this chapter.³⁰⁵ Woltman started a puppet theatre for the youth: discoursed by daily sequences, and both group and individual treatment procedures for his caseload. Woltmann made the puppets himself, and would then play with the puppets in front of the whole children’s ward; he’d have the youth patients react and talk for the dolls; he would also use the dolls to emulate and act out the patient’s behaviors. Later, in a room specifically designated for play (rather than, like Woltmann’s solo performances, in front of the whole ward) he let the children play with other puppets, similar to the ones he created. As Woltmann talked

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 97. Reiss’ research is particularly valuable given the lack of extant records from the majority of burgeoning asylum models and institutions through the 19th century. With no records indicating performances of Shakespeare in the United States prior to the 1860s, some guess work is needed to fully imagine what asylum performances in the U.S. would have looked like in this moment. There are also failures of the use of theatre, for instance, documentation presented by Reiss on a time at Utica where the actor’s recitation of the murder scene from Hamlet “upsets the inmates, especially one who had cut off his doctor’s head and kicked it about the garden.”

³⁰⁵ Simone Marcus, “Therapeutic Puppetry,” in *Puppets and Therapy*, edited by A. R. Philpott (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1977), 11-12

with them (asking questions, sometimes bringing in his own life and mediation of internal troubles as a model for vulnerable sharing through the apparatus of surrogate puppetry), he'd be able to document, treat, and better understand the youth's trials and cognition through their acts of play with the puppets. As Woltmann began to develop his puppet theatre practice (and contribute to the development of other similar methodologies in the United States), the location of Dr. Bender's ward created soon-to-be actualized opportunities for collaboration within both psychiatric and theatrical circles of expertise—as well as with the Federal Theatre. Woltmann's puppet theatre was operating as a part of the children's psychiatric ward at: Bellevue Hospital.

The complex question for this point of intersection in the Federal Theatre Project's outreach initiatives in public-serving performance, and the performances-for-cure held by Woltmann at Bellevue hospital in the children's psychiatric ward, is one of antecedent and response. Which came first: the FTP's intervention, by supporting the children's ward performances through actor's labor and administrators allocations of funds and effort to bring in Federal Theatre practitioners into the hospital—or Woltmann's psychiatric innovations in children's psychology through puppet theatre? Perhaps, too, the two were directly overlapping: that Woltmann's model and methodology was operating at Bellevue, and the introduction of other (likely more skillful or highly trained) puppeteers into the children's psychiatric ward bolstered the efficacy, creativity, and theatrical utility of the puppet shows. With little surfacing archival evidence, it is difficult to fully reconstruct the trajectory or timelines of how the Bellevue Hospital medical staff collaborated with the Federal Theatre officials and practitioners. Like many of the questions surrounding the Federal Theatre, despite droves of archival evidence—boxes upon boxes of extant materials from projects all around the country—finding specific evidence from any one performance event (or performance venue) of the thousands

conducted by the Federal Theatre in its short four year tenure can be like searching for a needle in a proverbial haystack. That said: triangulating available accounts of the Bellevue puppet shows for youth with these historical developments for both psychiatric hospital performances and the Federal Theatre's work with puppet theatre offers clarity on the likely size, scope, and shape of these performance events. The most illuminating component of these intersecting histories can be testified to in a return to the Federal Theatre's findings in their internal documentation of the Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project.

FTP Preliminary Report Findings

The Federal Theatre Project's Preliminary Report functioned to detail the successes of the project for internal accountability as a government subsidy, and to cue higher ranking Federal Theatre Project officials (including Hallie Flanagan) to the performance events and outreach projects undertaken by the Federal Theatre. In addition to being part of the required documentation of activities as a federally funded initiative, these internal reports allowed administrators to both upkeep and celebrate various components of the FTP operating nationwide. Hallie Flanagan, among other high ranking officials for the project, would then travel between the various projects for opening nights, to assist with particularly difficult final stretches of mounting a production, or to allocate additional funds and resources to struggling projects or performances.

The internal report regarding the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows was a celebration: detailing of success—and even epiphany—of the Federal Theatre practitioners who attended and served in performances at Bellevue. In concordance with earlier citation of the Preliminary Report, two observations by the Federal Theatre officials writing the report are worth

resurfacing. As the FTP documenters watched on, they wrote of the actions of the children in the psychiatric ward as they engaged with Federal Theatre Project puppeteers (and, likely Woltmann and Bender, either training the FTP actors, or collaborating with them to bring the Federal Theatre puppet performances into the methodologies for therapy already in place in the Bellevue ward. The FTP documenters write upon watching the children engage with puppet theatre: “soon the children began to mingle their slowly awakening senses with the troubles and trials of the puppets.”³⁰⁶ This documentation aligns with various approaches to puppet theatre contemporary to the 1930s era; it also names an “awakening” on the part of the children which is concordant with philosophies of healing and psychiatric practice historicized in this study. In Boalean terms, watching this “awakening” by children documents a Morenean catharsis; the term chosen in the Preliminary Report was not of happiness or felicity, but a return to a previously sentient state. “Awakening” implied that the child’s child-likeness has been present all along, but dormant due to their mental maladies; the puppet theatres then allowed for what Boal called a “purging” (in connection to catharsis) or “expelling” (in relation to mental “poisons”) of these mental illnesses, and a return or awakening to the child’s original state. Boal further used the term “purifying” for the act of catharsis in situations like the ones experienced at Bellevue Hospital, and articulates the ultimate “goal is the happiness of the individual.”³⁰⁷ For Vihos, this awakening constitutes a form of psychological healing, returning the child—in the logic of medical healing practices—to an original, healthy, integrated state.

The Bellevue puppet shows were dynamic performances—with the impact on the psychiatric ward’s children growing throughout the course of their applied drama discourse. The

³⁰⁶ “Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project”

³⁰⁷ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 70-71.

Preliminary Report detailed this development throughout the session, writing that despite slow uptake by the children in the psychiatric ward, eventually “a play spirit developed. The children began to evolve stories of their own. A dream world was created for these unfortunate little ones.”³⁰⁸ This rhetoric and reflection is generative in a number of domains. The children experienced storytelling—and “evolving” stories of their own alongside, or “mingled” with, the stories and character of the puppets—as a mode of healing and surrogacy for their own woes or maladies. This parallels what Gardner referred to as the early 20th century conception of efficacy for story drama in children’s psychiatric settings. The creation of a “dream world” harkens Ferrera’s argument for a “mental space” that is created through the process of applied drama—offering a freedom of expression to the mentally ill children in the Bellevue psychiatric ward.

To continue parsing the psychological practice histories and theatre tools being implemented in this case study—evidenced by the Preliminary Report’s reflection—I’ll organize parallels concordant with the case study into three categories being alluded to in the performance events: *experience, methodology, and play*. For each, I’ll return to earlier framed philosophies of healing and performance that reach a flashpoint in the case study, and are actualized through the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows, arguing the the children’s “awakening” in this case study was only made possible by the Federal Theatre and Bellevue Hospital staff’s utilization of theories and approaches to performance-based healing that reached a manifestation point in the late 1930s era, and through the FTP’s means of theatrical performance.

³⁰⁸ “Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project”

Children's "Awakening" through theatre

In the Bellevue Hospital puppet show performances, the most significant performance result was the happiness, levity, a "spirit of play" that enlivened the youth patients at Bellevue. This "awakening" of children's spirits is aligned with philosophies of performance in this literature review components of this chapter: including those that predated the Federal Theatre, and likely led to the implementation methods used at Bellevue Hospital, as well as those that were only theorized following the Bellevue puppet shows. I argue that the Federal Theatre's success in this performance event was a puzzle piece in the 20th century formulation and theorization of these applied drama tactics. The first domain these philosophies attach to is that of what children are experiencing during the acts of spiritual, psychological, and medical transcendence occurring in these unique applied drama settings.

Regarding the Bellevue Hospital puppet show participant's *experience*, one such philosophy (conceptualized nearly fifty years after the FTP puppet shows) is articulated by Michael Eigen. Eigen writes of art therapy as a form of expressive therapy that impacts the experiential domain of the children. Reflecting on one of his own patient's experiences, Eigen reports that the patient's illness had led to this phenomenon: "as a child she lost her *body self*, her sense of body aliveness, her spontaneously-felt being."³⁰⁹ This idea of separation of "body self" and subjecthood helps to frame the importance of art therapies in returning to the corporeal body state, when the body is affectively dislocated through trauma or mental unwellness. As Eigen engaged in dream-based art therapy with his patient, he reported: "when she focused on the image of the little girl she could feel her body come more alive. It was as though she were

³⁰⁹ Michael Eigen, "Expression and Meaning," in *Expressive Therapy: A Creative Arts Approach to Depth-Oriented Treatment* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), 299. My italics.

reunited with a part of herself that had gone blank and now was filling out again.”³¹⁰ A shared experience of bodily realignment is occurring in both the 1930s Federal Theatre case study, and with Eigen’s patient in the 1980s—but what causes and aids this process of bodily dislocation, and bodily reintegration? Craig Haen researches the way that this causality of body dislocation is likely caused by aspects of trauma in the child’s life. “Trauma exposure impacts people multidimensionally,” writes Haen, “involving physiological, neurological, emotional, and cognitive domains.”³¹¹ These case studies show that children’s trauma severs the traditional means of embodiment for the young patients. Haen elaborates that ““Several scholars have argued that increased attention be paid to imagination as a transtheoretical mechanism of change in psychotherapy... Taylor (2013) defined imagination as the capacity to ‘transcend time, place, and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, and consider alternatives to the actual experiences of our lives.’”³¹² According to this philosophy, art therapies—and in particular the use of drama as a means of therapy, engagement, and experience for children—permits access to imagination and creativity in a way that facilitates their healing. As the Federal Theatre officials wrote of the “dream worlds” that were created by the Bellevue Hospital puppet show participants, what may have been less obvious was that those dream worlds were, in fact, vehicles towards healing for the youth.

In Moreno’s terms, the children in the Bellevue case study are experiencing a “freedom” from the “living space” of their reality through the discourse of theatre. Moreno theorized: “the living space of reality is often narrow and restraining; he may easily lose his equilibrium. On the

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Craig Haen, “The Imagined Body: Drama Therapy’s Unique Contribution to Trauma Treatment,” in *Trauma and Embodied Healing in Dramatherapy, Theatre and Performance*, edited by J. F. Jacques (New York: Routledge, 2024) 13.

³¹² Ibid.

stage he may find it again due to its methodology of freedom—freedom from unbearable stress and freedom for experience and expression.”³¹³ Without postulating what caused the individual patient’s illnesses or maladies that led to their being admitted into the psychiatric ward, the limitations of reality can certainly be said to have inhibited their processes of healing. Thus, when the children were allowed to create, play with, and storytell through the puppets at Bellevue, they experienced awakening to their senses and spirit. In questioning the apparatus of the stage in psychodrama, Moreno explains how the actor is, “asked to be himself on stage, to portray his own private world.”³¹⁴ Fox elaborates on this process, explaining how, “in psychodrama a patient, called the protagonist, is invited to share his or her *Eigenwelt*, or private, inner world, no matter how idiosyncratic; in the process, the individual is validated.”³¹⁵ For the Bellevue patient-actors, I contend that their individual *Eigenwelts* were being explored (reflected on as the creation of “dream worlds” through their puppet dramas. Without the developments—from A. Freud to Woltmann, Battie to Browne—that predated the Federal Theatres shows, this unique theatrical remedy would not have been possible, as it was created by the Federal Theatre Project.

The second domain that allowed for success of the Federal Theatre puppet shows at Bellevue Hospital is methodology. The intention of these shows was to bring about change for the participants, to—as Boal argues, help them is the goal of many theatrical catharses—reach happiness. Anthony Jackson’s writing on educational theatre is useful to return to in this regard. As a form of public outreach, we can align the Bellevue puppet shows with what Jackson refers

³¹³ Jacob L. Moreno, “Psychodrama and Sociodrama,” in *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, edited by Jonathan Fox (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1987), 13.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Jonathan Fox, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Moreno*, xv.

to as the intention of educational theatre in outreach settings. In reflection on the common elements of these education theatres, Jackson notes: “most are intended to signify forms of theatre practices that aim to effect a transformation in people’s lives, whether that be the activation of a process of *attitudinal* or *behavioral change* on the part of the audience.”³¹⁶ With the intention of aiding the Bellevue Hospital staff in cure, as well as entertainment, the FTP practitioners sought this form of attitudinal or behavioral change by the youth actor-participants. As children were allowed to “mingle their slowly awakening senses with the troubles and trials of the puppets,” they were given a doorway to accessing a band of internal change—with the change agent, or catalyst, for this growth being the means and mechanisms of theatrical performance.³¹⁷

A second methodology at play is the use of what Boal later called *simultaneous dramaturgy*. For Boal, *simultaneous dramaturgy* was a foundational element of Forum Theatre, and the central conceit of many Theatre of the Oppressed frameworks of action. In *simultaneous dramaturgy*, Boal frames the actions of his original TotO troupe: “we would present a play that chronicled a problem to which we wanted to find a solution. The play would run its course up to the moment of crisis — the crucial point at which the protagonist had to make a decision. At this point, we would stop performing and ask the audience what the protagonist should do.”³¹⁸ While not constructed through the (subsequent, not precursory) traditions or modalities of Theatre of the Oppressed, many aspects of the Bellevue case study, and puppet theatre in children’s psychodrama utilize this same logic of performance. Woltmann’s methods—used at Bellevue and presumably either one-in-the-same with the Federal Theatre performances, or that laid the

³¹⁶ Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, education and the making of meanings: Art or instrument?* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 1-2.

³¹⁷ “Preliminary Report of the Educational Activities of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project”

³¹⁸ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 5-7.

groundwork for the FTP to actualized puppet theatre in this way at Bellevue—relied on asking the audience participants questions, having the youth make decisions, and even employing the actor-participants as voicers and puppeteers for the puppets. In this way, the Federal Theatre’s performance event Bellevue Hospital utilized approaches and methods of production for applied drama that predated the work of Boal, Richard Schedner’s similarly reactive rasa block system, and the work of psychodrama practitioners like Sextou at the middle and end of the 20th century. This performance event, and the significance of children’s puppet theatres that operated with similar psychiatric aims, could then be grafted into the longer lineages and storylines of these forms in ways that scholars frequently overlook in present historicizations.

A final domain for analysis of the preliminary report findings of the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows operates recognition of the central importance that children’s play has in the psychodrama and theatrical processes undertaken by the children-participants of the psychiatric ward. Lineages of play—both those expanded on in this chapter, and other philosophies core to creative drama, educational theatre, and therapeutic theatres—note that play is a fundamental component of human cognitive and social development. Play, in the setting of Bellevue Hospital, can also be considered an aspect of healing. Famed developmental psychology theorist Erik Erikson wrote in his groundbreaking *Childhood and Society* how “to play it out is the most natural self-healing measure childhood affords.”³¹⁹ In the Bellevue puppet shows, “playing it out” allowed children who were at first hesitant to the methods of their doctors and the FTP practitioners to eventually engage in meaningful play with the provided puppets. Creating, playing with, and then storytelling alongside the puppets allowed the youth at Bellevue to engage in the self-healing measures described by Erikson. Richard Courtney writes of similar process of

³¹⁹ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950), 222.

healing through play, arguing that “dramatic play as a stage in ego development that follows acting-out behavior and eventually leads to sublimation”³²⁰ This sublimation, or a metabolization of emotional responses, triggers, and trauma, images the act of play as the vehicle by which the youth’s healing was made possible. Correlating use of Courtney’s theories have been etched into the field of drama therapy in the aforementioned work of Renée Emunah. Emunah contends that, “dramatic play has a central position, relating the unconscious to the intellect... it is the link between instinctual gratification and mature thought.”³²¹ Though the maturity or sophistication of cognition held by the participants of the Bellevue performances is not a question raised by this chapter, it is clear that the act of play allows actor-patients access to higher order means of metabolization of emotion. In this way, Courtney, Emunah, and Erikson all theorize how play becomes not sophomorically the *activity* engaged in by the youth in this study, but rather the *modality* of healing used to treat the children at Bellevue Hospital.

Justifying the significance of play can be expanded by highlighting the nature of play engaged in at Bellevue Hospital. Aligned with this chapter’s historicization of surrogate play—or the use of dolls and other objects as representatives for the patient’s words and emotions, conducted by A. Freud and other psychodrama practitioners—is an argument for abstract representative play by educational psychologists. Jean Piaget distinguished these forms of play through the rhetoric of symbolic action. “According to Piaget” writes Emunah in her drama therapy theorizations, “*symbolic play*, often in the form of dramatic play, shifts the *practice play* which typically involves rule games, at about age seven, though in fact the *symbolic play* is accessible to the individual throughout the lifespan.”³²² In this way, Emunah articulates that by

³²⁰ Richard Courtney, *Play, drama, and thought: The intellectual background to drama in education* (London: Cassell, 1968), 92-93.

³²¹ Renée Emunah, *Acting for Real*, 4.

³²² *Ibid*, 7.

using *symbolic play* (or what I've also called surrogate play through the chapter) as a means of discovery, the children at Bellevue were also learning a means of reflection that they could use following the performance event. Unlike Woltmann's psychodrama with puppets, this means that the Federal Theatre's intervention in Woltmann's method—by giving youth the tools of the puppets to create and play with in a more agency-laden formal—allowed for extensive afterlives of and for healing than would have been conducted without the FTP practitioner's addition to Woltmann's model. Perhaps the clearest framing of this form of play was written and used in practice by children's drama and drama therapy practitioner Peter Slade. Slade, mentioned frequently in the various tributaries of this study, focused on play as a modality in his work with children in the mid-century. Keeping to add clarity of rhetoric to the growing conversations on play as a means of therapy, Slade attempted to revise previous studies that would differentiate between modes of play for children as *realistic play* and *imaginative play*. In these traditions, *realistic play* would indicate quotidian actions of play by the child-participants (i.e. playing doctor, or pretending to be a parent caring for a child); whereas *imaginative play* would gesture towards creative, non-literal actions of play. Slade instead argued that “play is so fluid, containing at any moment experiences of everyday outward life and of inner imaginative life.”³²³ In his pivotal *Introduction to Children's Drama*, Slade attempts to facilitate an identification between types of children's play, while still allowing for all forms of play to be fluid between realistic and imaginary. Slade's chosen delineation was between *personal play* and *projected play*. In Slade's organization, *personal play* is when a child engages in an “obvious drama; the whole person or self is used;” this could mean acting out a scene between a teacher and student, where children play separate roles in the figurative action. This operates differently than

³²³ Peter Slade, “General Principles,” in *An Introduction to Child Drama* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1958), 3-5.

projected play, where a “drama in which the whole mind is used” is engaged in by the youth; “but the body is not used so fully... treasures (footnoted as dolls, bricks, old paper) are used to either take on character of the mind or become part of the place.”³²⁴ To unpack the Bellevue case study, this concept of *projected play* is the central mode of creation. While some of this is a matter of pure rhetoric (calling the exercises and performances “surrogate play” or “projected play” doesn’t alter the pragmatics of the performance event), using Slade’s vocabulary allows historians to a) see other variations of the expansive histories of children’s drama and psychodrama with children than led to, and spawned from, the FTP puppet shows at Bellevue, and b) recognize that healing operated in this study as a result of intrapersonal projection. In this form of *projected play*, allowing the puppets to take on characteristics of the child, or of the children’s subconscious dialogues, created the space needed for children to experience psychiatric healing. *Projected play* as a medium is also what allowed the children at Bellevue to engage in Boal’s *simultaneous dramaturgy*. On the process of *simultaneous dramaturgy*, Boal writes: “this truth dawned on me: when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place.”³²⁵ If *projected play* was the medium, and *simultaneous dramaturgy* the action—healing took place at Bellevue because of the way that children’s personal, unique trials and traumas were given voice to by the children themselves. The sophistication of this process is dense, and only made possible through the collaborations between Woltmann and Bender’s team, the Federal Theatre, and the children-patients

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 7.

themselves, working to discover the mechanics of a powerful form of therapeutic theatre still being formed at this point of arrival in the late 1930s.

Afterlives of the Bellevue Puppet Shows: Grieving the Loss of Healing

Precedent performance events throughout the history of the Federal Theatre indicate that the regionally specific goals and performance implementations carried out by various projects of Federal Theatre, when successful, were replicated on a national scale. Reflections and adjacent testimonies of the Federal Theatre's outreach work outside of New York City intimate that the discourse of the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows was likely emulated in projects around the country. Future research on this topic should engage in archival study of other project localities—from Chicago to Los Angeles, Cleveland's prominent youth theatres to Seattle's extensive WPA outreach initiatives—to uncover how the New York City antecedents created at Bellevue Hospital may have inspired other FTP puppet shows in hospital and psychiatric settings. Like many Federal Theatre developments, New York served as a testing ground for productions and performances modes (the Living Newspaper, the Classical Unit of subject in Chapter 1) which inevitably circulated in mode and production around the nation. Subsequent studies may ask: how far did these developments in children's psychodrama reach prior to the Federal Theatre's closure in 1939?

Correspondingly, a core question of *Grieving the Federal Theatre* protrudes in conclusion of analysis of the Bellevue Hospital psychiatric puppet show performances for children. It asks: what impact did the Federal Theatre have on future development and innovations in psychodrama, drama therapy, and theatre for youth in outreach settings? Perhaps the most obvious optics that defend a poignant puzzle piece laid by the Federal Theatre's work at Bellevue is how many of the methodologies, psychiatric approaches, and forms of applied theatre

dissected in this chapter were created or theorized *after* the tenure of the Federal Theatre. In using the histories—prior to and after the American 1930s—of their various forms as means of interlocation with the Bellevue case study, I’ve hoped to note that the mid- and late-20th century developments in these correlating fields of drama were likely not without connection to the Federal Theatre’s work. As a federally-run and nationwide institution, the Federal Theatre likely helped forms created by Woltmann, and other components of the Bellevue puppet shows, to gain traction nationally—and to extend their developments following World War II in peacetime theatre creation in the 1950s and beyond.

There is further tangible evidence of the impact of the Bellevue case study on hospital dramas. A letter from Marguerite Turnbull, reproduced from the correspondence section of the *Puppet Post* in the autumn of 1960, describes Turnbull’s psychiatric puppetry practice. Turnbull writes of children doing everything from singing along in puppet theatre songs, to using the voice of puppets to utter curious phrases like “I’ll magic you all up to the sky!” when given the chance to play with puppets—and to allow the puppets to voice their concerns through projected or surrogate play as a means of therapy. Puppetry, according to Turnbull, “is one of the few activities of which (the children) never tire,” asking puppeteers to join her therapy practice more often, as “we found it such a valuable experiment.”³²⁶

Pelander & Leino-Kilpi deduced in a 2012 study that “unspoken and concealed pain cause some of the worst children’s experiences in healthcare.”³²⁷ The Bellevue Hospital puppet shows created a means for children to voice their concealed pains in ways that created a lasting impact on their mental, physical, and spiritual health. Later developments in similar

³²⁶ Simone Marcus, “Therapeutic Puppetry,” 11-12.

³²⁷ Cited in Sextou, Persephone & Stelios Kiosses. “The Lexicon of Pain: Highlighting the Advantages of Applied Theater in Pediatrics through the Lens of Psychodynamic Therapy.” In *Creative Arts Education and Therapy*, 10(1):126–140. 2024. DOI: 10.15212/CAET/2024/10/5

psychological methods by Hawkey, Sextou, Fox and Salas, Boal, others all utilize these conditions of performance. While not solely created by the Federal Theatre, a meaningful reimagining of the Federal Theatre's impact on American society can be introduced by recounting the Bellevue Hospital puppet shows—and the acts of healing conditions of mental illness for children in a psychiatric ward that occurred during this performance event—reframing compassionate histories of the Federal Theatre, and the power of performance to heal.

Chapter III

“The Moral and Spiritual Rehabilitation of Boys”: Performance as Identity in the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps Camps

Flashback: Gay Sexuality in the CCC Camps

The narrative of the Federal Theatre Project is far from bereft of stories of failed intentions, productions, and plans-gone-wrong. Scholarship on the FTP has often sought to restore the efficacy of the project: recounting tales of successful, impactful productions throughout the tenure of the Federal Theatre, and meaningful initiative afterlives far outlasting the programmatic of the FTP itself. However, a curious collection of histories live in the space between: not in failed or successful Federal Theatre efforts, but in the unexpected felicities experienced alongside, or because of, the Federal Theatre Project’s undertakings. In reviving choice archival memories of the near countless FTP performances—and the profound identity and societal formations accessed because of them—occasionally these externalities of the Federal Theatre’s work present themselves. The shadows that they cast can feel as large and consequential as the Federal Theatre Project theatricals and production labors themselves.

On July 2nd, 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt accepted his party’s nomination for president at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. During this speech, a marquee statement was posed as Roosevelt pledged “a *new deal* for the American people.” In a less-talked about section of Roosevelt’s speech, he would explain to the crowd in Chicago: “there are tens of millions of acres east of the Mississippi River alone in abandoned farms, in cut-over land, now growing up in worthless brush... we face a future of soil erosion and timber famine... (in) the

reforestation of these vast areas.... Employment can be given to a million men.”³²⁸ Roosevelt’s desire to craft a conservation-based program to develop lands of the frontier, West Coast, and forested public lands of the United States launched a unique program in the New Deal’s employment relief efforts: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

The Civilian Conservation Corps was originally drafted as the Emergency Conservation Work program (ECW) on April 5th, 1933.³²⁹ While the formal name of the program shifted over time, the core objectives of the original ECW remained intact. From the inception of the program, to nearly a decade later when the CCC was closed on June 30th, 1942, the program aimed to create “useful” (or “worth-while”) “work for unemployed boys.”³³⁰ Separate from other New Deal and WPA initiatives to repopulate the American workforce, the CCC held a specific focus for the “protection and development of forest(s) and watersheds” and other environmental efforts across the United States.³³¹ Early ECW founding documents frame a third objective (numbered and clearly placed of equal value as the relief and conservation intentions of the project): the “building of health and morale” for young men.³³² This concept of promoting physical, psychological, and emotional wellness for young men in the United States spans justifications of the CCC, internally and to the American public, across the CCC’s entire tenure.

³²⁸ Benjamin F. Alexander, *The New Deal’s Forest Army: How the Civilian Conservation Corps Worked* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 4.

³²⁹ The ECW was the formal name distinguishing the CCC camp program until 1937, when the program was formally recognized by the government under the name of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Prior to 1937, though the colloquial naming of the CCC was prominently used, the formal operations of the program fell under the name Emergency Conservation Work program.

³³⁰ Wallace I. Hutchinson, *Public Opinion of the Civilian Conservation Corps in California*, published by California Region, U.S. Forest Service. “Useful” the term used in a 1939 program description, and or “worth-while” articulated in the original ECW documentation.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

However, the exact nature of “health and morale” that was actually explored, empowered, and actualized in the CCC camps is where this shadow(ed) history of the Federal Theatre Project’s connection with the CCC begins. Historian Martin Duberman’s monograph *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* includes details about the CCC camp program seemingly unrelated to any previous telling of the Federal Theatre’s performance programs in the Civilian Conservation Corps camps. Working through archival materials on the CCC at the Institute for Sex Research in Indiana (or, the Kinsey Institute), Duberman found curious records of three separate CCC camp programs in Texas.³³³ One piece of evidence found by Duberman was a journal by a man, noted by the pseudonym “BA.” BA was a 47 year old man who admits to being “planted in the camp with an agreement that he would make all the sex contacts he could and learn all he could and keep a record which he would turn over from time to time.”³³⁴

While there is a lack of documentation of *who* planted BA in the camps, and *why* he was there to collect this data, corroborating evidence and histories of the U.S. nation-state’s relationship to queer sexuality in the era place BA’s being planted in the CCC camps at a time of increased governmental interrogation of gay sexuality. In Margot Canaday’s meaningful study of sexuality and citizenship in the twentieth-century, *The Straight State*, she offers a view of U.S. state power apparatuses as both homophobic, and interested in manufacturing public policy to

³³³ The Institute for Sex Research was founded in 1947 by Dr. Alfred Kinsey, the famed biologist and sociologist (and, one of the earlier terms “sexologist” in the field of human sexuality) became a repository for sex-based research following the work of Kinsey, who built large scale, evidence-based, empirically focused research models to better understand sexuality. Once opened, the Institute welcomed mail-in evidence and archival documents that could contribute to their mission of research on human sexuality. Prior to Kinsey’s research, other pioneers in the field of sexology (or, research on human and animal sexuality) set precedent for studying queerness in relationship to and divergent from heterosexuality. In late 19th century Germany, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs wrote and researched gay sexuality, specifically how gayness was inborn and not a predilection. Later in Germany, during the Weimar Republic, Magnus Hirschfeld forwarded Ulrichs’ research, and argued for legal rights for gay men—while also proposing theories and research on transgender identity.

³³⁴ Martin Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* (New York: Meridian, 1986), 149-150. Duberman writes that prior to finding this evidence, “nothing I read contained even an oblique suggestion of homosexuality in the C.C.C. campus;” that BA’s notebook challenged his own conceptions of community and gay sexuality in the CCC.

police and inhibit gay sexuality and expression. In a chapter dedicated to the New Deal era, migrancy, and gay male identity, Canaday argues that the U.S. government wasn't sorting out or delimiting gay sexuality in the formation of the CCC—nor was the state solely attempting to reform a perceived cultural effeminacy amongst young men. Rather, Canaday says that the government may have been collecting intel on “homosexuality and gay identity” for future use.³³⁵

BA's journal was very plausibly documentation collected to bring back to United States government officials.³³⁶ As jarring and question-provoking as BA's presence in the CCC camps and his likely relationship to government surveillance of gay sexuality is—the documentation of his gay sexuality is even more notable. In recollections of the journal's data, BA wrote that he approached 104 different “boys” in the camp programs with offers of sex; only 39 refused, and 65 others consented to (at least) masturbation and fallatio. Further at least 20 boys, who were supposedly aware of BA's reputation in the camps, made the first advance (approaching BA to explicitly ask for sex). BA's notes reveal that some of the boys had some sexual experience with males before; some didn't. Many were sexually active prior to enrollment; some were not. However, the notebook chronicling gay sex from BA's experiences reveals a clear—and extensive—log of gay sex, and a culture of gay sexuality, occurring in the CCC camp programs.

The CCC & Federal Theatre Connection

How, in an era with rather strict cultural norms forbidding the espousal of queer (sub)cultures and rampant participation in gay sexuality, was it possible for the Civilian

³³⁵ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³³⁶ Ibid. Despite the top-down authority of this account, Duberman writes that “camp authorities were not aware of the arrangement and if they knew of his sex activities they said nothing. There were no unfavorable comments or trouble.”

Conservation Corps to become a haven for young men engaging in taboo male-male sex? As social image was crafted in the late 1930s as of legitimate import for communal and economic stabilities, how were the performative expressions of queerness, transness, and transparency around male-male desire not just permitted, but thriving in the CCC camp culture?³³⁷ I argue that these manifestations of gay sexual desire did not operate as isolated actions, or simply as natural results of the homogenous population and remote location of the government camps—but instead were aided, abetted, and *embedded* into the culture of the CCC camps because of the theatrical and identity performances that encouraged their flourishing. By tracing the size and shape of influence that the Federal Theatre Project had on the installation of camp theatricals, education in theatre practitionerhood, and other dramatic performances around the CCC camps, I'll triangulate theatre's relationship to the burgeoning of queer subcultural performances (such as drag, trans-identity performance, and male-body worship), and gay sexuality in the CCC. In this chapter, I frame these three entities (formal theatre, queer social performance, and gay sex) as symbiotic entities. The interpretation of archival evidence housed here demonstrates the mutually propellant nature of the FTP contributions to CCC camps, the queer(ing of) camp culture itself, and gay sexuality in the campsites. The culture incubating this three tiered symbiosis can then be understood to have crafted a pedagogical mechanism, allowing the young men who became CCC enrollees to rehearse, experiment with, and learn about their own gender and sexual identities in the otherwise restrictive landscape of hegemonic sex-gender relations of the American 1930s.³³⁸

³³⁷ I borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's use of "desire" here, as a drive towards non-matriculated gay sexuality (or, sexual attraction), with other context Sedgwick applies in the term to queer sexual desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

³³⁸ "Enrollees" is the most common word used in governmental and popular media recollections of the Civilian Conservation Corps members. Accordingly, rather than "members," or the inflated "troops," or the contrived-and-pejorative "campers" or "boys," I'll often refer to those who joined (not enlisted, as will be detailed later in the chapter in the CCC camp's relationship to the military) the CCC camp program as "enrollees"

This study poses a useful arousal of the sometimes separatist aims of our field's current rhetorically-compounded titling. The CCC camps exemplified a unique moment in Theatre History, as the programmatics of actual FTP performances for CCC enrollees and stage training offered in the CCC education program charts an undertrafficked realm of theatre's importance to the CCC program. However, using a Performance Studies lens, there are additional readings available by viewing the CCC's "staging" for the primacy of masculine identity, choreographies of community formation between young men, acts of male-bonding, and esoteric farces enacted in quotidian settings *as* performance. Simplified to a linear equation, the essential question of this study asks: how did the Federal Theatre's contributions to CCC camp dramatics, recreation programs, and methods of education promote social performances of queerness and femininity that occurred in those CCC camps—and did the modes of both theatre *and* performance facilitate accepting cultures for gay sexuality in CCC camps and therefore in the United States?

To tease out the interwoven nature of the CCC's complex culture of theatre-making, social performance, queer sexuality, and governmental responsibility, I'll begin with gay sexuality in the camps—framing gay sex in the CCC not as the cause of the other aspects of queer culture in the camps, but as a dividend consumed in *and* supplied by the surrounding queer cultures of the camps. Using seminal identification of the mechanics of power relations extant in male homosocial relations by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and theorization on liminality created in spaces of utopian sexuality and gender-based performance by José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam, I'll question the relationships of power, exploitation, and employment experienced in sexual relationships held between CCC administrators (foreman, camp superintendents) and the boys in the enrollee population. I'll then employ scripts from the Federal Theatre Project and programs generated by the FTP to acknowledge metacognition held on these sexual interactions,

and the community acknowledgement of gay sexuality that was prevalent in the CCC. In doing so, the opening of this study articulates how the uniqueness of CCC camps fostered a space of queer possibility—of queer emergence, and even queer dangers—for the young male enrollees.

The chapter then shifts, building on the work of historians such as Colin Johnson and Martin Duberman, to expose fallacies of the Civilian Conservation Corps program's intention to build a more masculine social gentry in the United States. By enumerating evidence of gay sexuality's coexistence with queer(ed) bonding rituals, social performances of counter hegemonic sexuality, and communal sharing of personal identity performance, the chapter navigates the stakes and successes of creating a queer subculture in the CCC camps. The chapter's final section then takes up those identity performances: cross-dressing, experimentation with gender norms, flamboyant effeminacy, and early manifestations of what in the 21st century would readily be referred to as trans identity (and in the American 1930s, aligned with a tradition and subculture of "female impersonation"). Performances themselves, the archive begs questions of how theatre and performance helped to concretize—to make more accessible, widespread, and uncloseted—these fluid and gender-crossing or bending identities for the youth in the CCC.

Throughout the chapter, I'll create an impact topography the Federal Theatre's role in program formation in the CCC camps, ultimately arguing that the FTP's presence in the camps generated a subcultural fertility for young men to learn about (and experiment with) gayness, queer identity, and to effectively permutate their gender and sexual identities in a manner that would have otherwise not been possible amidst the era's strictures on male identity. Using archival materials such as inter and intra-camp newsprint from the CCC camps, Federal Theatre Project scripts written for CCC camp education programming, and governmental documentation of the CCC's aim and import, I'll extend previous research on both the CCC and FTP,

interconnecting what are currently separate histories of the various avenues of the CCC's queer culture and queer performance. It is my hope that fusing these separate points of intervention (the cultures of queerness in CCC camps, dramatic interventions offered by the FTP, and pedagogical means of exploration existing in the relationship between the two) creates a better image of the queer experience, and queer permissibility, that occurred in Civilian Conservation Corps camps.

In the larger narrative of this project, the CCC camp performances connect to Hallie Flanagan's post-FTP stoppage op-ed, in her articulation of the presumed (and sardonic) nefariousness of "free vaudeville performances" for vulnerable populations.³³⁹ The appearance of this overlap introduces both a questioning of the theatrical vehicle of vaudeville and lowbrow, ad hoc theatre into the study. While not "for the ill, and aged and the underprivileged" as other case studies (Chapter II on Bellevue Hospital for the ill; Chapter IV on *Natural Man* in Seattle for racially subaltern populations), this raises consideration of the young men in the CCC camp program as potentially *vulnerable* audience subjects. By grafting this youth population onto the other youth programs and performances found in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, I include the young enrollees of the CCC camps as another youth populations deprived by the FTP's stoppage, and historize the FTP's imprint on the culture of CCC camps—one with afterlives, and with lost opportunities for personal growth for the enrollees—as part of the history of the Federal Theatre.

The Civilian Conservation Corps

Goals and Structure of the CCC

The early intentions of the Civilian Conservation Corps paralleled many New Deal programs—including the Federal Theatre Project, and the other Federal One arts projects—by

³³⁹ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

partnering the desire to offer relief employment with a unique means of serving budding national domestic interests. The CCC's scope would be conservation efforts, specifically those of public lands west of the Mississippi on land still ripe with possibility for the United States. An early *Standards of Eligibility and Selection for Junior Enrollees* pamphlet articulated the the purpose of the Corps as “to provide employment as well as vocational training for youthful citizens of the United States who are unemployed and in need of employment and to a limited extend for War Veterans and Indians through the performance of useful public work in connection with the conservation and development of the natural resources of the United States.”³⁴⁰

Supporting the health and morale of young men, while seemingly amoebous in articulation, was a response to very tangible national concerns in the early 1930s. In addition to the obvious social and financial difficulties facing many Americans following the stock market crash, and through the early Depression era, motivation to show resilience through the three years of economic drought had started to wane—especially amongst younger, less qualified or experienced men. By the 1933 formation of the ECW, unemployment issues for young men were being charted and provided for by several national programs, including the 1933 formation of the Federal Transient Program, which was nested in the operations of FERA.³⁴¹ Transience, migrancy, and homelessness amongst young men was seen as a growing concern, as the social affects of being out of work were discussed with as much fervor as the actual loss of labor

³⁴⁰ Civilian Conservation Corps, *Standards of Eligibility and Selection for Junior Enrollees* (Washington: Office of the Director, July 15, 1939) 1.

³⁴¹ The CCC/ECW was only one of many relief programs being created as a part of the New Deal response to Depression era work shortages. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), Public Works Administration (PWA); (Federal) Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC), and WPA all worked to support employment and economic stifling; the National Youth Administration (NYA), mentioned elsewhere in this study, was also supporting concerns specifically targeting American youth. Skeleton History of Federal Relief, Works Projects Administration, “Civilian Conservation Corps Playscripts,” RG 69: Box 354. National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD).

capital, or availability of jobs for young men.³⁴² While the Federal Transient Program was established as a part of FERA to create a national system of camps and shelters for mostly male migrants, the quasi-military Civilian Conservation Corps was “set out to *prevent* transiency among young unemployed men by placing them in camps to carry out conservation projects.”³⁴³

On March 25th, 1933, only a month and a half following the formation of the ECW, a plan was crafted for selecting a work force. The government, primarily through the conduit of the Army, would then provide the new enrollees with supplies and four weeks worth of conditioning before handing them off to the Parks and Forest Services to send them to camps. Roosevelt prioritized development of the Corps in line with his campaign promise, and wanted the first quarter of a million enrollees working by July 1st, 1933, with Army infrastructure helping to make it happen. Historian Benjamin F. Alexander explains the speed with which the Army, U.S. government, and Park Service were able to mount the camp program, praising how “by any standards, the army did a herculean job of making it happen almost overnight.”³⁴⁴

In selecting new enrollees for the Corps, a series of some cursory—and also some rather unexpected—provisions were outlined to cull the large crop of young men who were interested in joining the relief program. Enrollment held necessary requirements of American citizenship, unemployment, being “in need of employment,” and not being a student.³⁴⁵ The more fascinating

³⁴² Referring to the young men of the era as “transients” or “migrants” is common in archival sources, though it is worth noting that both are considered pejorative and dehumanizing in a contemporary view. Even “homeless” has been slowly phased out of colloquial speech by 2025 (in favor of “unhoused”) to humanize the conditions of out-of-work individuals, or folks without permanent or stable housing.

³⁴³ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 92. There will be no abbreviation of the Federal Transient Program in this study (for obvious concerns of conflation with the Federal Theatre), as in some governmental documents as the “FTP.”

³⁴⁴ Alexander, *The New Deal's Forest Army*, 23. Despite the Civilian Conservation Corp's potentially misleading name (“Corps”), this link between the CCC and Army is one of only a few factors that justified the liminality of CCC's early reputation as a quazi-military training program in public thought. In time, Americans came to uniformly understand the program as a forestry service, in spite of the lodging, training, and structure that seemed akin to the military.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 92-93.

requirements, for the purposes of this study, were age and marital status. Section 8 of the acts guiding enrollment for the CCC camp program necessitates that “the enrollees in the Corps... shall be unmarried male citizens of the United States between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three years.”³⁴⁶ This rule created the CCC camp as a specifically youth-serving relief program, at least in terms of intention. Roosevelt’s broader desire to put men back to work—or, rather, to invest in putting *boys* to work—seems to have eclipsed any experience or know-how in supporting conservation and reforestation; instead, the CCC welcomed enrollees who were novices to forestry; in doing so, finding a place for young men to be provided suitable jobs for inexperienced labor. The idea of being unmarried, however, quickly dissolved from the American welfare state following initiatives like the ECW/CCC’s creation. Afterall, the U.S. government isn’t often in the business of supporting citizen development that doesn’t operate in line with concretizing the American family, and the economic dividends of neoliberalism and compulsory heterosexuality. In fact, the public perception of many migrants was that their inherent dispositional attitudes, and lack of employment, were connected—and that both could be blamed on sexuality. Canaday writes of the “problem of ‘unattached persons’” in the early New Deal era, and uses public notices and newsprint to surface the argument (or, pejorative verbal assault) of the era that “most fags are floaters.”³⁴⁷ With this causticity of valuation for a melded perception of migrants and gay men in social thought, the government (too) was reluctant to build programs supporting men in non-normative identities, and on the fringes of an acceptable labor-focused society. However, the fact that a large population of young men were both unmarried (and therefore, unattached to a woman as spouse) and out of work was

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 91.

unavoidable; so, the CCC used a “dependency requirement” to help obfuscate the need for enrollees to be unmarried. Accordingly, archival records for enrollment note that “applicants with dependents are required by law to agree to make monthly allotment of a portion of their cash allowance for such dependents;” selection into the Corps was contingent upon selecting a dependent.³⁴⁸ In this way, the CCC was able to skirt questions about enrollee sexuality, marital status, and ethnographic background. Instead, the young men in the CCC would be sending money back home—presumably to either fiancés, mothers, or sweethearts—while they lived and worked in the camp programs. Many of the camp foreman and superintendents were in marriages with women, and their wives would often live in towns adjacent to the CCC camp programs.

The nimbleness of the program was not overlooked, but marketed in enrollment materials, and the broadcasting of selection processes. One handbook on the selection of enrollees went so far as to moniker the ECW as “an opportunity for wholesome outdoor employment in the National and State forests and parks, on the public domain, and on private lands where approved conservation projects are available.”³⁴⁹ Through these requirements of enrollment, the government maintained a social status quo, while quickly and diligently packing camps full of young men by the end of the springtime in 1933. The enjoyment of the great outdoors didn’t change that the camps were first and foremost about relief, and not-so-subliminally about American citizen-making. In marketing materials, for instance, the Federal Security Agency further writes how “CCC boys become better qualified for self-support and for their proper place in American life. Hence, *better citizens*.”³⁵⁰ The CCC enrollment process therefore operated to outline the necessities of being a good citizen according to the U.S.

³⁴⁸ CCC, *Standards of Eligibility and Selection for Junior Enrollees*, 1.

³⁴⁹ Handbook for Agencies Selecting Men for the Civilian Conservation Corps. Emergency Conservation Work Bulletin No. 3, Edition: July 1, 1935 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1935), 2.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. My italics.

government in the late 1930s: that one is a man, gainfully employed or seeking to be so, with a dependent wife or woman to support, and a goal of directly contributing to the federal government. Clearly many young men met—or wanted to appear to meet—those requirements.

Population and American Youth

“During the Corps’ first year” writes one apt description of the first of CCC enrollees, “the selection criteria yielded a cohort of enrollees that was, generally speaking, young, relatively uneducated, slightly malnourished, and predominantly rural in origin.”³⁵¹ While the first group of enrollees may not have been an impressive bunch, the goal of siphoning young inexperienced boys into the program was, after all, a part of the government’s plan for the CCC.

A government-issued pamphlet heralds the CCC’s focus on young men with bold titling: “The CCC—A Young Man’s Opportunity to work... to live, to learn, to build — and to conserve our National Resources;” this document itself is entitled, separate from its bolded headline, “The CCC, A Youth Program.”³⁵² A reading of this cover alone warrants a moment of attention, as does its subsidiary indebtednesses. The orange background frames the pamphlet’s black and white rendering of photographic and drawn images of young men in the CCC camp program. There are those farming, logging, and engaging in other forestry efforts. However, young men are also seen reading and writing; playing trumpet, banjo, and fiddle; they are depicted in conversation and work alike. This seems to point to the way that the program was to be received,

³⁵¹ Colin R. Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” in *Just Queer Folks* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 21.

³⁵² The CCC, A Youth Program. U.S. Depository Copy. United States, Civilian Conservation Corps, 16-7245. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office. See Appendix D, Figure 1. Inside, this pamphlet celebrates up-to-date statistics supporting enrollment into the program, which are cursory here given that I’ve noted later statistics earlier in the chapter. It details: “Within less than 4 months, 1,500 two-hundred man CCC camps had been established. These camps were occupied by approximately 300,000 men who came from every State in the Union, and worked on a wide variety of conservation projects.”

at least by potential enrollees: as both a labor program, and a *social* program. Larger than all other print and photograph, stands a young white man with a confident smirk, and an axe ready-for-use in his hands. This image is central not only to and for the pamphlet—but as a replicated visual moniker for the CCC. In a separate poster sized image eliciting applications to the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission’s Illinois Selecting Agency, the CCC is marketed as “A Young Man’s Opportunity... for Work Play Study & Health.”³⁵³ As with the CCC Youth Program pamphlet, the Illinois Selecting Agency’s poster doesn’t market the CCC as a military training program, nor does it solely note that it is a relief agency for out-of-work young men. Instead, the poster and pamphlet market two major considerations for potential enrollees. Firstly, that the program would be expansive beyond merely a work opportunity. While work is the core focus, the poster’s equal weighting of “Play Study & Health,” as well as the pamphlet’s chosen images dictate that enrollees were being enticed to the CCC due to the program’s focus on social connection, recreation, and holistic wellness. Secondly, and less austere in execution, that the program was selling enrollees on imagining the kind of men they become in the program. The Illinois Selecting Agency nearly replicates the exact image of the photograph from “The CCC—A Youth Program,” having a cartoon image of a young man smiling wide while holding an axe. Whether it be through the masculine utopian image or earning capital through forestry labor (in the two boys holding an axe), or the concept of male connectedness forwarded in the images, the CCC effectively recruited young men into the program through images like these, and through promises of masculine community in their enrollment and selection marketing.

In a separate enrollment measure, the CCC released a pamphlet reading, “Meet Mr. Average Enrollee.” This document gives clarity on the typical CCC camp enrollee, and also

³⁵³ Poster, “A Young Man’s Opportunity,” Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, Illinois Selecting Agency. RG 69: Boxes 354-255. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. See Appendix D, Figure 2.

details that the organization was trying to market to other young men of the same demographic by tracking their relatability and similar life situation. The Meet Mr. Average Enrollee section of this pamphlet reads: “Meet Mr. Average Enrollee! He is 19 years old and has completed 8 ¼ school grades. He allots \$15 of his monthly pay to his dependents. He has been jobless for 7 months before entering the Civilian Conservation Corps. He weighs 147 points, is 5 feet 8 ¼ inches tall, and he spends an average of 1 year in the CCC.”³⁵⁴ The inclusion of physical and unemployment information indicated that the CCC knew it could entice boys to join the program by framing the acceptance (or, at least the concordance) that young men would find upon joining the program. Curious, however, is the average age of enrollees in Company 1745. When tallying the ages of men in the company by hand, across records for 186 current and past enrollees, the mean age was 34.95 years old. The augmentation of the mean and median ages occurred for several reasons, in Camp 1745 and others. Firstly, a group of foresters known in the CCC camp program as “Local Experienced Men,” or LEMs, were brought into the CCC camps to help with fire prevention and other know-how, assisting the naive and untrained CCC enrollees.³⁵⁵ Secondly, Duberman’s study of gay sexuality in the CCC camps reports that, while enrollees would range in age from “18 to 26 by regulation,” many boys, “lied about their age and got in some as low as 15. There were few above 22. Most of them were 17 to 21.”³⁵⁶

In 1939, the Director of the CCC (under the title of “Director of Emergency Conservation Work”) Robert Fechner wrote of the successes in the then six year tenure of the program.

³⁵⁴ The CCC at Work: A Story of 2,500,000 Young Men. Federal Security Agency. Civilian Conservation Corps Records, Acc. No. 1251-001 (Box 1). University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, W, 1941. Originally, the ECW cast a net seeking “Junior” enrollees between the ages of 17 and 23. However, the CCC marketing and enrollment demographics quickly shifted to 18 to 25 as a baseline for ages of relief-seeking young men.

³⁵⁵ Alexander, *The New Deal’s Forest Army*, 23.

³⁵⁶ Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* (New York: Meridian, 1986), 149.

Fechner enumerated: “since 1933, more than two million *youthful citizens* have served as enrollees of the Corps. They have been chosen from a much larger group of eligible applicants who have eagerly sought the opportunity to participate in a Nation-wide conservation program and to benefit themselves and their families thereby.”³⁵⁷ For the government, early in the program and through the CCC’s duration of activity, the program was seen as a resounding success. However, the government’s objective and heralding of the success of the CCC went beyond the financial benefits of the program to relief roll members. In “The CCC, A Youth Program” the recruiters from the government are quick to add that the CCC was creating an opportunity for the young man in America “to build... his self-respect, his mind, and his body, so that he will be better equipped to seize opportunities and to make his way in the world... All this is possible because his Government, striving to make him self-reliant and independent, offers him employment...”³⁵⁸ This governmental self-congratulation parallels an earlier document: a March 31st, 1934 survey sent to the men of California. The survey asked residents about their perceptions of the CCC camp program, and its effects on their local area. Notably, of the 95% of respondents that reported they approved of the Civilian Conservation Camp, the second highest justification for *why* they approved of the program (194 total submissions) selected the “the moral and spiritual rehabilitation of boys,” as of highest commendations of the program.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Civilian Conservation Corps, *Standards of Eligibility and Selection for Junior Enrollees*.

³⁵⁸ The CCC, A Youth Program. U.S. Depository Copy. United States, Civilian Conservation Corps, 16-7245. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.

³⁵⁹ Wallace I. Hutchinson, *Public Opinion of the Civilian Conservation Corps in California*, published by California Region, U.S. Forest Service. 199 responses (the first place vote-getter), was for the “Forest benefits” of the program.

Boys of the CCC: Pedagogy & Pederasty in the Camps

What were these groups of boys and starkly older men doing in community, unified by their remoteness and their positionalities of needing relief work? The given circumstances or *mise en scène* alone—while perhaps not raising eyebrows in the era itself—seems to suggest a governmental perception of imperviousness to gay sexual misconduct. Or, as the planting of B.A. indicated, perhaps the government was interested in studying discourse and likelihoods of gay sexuality. In either case, the pairing of these “local experienced men” and older foreman or job site supervisors with the batches of new enrollees created the conditions for unique questions of pedagogy—both processes of job training, and sexual pedagogies for the young men. By first outlining the intended educational regimens of the CCC camps, then documenting the emergence of queerness in the incubator of these camps, we’ll see one avenue of the Federal Theatre’s facilitation of queer culture in the CCC—and the power of performance in the CCC.

Educational Programs

In August 1933, a report on the CCC explained that “almost every company... has a class of some size or variety” jesting that “the whole woods army seems to be getting an itch to know more things about everything.”³⁶⁰ Seeing the CCC as a pedagogical program could then be understood as an inherent desire of the government’s founding the program. Educational programs became both a selling point, marketing indicator, and testimonial for the CCC’s efficacy and import during the New Deal. This is valuable as—much like in programs like the Federal Theatre Project—the CCC’s most significant aim as a relief program had begun to be eclipsed by the supplementary programs attached to and developed by the program. In this way,

³⁶⁰ Alexander, *The New Deal’s Forest Army*, 23.

the camp programs became a holistic framing device for an American polis-in-development, through the samples of young men who were enrollees in the Corps. In marketing materials recruiting youth to the CCC, the program boasted the priority of enrollees “to learn...” explaining that, “in his leisure [the enrollee] is offered academic instruction from elementary through college grades. He is given additional off-the-job instruction along the lines of work used in the conservation program in which he is engaged. He is offered vocational training—and supplementary reading courses. All camps have separate school buildings and workshops. All camps have libraries. Planned athletic and recreation programs are part of all camp schedules.”³⁶¹ With recreation and education—some programs even working in concord with area universities to offer rigorous and meaningful instruction—afforded as core pillars of the enrollee’s engagement in camp programs, various state and local CCC organizations started to use the two components of social life and learning in the CCC as ways to compel further camp enrollment.³⁶²

As educational initiatives were endorsed, marketed in recruitment, and beginning to run felicitously in the CCC, camp programs across the nation began to run their own, often highly unique, educational programs. Archival documents from CCC publications and camp reports across the United States show the topics and instruction of educational programs were widely different by camp, and often decided on by the qualifications of teachers available to the camps, and by enrollee predilections. In Cascadia (amidst the Pacific Northwest region of the country) in

³⁶¹ The CCC, A Youth Program, Civilian Conservation Corps.

³⁶² In Oregon, for instance, the General Extension Division of the State System of Higher Education of Oregon wrote a letter to the CCC that the system would be “very glad to co-operate [sic] with the educational advisers in their efforts to make educational opportunities available to men in the CCC camps.” In the same letter, Miss Mozell Hair writes of Communications topics course that could be extended through Oregon colleges and universities to serve CCC enrollees, and that the payment plans could be offered (“this spreads out tuition so that it is easier to pay”) for CCC camp enlistees, knowing their status as previously unemployed laborers off of relief rolls. Letter from “(Miss) Mozelle Hair,” Head of Correspondence Study, Eugene V. Dennett papers. ACT. NO. 3917-002, Box 2 of 19, Vo2686. UW Special Collections, University of Washington, Seattle, WA. The use of “Miss” concordant with the letter’s signature and rhetoric. In the archival document, Hair writes her name as “(Miss) Mozell Hair” which is a unique use of parenthesis for the title.

particular, rich repositories hold useful documents from the dozens of CCC camps in the local region. On the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State, a pictorial review shows that crowd favorites for coursework included typing class, government class, time spent in the reading room, auto mechanics class, and the camp's cooking school.³⁶³ The camp's young men also reported enjoying the recreation programs of billiards, music, swimming, and basketball. A camp bulletin from Vancouver, Washington reports that beyond scholastic coursework, the CCC program offered vocational training to enrollees: "in addition to academic subjects (English Languages, Mathematics, Penmanship, Science, Social Sciences, Civics and Government). There are also vocational subjects... agriculture, auto mechanics, blacksmithing, blueprinting, drafting, mining, photography, plumbing..." as well as a wide range of other classes from Forestry to Commercial Subjects, and "avocational subject" such as Art, Craftwork, Music.³⁶⁴ The inclusion of the arts here is useful to the Federal Theatre, as aforementioned (and forthcoming) use of FTP materials could likely have been included not only in the recreational programs of the CCC camps, but as "avocational" coursework and through classes made available to the CCC camp populations. Additional reports of educational programs across the country corroborate the centrality of classes, courses, and learning regimens as a part of camp life and enrollee commitments. At Camp Sullivan Lake, "150 enrollees regularly and voluntarily participated in the education program," which constitutes a large majority of all enrollees.³⁶⁵ Similar reports indicate that many camp programs had nearly 100% involvement in the educational programs.

³⁶³ Pictorial Review. Fort Lewis District, Company 938, Camp Quinault. S 3992 .W2 C58. University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 1933.

³⁶⁴ Bulletin 15, Headquarters Ninth Corps Area, Office of the Educational Adviser.

³⁶⁵ Report of Education Department. Company 2930, C.C.C., Camp Sullivan Lake, F-1, Metaline Falls, WA. Vo2686. UW Special Collections, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

Power Dynamics & Sexual (Mis)Education

While extensive evidence of positive academic learning experiences and career training in forestry exists throughout the history of the CCC, the informal pedagogies of the CCC may have been just as impactful. In these unstructured acts of maturation and learning, a more complex form of life skills learning could be said to have occurred. In recounting the aforementioned CCC population data, it is clear that many of the young men in the camps were actually boys—with youth as juvenile as their mid-teens present in the CCC program. This evidence raises other questions about the nature of the pervasiveness and nature of gay sex in the Civilian Conservation Corps camps—in particular, those related to questions of pederasty, statutory rape, and sex work (or, if exploitative, “prostitution”). These questions (and concerns) arise because foremans and superintendents were often involved in gay sexual relationships with the young CCC enrollees; several pieces of evidence triangulate these claims. They also problematize the more innocuous accounts of gay sex in the camps, as they reference large age gaps between the men and boys, confer power dynamics at play in the gay sexual relationships, and the secretive nature of some gay sexual activities (especially those held with CCC supervisors). Many foreman and superintendents were involved in gay sex in the CCC camps; often, they would have wives living across the state or in a nearby town. For instance, one foreman in a Texas camp was chronicled as “a large, well-poised man with an unusual faculty for getting along with boys and controlling them; inspiring confidence in them and getting them to work.”³⁶⁶ Along with this “inspiration” of confidence was sexual relationships with the youth; one of whom, claimed he and the foreman were in love. In a separate CCC program, a camp owner gave boys unlimited credit for candy and soda pop at the general store on site in exchange

³⁶⁶ Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, 149.

for sexual favors. In a third camp, a foreman would rent visitors cabins (usually on site for hikers), and have sex with boys there—a maneuver that the camp owner watched and then copied for himself. Some situations read as moderately innocuous, such as those similar to a reference in BA's journal that he was giving boys a ride into town, or locating supplies for them. However, some of the men in power in CCC camps positions utilized their roles for more coercive sexual activity. Many of the boys were reportedly “well paid” by their suitors, supervisors, and Johns—especially the senior members of the CCC camp program administration. Concordantly, some boys used sex as a way to bargain their way into less labor-intensive roles. In one camp, a superintendent would assign seemingly amenable boys to the role of clerk in his office/cabin. This lighter load of physical labor was accompanied by the superintendent having easy access to having sex with the boy; once forging these coercive and exploitative relationships, the superintendent would hush any word of it to other officials in the CCC camps. Even more complex, the pederasty documents in the CCC is not limited to intracamp sexuality. “Several of the boys” expands Duberman’s study, “were known to have ‘regulars’ in town--men whom they met frequently and secretly. One would stand out in front of the camp quite openly every few evenings and be picked up by the same man in a good car and not return until late at night... there was a good deal of joking about him but he kept by himself and ignored it.”³⁶⁷ These experiences shroud the wholesome documentations of CCC camp mentorship, posing cultures of sexuality that were both freeing for the CCC enrollees, and may have put them in harm's way.

I want to offer an interpretation of the man-with-boy (supervisor-with-enrollee) relationships extant in CCC camps, in order to frame the misconceived import of these

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

relationships on the CCC's mechanics of "learning," and to create a wedge between these exploitative gay sexual mentorships, and the formative queer sexual relationships that formed not as a result of power, but of queer performance subcultures. We can begin by asking: should we re-read these relationships contemporaneously as exploitative? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick useful here, in her writing on transhistorical relationships between men and boys. Sedgwick writes of 20th century culture and Renaissance sexuality, with an available direct application to the CCC camp programs: "the debate in the gay male community and elsewhere over 'man-boy love' asks a cognate question: can an adult's sexual relationship with a child be simply a continuous part of a more general relationship of education and nurturance? Or must the inclusion of sex qualitatively alter the relationship, for instance in the direction of exploitativeness?"³⁶⁸ The latter part of Sedgwick's question relates to the nature of capital for supervisors (in paying, or in offering rewards or services) when having gay sex with boys. Long histories of this question—in Sedgwick's words, the "relationship of education and nurturance"—permeate the Renaissance era, antiquity in Rome and Athens, and transhistorically in the fields of philosophy, Theatre History, and sociology.³⁶⁹ Kenneth Dover, in his landmark study on *Greek Homosexuality*, quotes Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium* as saying "that it would be right for him [the boy] to perform any service for one who improves him in mind and character. Along with its erotic component, then, this was a bond of mentorship; the boys were apprentices in the ways and

³⁶⁸ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 6. Sedgwick's broader discussion in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* is not regarding exploitation alone (as used earlier in relationship to the enrollee-supervisor sexual relationships), but the way that male homosocial bonds guide male interaction. Sedgwick's focus on homosociality builds in a foil to the more apparent questioning of "homosexuality" in the middle of the 20th century. Encoloured, and in fact polluted as a term, by the medical use of "homosexuality" in the early and late 20th century as a way of fabulating queerness as a mental illness—Sedgwick uses homosocial as a term to ask broader questions about how male-male connections, friendships, and mutually beneficial platonic partnerships operate as societal forces.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

virtues of Athenian citizenship, whose privileges they inherited. These privileges included the power to command the labor of slaves of both sexes, and of women of any class including their own.”³⁷⁰ In Dover’s reading, and in Pausanias’s ancient Athenian view, the boy’s indebtedness to the older man for his mentorship, instruction on citizenship, and guidance permits sexuality as a non-oppressive force. However, Pausanias also highlights that the sexual relationship between man and boy in Athens was pedagogical *for* the privileges and executions of oppression against “slaved... and of women.” Accordingly, the gay sexual relationship between man and boy is, at once, both instructive and reifying. That exploitation is a means to an end to teach the boy *about* exploitation—and how to wield the powers of it against other (lower) subclasses of society.

But can this form of explorational instruction really be housed in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*’s argument of the CCC as “moral and spiritual rehabilitation of boys” as beneficial? A problematization of that stance might benefit from Heidi Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy as, “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women,” as a foil, in questioning the position of oppression for the boy against that of women.³⁷¹ While the key indicator in Hartmann’s writing is domination of women, I argue—based on my early positioning of boys in the CCC camp as a vulnerable population—that the relationships between men (such as foreman, camp owners, and superintendents) which enabled exploitation of the young men and boys in camps could be seen as patriarchal and harmful. This argument is bolstered by Gayle Rubin’s recognition that suppression of homosexual components of human sexuality is actually a part of broader systems of patriarchy. For the camp supervisors and leadership teams, to suppress

³⁷⁰ Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 91.

³⁷¹ Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 174.

knowledge of their gay sexual relationships—and to permit homophobia amongst the young men while engaging in gay sex with some youths—constitutes the sexual relationships as not only presently understood as statutory rape, but (even in their era) a part of a gender and sexually oppressive programmatic. These relationships, using Hartmann’s logic, were *different* from the gay relationships that emerged between boys (often alongside of, or because of queer and identity-based performances), as the supervisor-enrollee relationships *did* have a material, capitalistic, or incentive-oriented foundation, due to their fundamental dynamics of power.

Mighty Poorly: Queer Coding in Performance

The effusiveness of these exploitative sexual relationships begot their referentiality on stage, as is the habit of performance’s reflective apparatus. One script case study from the Federal Theatre Project that illuminated some of the CCC administration’s core goals and education program initiatives, as well as the gay subcultures burgeoning inside of CCC camps, is a script entitled *Mighty Poorly*. This script was located as a part of the FTP “script exchange” files in the FTP archive in the National Archives and Records Administration. So popular were FTP performances, vaudeville scripts, and drama being brought into the camps as a part of the education programs, or as a means of entertainment, that dramatic performance became a highly desired form of recreation. The Federal Theatre Project found ways to impact CCC camps without being on-site. A “script exchange” was created, allowing the Federal Theatre Project to pay playwrights to craft original plays specifically for performance in the CCC camps, either as recreation by the enrollees, or during dramatics coursework.³⁷² The exchange was highly spoken

³⁷² The exchange also gave camps the ability to send scripts to other CCC camps around the country, forwarding plays that were particularly notable, pedagogical, or fun for the recreational enrollee-actors. In this way, the FTP capitalized on its well-known national networking where productions were already being transferred from New York City to FTP projects around the country, to have scripts linked to various CCC camps. Correspondingly, the CCC camps used infrastructure in place for intercamp correspondence, mail, and newspaper exchange, to include the passing off of dramatic scripts used for recreation.

of, being praised by commanding members of the CCC program. In several letters and testimonials, officers and education directors for camp programs around the country wrote of their indebtedness to their extensive use of Federal Theatre's script exchange program. "Thank you for the plays you sent me," wrote Ivan Ginther, the Educational Advisor for a CCC camp (colloquially termed "Camp Cascadia") in Cascadia, Oregon; "so far we have had pretty good success with them, using them in our Dramatic Classes, and presenting them in the Recreation and Mess Halls in front of the entire company...the boys here 'go' for them in a large way."³⁷³

Mighty Poorly is short but dynamic text, staging a CCC camp crisis that occurs when a fire breaks out in the camp. The play uses dramatic irony and rhetoric familiar to vaudeville of the era to introduce a character (named "Mighty Poorly" because the enrollee, whenever asked how he is doing, responds, "mighty poorly!"). The play was passed between camps, and crafted specifically for the CCC presumably by another FTP playwright writing in service of the camps.³⁷⁴ Aspects of the script (such as instructions on how to bring theatrical magic to fruition, or simply to accomplish sound and lighting effects) underscore how through the script exchange, the Federal Theatre Project writers and artists were able to impact and, indeed, to train the CCC enrollees in theatre making—at times, without evening being onsite in the CCC camps.³⁷⁵

³⁷³ "Other Activities..." Works Projects Administration, "Civilian Conservation Corps Playscripts," RG 69: Boxes 354. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Other testimonials on the FTP/CCC connection write about the benefits of the program in serving as anecdotes to conundrums related to the program's remoteness ("during the winter, we are pretty much isolated here and will need things of this kind for entertainment"), lack of other theatrical resources ("we have a great demand for these scripts... we are just starting our Dramatics [classes]"), and applicability of the playtexts specifically crafted for the CCC enrollees ("it is just that kind of thing that is needed, as well as appropriate for the C.C.C. use."

³⁷⁴ "Mighty Poorly," Script Exchange Service, CCC, Script 5 (United States: Department of the Interior, Office of Education. Washington, DC), 1.

³⁷⁵ The playwright, for instance, includes production notes, documented in the script exchange, including a precursor to the text reading: "'Here's the hardest show of the whole bunch so far! And you'll have lots of fun with it!... It's hard because you've got to train a sound effects crew to do an almost-perfect job... and the timing on the sound effects has to be perfect." Italics are from the original script/playwright. For special effects and foil sound design, the playwright explains each difficult sound cue, noting: "crowd sounds...you can utilize actors who aren't before the mike, and sound effects men who aren't otherwise engaged at the moment... Puppies whining. And Dog barking.

Mighty Poorly, like many performances by the FTP, was highly-reflexive of CCC life—serving in some ways as a marketing agent for the Civilian Conservation Corps. The playwright details in their introduction notes that, “this show was written to give your audience an idea of just what kind of work is being done in CCC Camps, and an idea of the attitude of the officers and supervisory personnel toward the men.”³⁷⁶ At first, *Mighty Poorly* is reluctant to engage in labor in the camps, proving a rather lethargic and distracting presence at camp. During a meeting with the camp supervision (Young), *Mighty Poorly* explains his desire to avoid work:

YOUNG: Jones, what’s wrong with you, anyway?
MIGHTY: Just what do you mean, Captain?
YOUNG: When you left home, you came here to work, didn’t you?
MIGHTY: I... (trails off)
YOUNG: But you what?
MIGHTY: Wall, I never did figure on doin’ any more than I had ta.
YOUNG: You’re getting paid to work, though - aren’t you?
MIGHTY: I reckon so.
YOUNG: Doesn’t it sort of strike you that it’s a dirty trick to take money for a job you don’t do
MIGHTY: Wal, sir - that’s occurred to me and it’s been on my conscience lately. I was fixin’ to ask you to send me home.³⁷⁷

However, before sending *Mighty Poorly* home, Young seeks to engage him by offering labor positions in camp based on *Mighty Poorly*’s abilities and desire. The supervisor asks, “surely there’s some job around camp that would interest you. How about carpenter work/we need another man on our camp carpentry crew.”³⁷⁸ In this way, the theatrical sought to show the

That means you’ll have to hunt down a human hound and train him to perform for you. However, if he will cup his hands over his mouth and bark and “woof” into them, a little practice will show him how it’s done... then, a wheelbarrow. That can be done by trundling a rickety swivel chair over a wood flooring.”

³⁷⁶ Ibid, *Mighty Poorly*.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

compassion and personalization of leadership in the corps, and to further recruit by framing the CCC as open to meeting the desires of enrollees. So detailed (and transparent) was this aim, that the playwright added a “Work Superintendent” character to praise the CCC in the final scene.³⁷⁹

While *Mighty Poorly* feels like a fairly straightforward stock in the model of other esoteric CCC plays, the play’s neutrality of topic also shined light on the nuances of queer culture and sexual coding in the scripts. There are moments where a line’s innuendo could have been received differently in text vs. performance given the subcultural codes and inside jokes of the CCC enrollees. For instance, at the end of the play, a searing fire that has set the camp ablaze threatens to burn down the surrounding wilderness. After the fire has been put out, largely due to *Mighty Poorly*’s know-how and ability to stay calm and give directives to the other men on how to properly put out a forest fire, *Mighty Poorly*’s supervisor tells him he won’t be losing his job afterall, with sly piece of dialogue:

YOUNG: Jones, you're not going home because you don't like to work.

MIGHTY: But you said, sir - this evening...

YOUNG: Anybody who can handle men like you can, doesn't have to work to make a living. He can find men who'll make it for him.³⁸⁰

With the aforementioned extensive documentation of the queer sex work being done in camps, this line that “anybody who can handle men like you can, doesn’t have to work” is one that without a doubt would have been received with a knowing snicker by the CCC enrollees. That *Mighty* could “find men who’ll make it for him” is certainly inclusive of the play’s plot but also,

³⁷⁹ After being announced by a narrator (“May I present John W. Botts Work Superintendent of 456 CCC Company at Vulture Valley. Mr. Botts!”), the work superintendent announces: “... the story of *Mighty Poorly* gives you a pretty good idea of the attitude of the officers and members of the supervisory personnel towards the men. Nearly every CCC camp is doing a lot of different kinds of important conservation work. We’d like to find for every man, the job he’ll be happy in, and the job he’s fitted to do. We’re doing our level best every day to make that happen as often as possible. I thank you. Ibid, *Mighty Poorly*.”

³⁸⁰ Ibid, *Mighty Poorly*.

in my reading of the performance text, a coded barb; an inside joke about gay sex in the CCC. Given the penchant for CCC camps to have supervisors as sexual commanders of their inferiors, an extension of this line from Young raises eyebrows. The supervisor tells Mighty Poorly that he should raise to the station of his promotion by shaving daily; then, he should come meet Young to have the smoothness of his shave examined. *Mighty Poorly* then serves as a unique case study: a performance text, created by Federal Theatre Project artists for consumption in the CCC, that ultimately holds interplay between the CCC's self-marketing and brand creation, and which uses subtle gay innuendo to depict life in the CCC as holding severe undercurrents of gay sexuality.

(Homo)Sociality and Dramatics in the CCC

Happy Days Camp Publications

While the educational programs offered by the Civilian Conservation Corps constituted productive uses of time outside of the camp work day, many enrollees were more both drawn to enrollment due to the recreational programs of the Corps. Camp theatricals both in classes, and through clubs, productions, and social readings of scripts, piqued the enjoyment of enrollee's time with the CCC, and therefore served as a motivator for enrollment. Outside of the FTP script exchange program, documentation of these camp theatricals and dramatic programs is available due to archival rememberings of the *Happy Days* publication.

Happy Days was the name of the camp newspaper system that permeated CCC camps around the country. Each CCC site would have their own version of (and approach to) the newsprint; however, an internal governing body also sent around publications guiding the enrollee-journalists and editors of each version of *Happy Days* towards what made for a generative camp newspaper. Copies of each camp's paper could then be circulated both to give camaraderie to the enrollees (urging realization that their camp was just one in a larger

ecosystem of satellite CCC camps), and extend models for programmatic inspiration to the other camps. Far more than a simple social newsprint, *Happy Days* carried enormous import for the CCC enrollees during the camp programming; one history of the Corps program writes that “*Happy Days*, the weekly newspaper of the CCC, was perhaps the most important and most revealing instrument in (the network of CCC information transmission).”³⁸¹ Inter and intracamp correspondences in *Happy Days* were so significant that President Roosevelt was made aware of the newsprint, and wrote to CCC administrators to celebrate the program. “I congratulate the editors of ‘Happy Days’ and the men of the C.C.C. for having such a satisfactory and useful newspaper,” Roosevelt wrote, lauding the paper, adding: “I am informed that the circulation of ‘Happy Days’ throughout the more than fourteen hundred camps has contributed strongly toward the maintenance of a high state of morale, not only among the three hundred thousand enrollees, but among the administrative and supervisory personnel.”³⁸² The newsprint therefore well serves historicization, and reconstruction, for elements of the Civilian Conservation Corps camps.³⁸³

The image crafted by archival memory of the CCC through the *Happy Days* newsprint is, naturally, notably less controlled and sanitized than Roosevelt’s praise, or the government sanctioned documentation of the program. An apt example of this division—as well as the

³⁸¹ Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 21.

³⁸² Ibid. The title of the paper was also linked to Roosevelt rather directly, as it was named to echo Roosevelt’s campaign song, “Happy Days Are Here Again,” which was debuted for the president at the 1932 Democratic National Convention. The song “Happy Days Are Here Again” was taken from the 1930 movie musical *Chasing Rainbows*, directed by Charles Reisner—and was actually an accidental choice for Roosevelt’s campaign song due to a storied last minute change during the convention proceedings. It became the Democratic Party’s anthem for years after the convention.

³⁸³ In a letter exchange with Mr. Otto A. Huefner or the University of Illinois Library (Exchange Division) on December 17th 1934, an enrollee who sent a stack of *Happy Days* copies to the library received notice from Huefner, explaining: “we wish to thank you for the copies of your camp newspaper which you supplied recently. They were received in good condition and have proved to be the type of materials that we desire. This material is now being cataloged so that it will soon be available for the use of both the faculty and students of this university, as well as for future scholars.” Dennett papers, ACT. NO. 3917-002, Box 2 of 19, Vo2686.

CCC's thematic intention to serve the "moral and spiritual rehabilitation" of boys—is facilitated by the words of Ira Freeman, District Chaplain for CCC camp programs in Western Pennsylvania. Freeman wrote in a document framing the CCC's impact on the culture of young men in the United States: "I humbly prophecy that the conservation of these three hundred thousand lads will save future historians from the painful task of admitting that the American knighthood that flowered in 1776 withered until it became lounging sissyness in 1933."³⁸⁴ Freeman's words echo the concern with public perceptions of the overlapping concerns of migrancy/unemployment and effeminacy; accordingly, his notice details internal argumentation that the CCC was laboring to craft not only a job, but a life outlook for young men that would citizen-make youthful American boys in the image of a pseudo-Imperial "knighthood" held by the mythological remembering of prescribed toughness of America's colonial past.³⁸⁵

The stories, photographs, and testimonials of *Happy Days*, however, contradict this purported stasis of the CCC camp's masculine citizen making regime. As Colin Johnson succinctly writes: "during its first years of publication, *Happy Days* was saturated with news reports, stories, and images depicting enrollees as a fun-loving bunch of men whose high morale could be traced more directly to drag shows, campy slang, and an obsessed worship of the muscled male physique than to anything contemporary readers would associate immediately with

³⁸⁴ Qtd. in Johnson, "Camp Life: The Queer History of 'Manhood' in the Civilian Conservation Corps," 19.

³⁸⁵ Freeman was far from alone in his arguments. In a May 28, 1935 bulletin detailing the National Report of Educational Programs in the CCC from the Headquarters Ninth Corps area, a CCC administrator solidified this insinuation—and, again, harkened the CCC's rhetorical argumentation for moral and spiritual rehabilitation made available through the program. "More important" details the bulletin's author, "than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work. The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, who are now walking into the streets and receiving private or public relief [sic], would infinitely prefer to work. We can take a vast army of those unemployed out of the healthful surroundings. We can eliminate to some extent, at least, the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral stability." Bulletin 15, Headquarters Ninth Corps Area, Office of the Educational Adviser, May 28th, 1935. Vo2686. UW Special Collections, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

heterosexual “manhood,” strictly speaking.”³⁸⁶ Johnson’s words triangulate findings throughout copies of *Happy Days* and other personal correspondences from CCC enrollees. These self-authored images of the CCC enrollees open doors to question the very nature of male bonding, homosociality, and community in the Civilian Conservation Corps program.

“Between Men”: Safe Spectatorship and Permissible Intimacy

Imagining the relationship between homosociality (the bonds held between the camps’ young men) and queerness in the CCC allows for a broadening of the way we conceptualize performance as beneficial to the camps program’s creation of a space of experimentation for young men in the CCC. One of the most fascinating pastimes of bonding documented in *Happy Days* that serves this chapter’s questioning of homosociality in the CCC was based on body worship experienced through physique ranking competitions. In other studies, the “all male beauty contests” that a 1934 issue of *Happy Days* calls the desire to find “the best-looking man in the whole C.C.C.,” are referenced.³⁸⁷ Usefully detailed to recognize how *important* appreciation and eroticization of the male body was in the CCC, studies frame just how hard the boys of the CCC worked to be considered attractive. Some of this related to camp recreation, in terms of fitness programs and muscle-building during recreation hours outside of work times. However, in a primary source—a book called *The History of the Camps*—from Company 1483 in Florala, Alabama, the proceedings that followed an occurrence when a CCC photographer arrived on-site to take pictures of the enrollees in the CCC. Upon the photographer’s arrival, “it was a grand rush for the bathhouse” writes Lewis B. Watson in the Alabama camp history text;

³⁸⁶ Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 21.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 23.

“mirrors, yelling for combs, brushes, powder and hair tonic” all accompanied the fervor of the men to be manicured into specimens worthy of CCC intercamp photograph, and commendation for good looks. Watson writes that, “‘Country’ Walters won the company prize, having borrowed a complete outfit of clothes. He swiped eyebrow pencil, lipstick, and beauty cream. The result... was a masterpiece.”³⁸⁸ This brand of social performance shows the anti-masculine optics of the seemingly male-centered body ranking competitions, beauty pageants, and quests to be seen as handsome by fellow enrollees. While the competitions were also centered around bodybuilding, physique culture, and “aura of manliness and health,” they also demonstrate the quick turn to homoeroticism, primping, and body worship in the CCC camps.³⁸⁹

These male body ranking competitions may seem like a beamingly quizzical occurrence for a program marketed as a hegemonically-oriented community for young men. However, archival mention of these competitions—as well as honoring of the male body—surfaces with extensive frequency. Men and boys in the CCC would compete against their own camp-mates and intercamp photos to locate the best, strongest, and most physically-fit toned male body. These competitions seem to have been light hearted, but included not only an excessive amount of time in each camp dedicated to ranking and spectating shirtless peers, but also passing on photographs of the winners of local camp competitions to then be ranked by other camps, so that they could “compete” against the photographs to find the strongest men and most attractive men in the intercamp community. The influence of this recreation program can’t be understated. In countless photographs from the project, men are seen working shirtless, flexing for the camera, and comparing their bodies to peers. The culture of “worshipping” the male physique can then be

³⁸⁸ Lewis B. Watson, *The History of the Camps* qtd. in Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 22.

³⁸⁹ Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 20..

seen as a central tenet of the CCC camp recreational activities, and community ethos. Further, Duberman's study points out that this culture of body spectating led to sexual dividends. In Duberman's aforementioned study, BA's journal recounts how after "a comment on the tan on the shirtless torso of another (19 year old) enrollee" caused a visitor he was working with in the woods "to fall behind the others when they moved on" to make a pass at the boy, leading to the two having "uncontrollable and insatiable" sex.³⁹⁰ Clearly, these competitions created a culture of not only body-centrality, but fueled the already burgeoning gay sexualities in the camp programs.

These cultures of queerness were forwarded further by other CCC-sponsored recreational activities and social programs. Intercamp editors of *Happy Days* shared a reporter pamphlet for new "Camp Reporter(s)" about how to properly chronicle for *Happy Days*. In this pamphlet, notes are given on social commentary which included, "SOCIAL NEWS: This sort of NEWS will, of course, include stories of your social activities -- parties, dances, celebrations, dramatics. ... it may be that visitors at your party were transported fifty or one hundred miles to attend..."³⁹¹ This is a telling document, in that it notes how parties and dances were held in the CCC camps, and how parties would *occasionally* be held with visitors (such as local young women) to the camps. Social and recreational programs were even created to help the enrollees learn to dance to prepare for the parties. This again introduces a window for male homosociality to bridge with male-with-male sexuality, and the latter given space to bloom. Camp documents note that a manual on "The Art of Social Dancing," by Lawrence A. Hostetler was added to a camp's library, and used to support a social dancing class in the camps. Certainly, it could be that the boys were dancing with each other to prepare for their big soirées with women. However,

³⁹⁰ Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, 149.

³⁹¹ Dennett papers, ACT. NO. 3917-002, Box 2 of 19, Vo2686.

Hostetler's manual includes descriptions of dance, detailing "it is a manner of finding *pleasure* in rhythmic movements of the body... nowadays the dance is individualized. It is more of a manner of securing or giving attention. However, it is still a recreational art—although, actually, as much a social need as an art. It is more complex, but it still releases pleasurable emotions. It is still pleasing to the eye for its grace (except in wild and meaningless jazz)."³⁹² Hostetler's description cyclically notes the physical pleasure of feeling, and aesthetic pleasure of watching others dance. The question I'd raise, then, is: were these young men *just* practicing for their big dance socials? Classes themselves would have been composed of all men and boys from the enrollee population; preparation and training was, presumably, gained by having the men dance with each other. While not inherently sexual, recreation programs like this—read in alignment with the male ranking competitions—continue to enliven the queer recreation culture of the camps. Further, it creates an image of a U.S. governmental program that didn't avoid or encourage less effeminacy from the enrollees, but actually endorsed performing/filling a woman's role (in dance partnership and beyond) during camp-sponsored recreation programs with other men.

What is so unique, and perhaps worth celebrating, about these two scenarios male bonding is that they simultaneously coordinate and cooperate male body sites (in acts of looking, with the physique competitions; in acts of moving, to practice social dance) without archival memory of homophobia. While these instances very well may have had homophobic undertones or violence involved in them, the continuity (and popularity) of both seems to frame the events as allowing the boys of the CCC to engage in physically intimate interactions without immense judgement that would have occurred *outside* of the CCC camp sites. I'd argue that this incubator of judgement-free homosociality contributed to emergences of queerness stemming from each.

³⁹² Lawrence A. Hostetler, *The Art of Social Dancing: a Text Book for Teachers and Students* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1937), 189. Original version of the text written in 1930. My italics.

Humor, Ridicule, and “Bonding” Between Enrollees

What began as a forestry initiative, and grew into a male-centered community of young American men, had become something rather different from the U.S. government’s original aim. As the Civilian Conservation Corps became an intimate and communal space for young men, so too did these realms of safe male bonding space for cultures of gay identity. Canaday writes that despite the polarity of their original intent, in CCC camps the U.S. government was inadvertently crafting, “State-created enclaves of male intimacy.”³⁹³ The words of Ira Freeman, and droves of literature published by the U.S. government offices on the CCC, persuaded potential enrollees to recruitment based on a defense of a masculine state organization—and defended the CCC to the public as a means of building a more heterosexual and masculineist demographic of young men for the future of the country. Yet, archival documentation on the CCC in this study parlays Canaday’s argument that the government was actually creating isolated groups of young men with little exposure to the small towns they were working adjacent to in the CCC camps. The enrollee’s social scene was nearly entirely composed of other young men; their lodging/quarters were small and military-like; their early-life experiences of hormonal development and sexual curiosity all-but-fully linked to their time in the camps. Even without expanding on the available effeminacies and queerness(es) available in recreation and social programs developed for enrollees (such as in social dance, or the Federal Theatre Project’s interventions in CCC camp dramatics), and without exposure of the erotic and body-based social connections between the

³⁹³ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 95. Canaday also writes that the government—in addition to watching eyes in the public sphere—was unable to sort or distinguish between gay migrants and other unemployed youth. She adds: “The state, likewise, made only rhetorical but no actual attempts to sort relief recipients as deserving of undeserving according to their sexuality.” That said, while public perception of the CCC camp program was mostly positive, Canaday argues “it is impossible to cull the taint of perversion from all of the other factors that led to the public’s condemnation of the transients: their dependency, their potential criminality, and above all, their mobility,” framing the likely public reception of the CCC as a place where transients were being excluded from society—rather than being given tools to more seamlessly integrate into it.

men, the Corps program was from the start a pursuit funded by the federal government that forwarded apt conditions for the emergence of gay sexuality and identity.

However, not all bonding between the men and body of the CCC was without ridicule, social dissent, or judgement. As Sedgwick reminds us, male homosocial bonds guide male interaction—and the talon’s clench of patriarchal power is a precursory to both. Sedgwick argues that “in fact, it is applied to such activities as ‘male bonding,’ which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality.”³⁹⁴ Aspects of this fear and homophobia undoubtedly surfaced in the Civilian Conservation Corps. In a report’s guide to writing for the camp newspaper, a heading is listed for “HUMOR:...” On this, the advice-giving reporter details: “there is much humorous which will make good copy. And the most important point here, too, is to relate that which is original -- that which happens within camp, or *between the men*.”³⁹⁵ This consideration of comedy led me to ask: where in *Happy Days* documentation, or in other archival remnants of camp culture, do we see queerness (or innuendos of gay sexuality) being made the subject of homophobic “comedy” or judgement between the boys of the CCC.³⁹⁶

Archival materials from CCC Camp #177 and Camp #928, both perceivably in Niantic, Connecticut serve as useful examples of this kind of subversive queer judgement. In one archival file, the pages of the enrollee penned newsprint—akin in size and scope to a high school literary magazine—contain various forms of serious camp updates, comical inside-jokes between

³⁹⁴ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1.

³⁹⁵ Eugene V. Dennett papers. ACT. NO. 3917-002, Box 2 of 19, Vo2686. UW Special Collections, University of Washington, Seattle, WA. My italics.

³⁹⁶ Sedgwick writes of situations like these how “... just as, for different groups in different political circumstances, homosexual activity can either be supportive of or oppositional to homosocial bonding.” There is a logic to this framing of comedy between the enrollees that could position maneuvers of queer judgement as a kind of internalized homophobia on the part of young men in the CCC camps. That is, even though men were having sex with other men—the ability to poke fun at queerness served as a kind of shield for CCC enrollees. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 6.

enrollees, and lewd literary horseplay between the young men in the CCC camps. For instance, one faux-epitaph found in these files reads: “Here rests what remains / Of Dominik Crisci / Who ended it all / When she called him sissy.”³⁹⁷ This confusingly opaque John Wilmotean sexualized humor is compounded by a second poem in the same collection: a photo depicts a group of six musicians collaborating with the tagline, “It might have been a SEX(tette) but Randall wouldn’t let sex enter in.”³⁹⁸ These two references are small, straightforward accounts of dissent for queer sexuality—the first, as an insinuation that a camp enrollee was a “sissy” who died when a presumed lover found out that he was a closeted gay man. The second, perhaps more novel in nature, poses the insinuation that some of the boys of CCC were trying to engage in gay sex with other enrollees, but being turned down (and subsequently judged) by them. Both complicate a more straightforward narrative that would have the CCC imaged as a vibrant and safe queer culture. Instead, the CCC camps should be considered a complex space where the centrality of male bonding both permitted, and created shame for, the emergence of gay sexuality.

The activities of Company 935 located in Saltwater State Park in Des Moines, WA (between Seattle and Tacoma, WA) extends an even more revealing means of queer identity documentation in the form of homophobic humor between the enrollees. An issue of the camp newspaper, *The Salt Water Herald*, from Thursday, October 11th 1934 introduces a small camp conflict. The article in question from the “Herald” opens with the headline, “Funny Business,” before enumerating: “Much ‘funny business’ has been going on in camp but nobody seemed able to put their finger on the spot. The ‘Herald’ finally stepped into the breach and working secretly, uncovered a vast amount of evidence pointing to a deeply laid plot of some kind or other. Things

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Eugene V. Dennett papers, ACT. NO. 3917-002, Box 2 of 19, Vo2686. UW Special Collections (University of Washington, Seattle, WA).

have mysteriously disappeared from the men's quarters and stuff has been seen in camp which had no business here but nobody knew nothing." At first, the undercover sleuthing of the Herald seems rather routine and colloquial, if not cursory, to the dynamics of camp life. However, the missing items again raise suspicion to the nature of this theft—and the original owner's performance of selfhood. The missing items? "Cutex" (or, a popular nail polish remover in the era that, through genericization became synonymous with remover itself), "fingernail stain" (nail polish), and a "brand new lipstick."³⁹⁹ These items may indeed indicate either drag performance, trans-feminine identity performance, or (more minimally) experimentation with gender norms via use of women's fashion/cosmetic aesthetics in the CCC camp program at Saltwater State Park. Making this document even more curious is the penultimate line: "Roy Maxwell reported that someone had ransacked his locker and taken his bottle of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound."⁴⁰⁰ Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was an herbal-alcoholic medicine marketed in the late 19th and early 20th century across the United States which, despite no proven medicinal value or evidence of efficacy, became a prominent home remedy for menstrual discomfort and menopausal symptoms in women. This report in the "Herald" naturally raises more questions than it answers. Potentially, this is documentation that a (or multiple) member(s) of CCC Company 935 were engaging in cross-dressing, and other means of identity performance, and that their peers stole their aesthetic tools. Or, perhaps the documentation is an effort to call out specific members of the Company (like Maxwell) for actions of effeminacy, gayness, or lack of masculinity, as an effort to shame them. Lastly, it is possible that the newsprint is a simple joke; again, playing on the oft-located documentation in CCC camps where

³⁹⁹ The Salt Water Herald. Camp Saltwater, CCC Co. 935. Thursday October 11th, 1934. Vo2686. UW Special Collections, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

homosocial barbs serve as a means of homosocial bonding, or routine cruelties of era-based homophobia. In any of the above cases, it proves that the CCC camp members were highly dialed into the nuances of feminine performance; that, actions of effeminacy and performing femininity were being enacted, trafficked, policed, and shamed inside of CCC camps.

Cultures of Queerness in the CCC

Playscripts like *Mighty Poorly* depict an ethos in Civilian Conservation Corps camps that welcomed—if not savored—queer codings and gay innuendo in camp theatricals. Newsprint in *Happy Days* and other inter and intracamp correspondences show that queerness was received both as something to celebrate, and a means of ridicule between the CCC enrollees. However, perhaps the most profound means of queer performance in CCC camps occurred off of the stage, and out of the headlines. Identity performances by enrollees around campfires, in non-theatre competitions and games, and through personal performances of selfhood crafted a form of theatre and performance that made meaningful interventions not only in camp life, but in the social cultures of Depression-era United States masculinity. In order to reveal some of these identity performances and experimentations, I'll elaborate on the effusiveness of queer communality and identity performances in the CCC camps, and then document their surfacing in FTP theatricals for the CCC, arguing for the symbiotic linkages between the two entities.

Colin Johnson's scholarly documentation of the queer performance culture in the CCC is pivotal for accenting the import of both covert and blatant queer culture in the camp programs. In "Camp Life: The Queer History of 'Manhood' in the Civilian Conservation Corps," Johnson explains how "outlandish drag shows that constituted a popular genre of camp theatrical" were widely performed in the CCC camps. In imagining a reenactment of these performance traditions, one can speculate late night fireside storytelling and bunk-mate communality that

permitted queer and gender-fluid identities in the camps. A theoretical lens that helps to clarify the queer performances in CCC camps can be tied to Johnson's case studies of drag and identity performance in the camps is Jack Halberstam conceptualization of altered temporalities and spatial inhabitation in *In a Queer Time and Place*. *In a Queer Time and Place*'s root claim that queerness is an outcome of "strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices," operating in order to dislocate queerness as a fabrication of purely sexual identity, holds a number of overlapping thematics with the case study of the CCC.⁴⁰¹ Writing on how regionality connects to—or, enables and accommodates—queerness, in *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam "both confirms that queer subcultures thrive in urban areas *and* contests the essential characterizations of queer life as urban."⁴⁰² Despite the menace and threat of hetero-masculine violence in rural areas, Halberstam details ways that rural queers also enact selfhood, community, and replete possibilities for living their lives. In addition to early articulations of the interlocked relationship between wilderness, remote camps, and queer sexuality, Halberstam's writing helps to promote a reading of the CCC performance that argues a) that the remote location of the CCC camps gave way to not only gay sexuality, but the creation of individual queer identities for the enrollees, and b) how states of *liminality* of place also fostered queerness, transness, and identity performance. I ask: what if rather than thinking of rurality as a variable contributing to closeting or masking of queer identity, we think of the CCC as a utopian location promoting and aiding the creation of queer and trans identity?

When Johnson writes that enrollee populations of CCC camps, "experimented freely with the conventions of gender by donning women's clothing to perform for their fellow enrollees

⁴⁰¹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.

⁴⁰² *Ibid*, 15.

around the evening campfire,” this utopia comes into focus.⁴⁰³ The use of “utopia” in this manner is naturally linked to José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of queer utopia in *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. For Muñoz, queerness creates (and, in fact, *is*) a state that permits imagining a future different from the lived experiences of today. Muñoz describes how gay nightclubs, social parties, and esoteric communities of queer folks of the global majority permit a self-fashioning and genre of identity performance that is not only counter hegemonic, but rather dislocates relationality from being *only* counter hegemonic, subaltern, or other—holding possibilities, instead, of queer imagination. Halberstam’s broader arguments for *In a Queer Time and Place* speak to the way that not only possibilities, but functional perceptions of time and space exist within these utopian formats, mediums, and positionalities. To bolster the stakes of CCC camp performances, Johnson’s narrativizing of the history of queer camp performances can be fused with Halberstam and Muñoz logic of the possibilities of these queernesses. Halberstam writes, “But to still other viewers, the transgender body represents a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities;” accordingly, it is not only in conception or cognition on a space for queer identity that queer utopia is fostered, but rather in the body site of the queer and trans subjects themselves.⁴⁰⁴ Read this way, the body in performance becomes a relic of possibility—of queer possibility. Muñoz’s logic ratifies this argument, articulating how, “often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.” A future that the CCC was, in fact, enacting.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 20.

⁴⁰⁴ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 96.

⁴⁰⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Campfire Identity Performances

What is of further importance is that “drag and camp performance,” as Johnson explains, wasn’t a rarity or special even inside of the camps, but rather “was an important aspect of everyday life in the CCC.”⁴⁰⁶ Queer performances in the CCC were such a normalized part of the camp program, that reflection on them lasted well beyond the end of the CCC tenure. A document created more than twenty years after the 1942 closure of all CCC camps notes a sort of pen-pal reunion between enrollees. The document explains itself as, “A compiled list of former members of the 177th Company, C.C.C. who attained marked distinction in the year 1965. We present for your approval.”⁴⁰⁷ This “reunion” of sorts for CCC enrollees seems to document members of the program staying in touch for years following their time in camps. All of the entries in this “marked distinction” log of alumni are again farcical in nature; most ribbing or poking fun at members of the camp community with seemingly recalled inside jokes from their camp days. In this chronicle, one entry stands out: “Gracie Eldridge, noted femal [sic] impersonator, who rejected an offer of ten thousand dollars to endorse a brand of lingerie.”

Gracie Eldridge appears to be a member of the CCC enrollee population who was engaging in drag—either during the campy performances surveyed by Johnson, or perhaps (due to being named a “female impersonator”) with greater frequency around the camp. Several enrollees maintained consistent personas of drag performance during their time in the CCC camps. “Miss Agnes” for example, was an assumed identity for an enrollee named Curtis Culpepper in Company 1413. Soaringly popular, Miss Agness would use her “fire-flap” technique to use a flapper dress to fan the dispelling flames during campfires in the woodlands (earning her the name, “The Fire Flapper”). In Rhode Island, “Josie” (Joe) Gomes sang

⁴⁰⁶ Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” 28.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

vaudeville numbers for the other enrollees, crafting an original show to perform for (her) camp site colleagues.⁴⁰⁸ Examples of drag, cross dressing, and trans-identity performance go on and on, in both Johnson’s study and in the subtexts of archival copies of *Happy Days*. In Company 1740 in Arkansas, for instance, new enrollees arrived to be met by “Miss Nurse” (otherwise known as Mr. Hart) who greeted and checked them in. One report writes how, “it wasn’t until (the) next day that some of them knew that she was none other than the outfit’s supply sergeant.”⁴⁰⁹

The intrapersonal and communal significance of the “roles” and, indeed, identities of Gracie Eldridge, Miss Nurse, Miss Agnes, and Josie Gomes can be approached using a number of theoretical and historical models from both performance history, and queer/trans theories of gender. Rather than searching for an internal “why” behind the felt-sense motivations of the young men who assumed these drag, cross-dressing, and even trans performances, the question that guides my curiosity on each case study is: what was accomplished *communally* for the camp enrollees in the creation of each performed identity? George Chauncey’s significant cultural archeology of queerness at the turn of the century facilitates some of the historical antecedents and developments of these performances. Writing on performed identities of gay men in the era, Chauncey writes that “the fairy influences the culture and self-understanding of *all* sexually active men,” serving as an intervention between the hegemonic codings of the sex-gender system of the era, and contemporary understandings of sex and gender that would develop by the late 20th century.⁴¹⁰ By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the “female impersonators” (or, “inverts” which Chauncey notes was a separate contemporary a term for men who assumed female or

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. Johnson’s study—which includes Josie Gomes’ case study—doesn’t name the source of the vaudeville show that she opened for; however, there is a likelihood that the FTP sponsored, or even sent performers, to the camp for this vaudeville performance.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1994), 47.

feminine characteristics, effectively “inverting” their gender) “on display at the Bowery resorts were the most famous symbols of gay life, and the impression of that life they conveyed was reinforced the countless other effeminate men who were visible in the streets of the city’s working-class and amusement districts in the early decades of the century.”⁴¹¹ The figure of the fairy as both an intermediate sex, and as a performance aesthetic that guided identity and societal identification more readily than sexual object-choice holds a few dividends for the CCC camp programming. Firstly, that the young men in these performance roles were operating to legitimize and destigmatize the other gay sexuality that was happening in the CCC camp program. If the era’s understanding of sex-gender categorizations were more fully based on identity performance than sexual object-choice, then the young men in the Corps were engaging in various forms of gay sexuality without actually compromising their understanding of their own manhood or heterosexuality—as they were reifying male-fex sex by assuming the role of women before having sex with their camp mates. This allowed the boys in the CCC to have sex with each other, supervisors, and male locals, without altering their contemporary understanding of sexual order.⁴¹² Secondly, Chauncey’s writing begs the question of how the gay men and fairies of New York’s lower east side in the Bowery resorts would have experienced gay sexuality differently than the CCC camp members, and how identity performance factors into that difference. I’d argue that because many of these young men came from rural areas, they

⁴¹¹ Ibid. Chauncey argues that the fairy in early 20th century America created more than a performed figure, or personality archetype—but actually crafted an “intermediate sex” who, alongside “Butch” lesbian women, worked to create a liminal space between manness and womanness in the era’s somewhat rigid sex-gender system. Chauncey further contextualizes that by the mid-20th century, “a system categorizing people on the basis of their sexual object-choice had largely replaced one categorizing them on the basis of gender style” had been instilled—the early 20th century more starkly categorized queer folks based on their performed and assumed cultural roles, fashion sense, and mannerisms.

⁴¹² This brand of identity performance is aligned with Judith Butler’s famed and significant assertion that performances and presentation of gender are performative, stating that “gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

were not exposed to the omnipresent social performance culture of New York's city streets. While in New York, a gay man could walk with more safety and communal affinity; they could perform some aspects of femininity as they desired, and in ways that these rural young men could not. The creation of the CCC—and, the pervasive performance culture that saw young men performing identity nightly at firesides, during classes by day, and throughout their lived (i.e. in male body ranking competitions)—therefore gave these fairies a stage to perform on. A space to perform selfhood, in the omnipresent apparatus of performance that framed gay citizenship in the CCC.

Shotgun Wedding Ceremonies

The implementation of drag and identity performance in theatricals and rituals wasn't limited to dramatics classes, fireside performances by young men in drag, or those experimenting with "female impersonation" in CCC camps. Another overlap can be found with a different—and noticeably queer—variant of camp theatrical: shotgun weddings. These wedding ceremonies were a popular form of parody entertainment for CCC enrollees, and a genre openly discussed in *Happy Days* newsprint. In various CCC camps around the country, two enrollees would enact a wedding, complete with bridal parties and groomsman, costumes (including the bride in a white dress, based on photographs of the events), officiants, and vows. The shotgun weddings held in the CCC camps offered enrollees simulations of an otherwise traditional ritual, recreating this common choreography with peer enrollee populations for the sake of parody.⁴¹³ Or, were they?

The performance construction in the CCC camps shotgun weddings can be illuminated by the seminal performance ethnography of Victor and Edith Turner. In the Turner's activation of a

⁴¹³ See Appendix D, Figure 3.

simulated scenario through performance, they argue for legitimate stakes for the performer in a simulated social drama. In the Turners' case, this referenced enacting a performed wedding with colleagues and students, complete with roles for each member of the community, in order to activate discussion of the concepts of rights of passage, *communitas*, and liminality. During their ritual process the Turners explain how, "others were taken over, 'possessed' by what Grathoff and Handelman have called 'symbolic types' ... in the domain of ritual liminality."⁴¹⁴ These observations illuminated how people took over playing a specific role in the ceremony, and then felt committed to that role, with a sense of urgency for their own personal lives and affective domains outside of the simulation. For the CCC wedding, the question that emerges is how these "symbolic types" of the shotgun wedding were inhabited by enrollees, and what stakes they had for the camp populations. Doubtlessly, they were a form of harvesting Turner's *communitas*; defined as a strong, shared social bond held between members of a community due to sharing experiences of rites of passages, or a performance manifestation. However, were the weddings also seen as rites of passages (as hazing rituals, or more innocuously and beneficially as events permitting trans identity), that the camp enrollees enacted together? Were the wedding performances understood as purely entertainment, or were they culminating moments for men sharing sexual or romantic bonds enacting an *actual* means of celebration?⁴¹⁵ There remains readings of these performance events that signify the shotgun wedding as a way to concretize the extant gay relationships in the CCC camps—effectively "performing" gay weddings nearly 70 years prior to the first legitimized gay nuptial ceremonies permitted in the United States.

⁴¹⁴ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, "Performing Ethnography," in *The Drama Review (TDR)* 26, no. 2 (1982): 38.

⁴¹⁵ Diane Taylor explains how scenarios of this kind hold specific meanings for the members of the performance community and audience, which indicates that the exact meaning (or, naturally, several meanings) of the ceremonies was not linear, or uniform across the shotgun weddings. Taylor defines a scenario as "a sketch of outline of the plot of a play, giving particulars of the scenes, situations," and elaborated that "all scenarios have localized meaning, though many attempt to pass as universally valid." Diane Taylor, "Acts of Transfer," in *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

Yellow Harvest and The Drawback: Stage Representations of Identity

Additional textual case studies from the Federal Theatre and CCC's shared archival materials harkens curious enrollee spectatorial reactions, and meaningful deductions about identity performances in the camps. *Yellow Harvest* is a script that—like most camp theatricals in the Civilian Conservation Corps—seems to have had no afterlife beyond being performed by members of the CCC camps. Yet, the short vaudeville play frames a nature of performance in that camps that cross hatches a density of recognizable queer culture tropes.

The script's plot addresses a romantic couple (man and woman) who are discussing a shared business project. "Julie" and "Lee" speak to each other about the particulars of a business deal that are enwrapped in horticultural endeavors (much like many of the CCC focused projects). Recognizable business verbiage pervades many of the plot points: Lee, for instance, in a one-to-one two hander scene with Julie justifies himself, saying "I admit I took a gamble borrowing that five thousand dollars -- but that crop proves I was right, doesn't it! ... it will pay off every red cent I borrowed."⁴¹⁶ However, a moment of peculiarity arises in the scripting of Lee asking Julie if a business partner (Kells) has been making romantic/sexual advances towards her:

JULIE: The sooner Kells realizes he can't break up the corporation and get control of the flax crops, the better for all of us!

LEE: (Abruptly) Kells hasn't ever tried to get gay with you, has he?

JULIE: (Vaguely) No... not exactly.⁴¹⁷

This subtle textual coding has a few layers. First of all, the most obvious note is that Lee uses the term "gay" in asking about Kells' actions. However, this is a shallow consideration for the 1920s

⁴¹⁶ "Yellow Harvest," Script Exchange Service, CCC, Script 5 (United States: Department of the Interior, Office of Education. Washington, DC), 5.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

and 1930s, as this rhetoric would still have elicited a more traditional (or, 19th century) reaction to the term “gay” as cheerful, light, or jovial—as the word had not yet gained mainstream use for queerness or same-sex romanticism and sexuality.⁴¹⁸ It is however the response by Julie (“No... note exactly”) that is more interesting. This moment is perhaps a coded double entendre, using a gestural or facial acting choice to covertly add a wink-and-nudge to knowing audience members.

A second layer is the performatic recognition that Julie would have been performed by a second man in the CCC camps. Much like the conundrum of social dancing in the camps, the Federal Theatre’s choice to send scripts with romantic situations, partnerships, marriages, and other flirtations between men and women was a recognition that these scenes would often be performed by two men, and that doing so would be done with acceptance by the members of the enrollee populations.⁴¹⁹ Suddenly, in a vaudevillian inverse of Rosalind’s internal debate from *As You Like It*, Julie’s utterance of “no... not exactly” takes performance shape in the actor’s choice how to illuminate dramatic irony of being a biological male playing a woman’s role—being asked the rather complex question of if there has been anything “gay” about Kells’ advances.

A third layer of this scene begs the question: what was accomplished, in the first place, in the scripting, performing, and emulating the performance of *straight* (heterosexual) physically intimate or romantic relationships by two men in the CCC camps? A second script study illuminates nearly synonymous framing for a dramaturgical scenario. In *The Drawback*, two earnest lovers (Mabel and Edward) sit on a bench in a public park. Stage directions indicate that

⁴¹⁸ By the 1930s, the queer *subcultural use* of the term “gay” had already started to take hold; in prisons, gay nightlife, and other settings where male-male sexuality was prominent, “gay” could be understood as saying queer (or, of sharing same-sex physical desire)—but only with the coded aim of the term being primarily understood as such by in-group readers (that is to say: only other queers would understand the rhetoric use).

⁴¹⁹ I use “often” not “always” here because there were avenues of performance in CCC camps where female performers came into CCC camps to serve as “actresses.” Like social dancing, sometimes women were invited into the camps for social parties—as were FTP acting troupes with female performers brought into camps for theatricals and presentations. However, the ongoing use of scripts in club settings (like social dances having practices, classes, and rehearsals, meant that men were also frequently performing with each other in “heterosexual” scenework.

the two have just been engaged, and enter the park walking arm in arm. However, the short scene takes a sudden turn, as Edward announces that he has a secret to tell Mabel:

EDWARD: Mabel. There is something I must tell you. It's been on my mind a long time. It's sort of a confession.

MABEL: (*shocked*) Oh Edward. You are going to tell me that you love some one else [*sic*]. I knew this would happen. I felt it coming.

EDWARD: (*equally shocked*) No. no. That isn't it at all. I've never been in love with anyone else and I'm not now.

MABEL: (*surprised*) Is that really true? You mean you never fell in love with any one before you met me?

The two go on—leading to the title's "drawback" being revealed (Edward informs Mabel that his father is a hangman). The melodramatic unraveling of their breakup rivals era film screenplays:

MABEL: ... Edward there is something I must tell you. Our engagement cannot go on. It's all been a horrible mistake.

EDWARD: (*hurt*) Then it IS on account of my father.

MABEL: Not at all. It is on account of all those other women.

EDWARD: (*amazed*) Other women? I told you about them and you said you didn't mind.

MABEL: (*with incredible coldness*) But I did mind. I minded very much. I suffered in silence. A school teacher. A waitress. The Swedish Nightingale. Oh you cad. You libertine... you have broken my heart. You have ruined my life.

The theatrical aesthetic and modality of melodrama here serves a unique purpose, when juxtaposed with the likelihood that Mabel, too, was being performed by a man. The script, with this presumption, which would otherwise fall flat—given that its core substance is a game of question-and-answer as Mabel tried to figure out what Edward wants to tell her. However, with the wrinkle and theatrical intervention of Mabel being performed by a male actor (a "female impersonator," or a cis man in drag), the script is instead one that uses dramatic irony to have the audience laughing at what they guess will be the issue with Edward and Mabel's engagement

(that they are both men, in a queer couple). This script enacts Johnson's argument of CCC camp theatricals, that they "listed dramatically—indeed, often *melodramatically*—in the direction of a campy knowingness about the queer implications of homosexuality."⁴²⁰ This campy, silly, melodramatic zeal of comic performance allowed scripts like *Yellow Harvest* and *The Drawback* to add zany fun to camps, while normalizing queer identity through characters of the stage.

Afterlives of the Federal Theatre's CCC Camp Performances

What is so remarkable about the CCC camps and the myriad of identities and dramatic performances housed in them was how different their separate variants of queerness were. In an era with limited repertoires of queer identity, performances of queer desire or gender divergent identity in the CCC could be sincere or comical, gay or trans, stable (i.e. permanent) or simply a night's long experiment. To again parallel the camps with an adjacent concept in Shakespeare studies, we can think of the CCC camps as a sort of "Arden" or "green space" for the young men and boys who chose to enroll in the Corps. In *As You Like It*, the forest of Arden is where members of the urban upper classes escape to for exile, protection, rest, and (ultimately) rediscovery. The same is true in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the subplots of magic, mysticism, and whimsy—as well as many other Shakespeare plays where these "green spaces" become lands of wonder. What if we think of the CCC as a rather literal "green space" or "Forest of Arden" in the middle of the wilderness predating means of becoming for many of the young men in the CCC? These liminal places of creation allowed young men to chart possibilities for their own identities in the incubated environment of the CCC's unique wilderness home. While a small moment in the

⁴²⁰ Johnson, "Camp Life: The Queer History of 'Manhood' in the Civilian Conservation Corps," 20. Johnson further lists two core examples of this kind of camp in male homosocial, and queer, spaces as the YMCA and the U.S. military during WWII.

history of the CCC, the Federal Theatre, and the United States, these performances left a large footprint on the import of each entity, and the trajectory of queer performance in the 21st century.

Federal Theatre Project Touring Productions

At risk of feeding a narrative of the Federal Theatre's stoppage that reifies the project's performances as nefarious, it is worth noting that not all losses tied to the stoppage of the Federal Theatre (and, therefore, termination of the CCC-FTP collaboration) were queer one. The Civilian Conservation Corps program ultimately held a desire to create avenues of learning for American youth; to build a place where young men would find work, learning, and recreation that suited their predilections. The Federal Theatre Project operated in tandem with these CCC goals, and as the two intersected the enrollee population benefitted from visiting performances, resources for drama classes, and leisure-time activities provided by the Federal Theatre Project.

When the Federal Theatre Project performers visited CCC camps, they would frequently do so offering comic or jovial performance modes to the enrollees for entertainment. Vaudeville troupes visited camps with traveling acts; musicians connected to the FTP brought instruments for song and music theatre; actors and other FTP theatre professionals offered interludes that bolstered classes that were a part of the educational programs in the CCC. Many of the actual plays brought in followed one of several common templates: two-hand vaudeville comedies, law and juridical dramas, and CCC camp metacommentaries. These metacommentary plays seem of particular interest: both in the form of plays being performed for the enrollees that covered what it was like to be a CCC enrollee, and plays written with the CCC enrollees about their experiences that were performed on-site by FTP actors. In this way, the CCC-FTP collaborations worked as a pedagogical apparatus in and of themselves—allowing CCC members to learn from the scripts, or from each other, on subjects that supported life lessons on exigencies of the

enrollees' lives. By focusing on juridical, hiring, and camp-located dramas, the CCC enrollees were effectively preparing for or "rehearsing" real life through the CCC stage—allowing the enrollee to gear themselves towards future success in social encounters through the rehearsal for these encounters on stage.⁴²¹ In these plays, the CCC was using theatre as a means of teaching, helping enrollees to learn in a medium accessible to enrollees of all ages, learning levels, and educational backgrounds prior to the CCC. These educational goals funned back to the central focus of the CCC as a relief organization: tooling young American men to get back to work.

"We were held spellbound for an hour and half" detailed Captain CA-RES Claude C. Gruson, commander of the 938th CCC Company in Hoodport, WA, elaborating that "(the enrollees) were not content with one or two encores, but clapped several of the numbers back three or four times." Gruson extends an evaluation of the morale boosted by the Federal Theatre performances, stating that the FTP performance "produced more laughs than I have heard in this company for several months."⁴²²

The details of this chapter are far from exhaustive, as more collaborations between the CCC and Federal Theatre were held, such as their jointly-administered playwriting contest.

⁴²¹ For example, a play located in the National Archives and Records Association Federal Theatre Project holdings called *Be Yourself* detailed employment—and how to "be yourself" during a job interview; a similar play titled *Getting a Job In Life* taught enrollees how to get a job through the interview process, while bolstering the central philosophy of a work as vocation and public duty, or citizenship requirement. In fact, it appears—from evidence listed in the scripts themselves—that these thematic goals of bolstering employment through drama were actually requirements from the CCC administration. In *Be Yourself*, an announcer opens the text by explaining how "at six month intervals it is one of the requirements from headquarters, that we put on a play demonstrating how to get a job." "Be Yourself," Works Projects Administration, "Civilian Conservation Corps Playscripts," RG 69: Boxes 354 (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD).

⁴²² "Other Activities..." Works Projects Administration, "Civilian Conservation Corps Playscripts," RG 69: Boxes 354. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Gruson's writing is just one of many that ratified the import of traveling productions produced by the Federal Theatre that were brought into Civilian Conservation Corps camps around the nation. Another camp leader—Thomas I. Gunter, 1st Lieutenant and Commanding Officer of Company 3804 of the CCC in Cleburne, Texas—wrote that the FTP performance witnessed in his camp "was presented with the least effort and the most natural ability of any... it seems that the Federal Theatre Players are filling a need in CCC camps, and we would appreciate seeing the troupe again in the near future, if possible."

Titled the “National CCC Playwriting Contest,” the program offered a chance to budding writers from the CCC to develop original plays, and to submit to compete against other CCC enrollees nationwide; submissions were adjudicated by theatre practitioners in the Federal Theatre. The unified benefit of these programs were all lost at the FTP’s stoppage; so, too, were the subcultural felicities of the Federal Theatre’s cultural interventions in the CCC that served gay, queer, and gender-diverse enrollees. While one avenue of speculation asks what would have happened if the partnership had been permitted to continue, another might pose: “how would emergence(s) of queer identity in the U.S. be different without the FTP-CCC connection?”

Reimagining the Federal Theatre and CCC Connection

In 1935, Ned H. Dearborn wrote a book entitled “Once in a Lifetime: A Guide to the CCC Camp” in support of the vocational, recreational, and personal transformations that were possible in the Civilian Conservation Corps camps. In remembrance of the CCC camp program, narratives about the position of the camp system as a New Deal Relief program, development of United States forestry efforts, and bolstering of work ethic through the conservation program’s manual labor are all possible. However, much like many of the other programs in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*: what if these narratives are upended to make space for the remarkable primacy of identity, creation, forwarding of subaltern community, and reimagining of hegemonic ideals that was charted through the New Deal era through the means of performance? What if attendance and engagement in the CCC was, indeed, a *once in a lifetime* opportunity for enrollees—but not as a job or chance for economic relief, but rather as a chance to explore identity performance, or queer sexuality, in an incubated and powerfully unique set and setting?

Dearborn’s book served as a handbook of sorts for new enrollees to better understand the program they were now a part of. New (and potential) CCC enrollees could read about the camp

program, including pages in a section entitled “Other Things to Do.” Clearly, the flimsy rhetoric of this doesn’t frame the following as of paramount importance to the program. Dearborn’s list of those “other” activities includes acting, minstrel shows, masquerades, pageants, vaudeville shows, drama (writing, reading, arranging, performing).⁴²³ Yet, in this list—and countless other pages of CCC supporting marketing pamphlets, entry paperwork, newsprint, and magazine articles enticing enrollment in the CCC—I’m curious about what *isn’t* included as a selling point of what made the Civilian Conservation Corps such an important place for its enrollees. What might the pamphlet read like which would explain the “outlandish drag shows” that cross dressing enrollees took part in? How might the promotional materials explain the freedom to have gay sex, and to actualize queer desire in a variety of formats, in an effort to recruit lonely, rural area boys to the CCC? How might the amusement of FTP scripts with coded gay innuendos been explained by the federal government in “celebration” of the hybridity of the Federal Theatre Project’s collaborations with, and creations for, the CCC? In what way would a figurative promotional material that stimulated vicarious engagement with the campfire stories and identity performances that saw young men donning women’s clothing, expressions, lipstick, and heels?

Like much of theatre history, the ephemerality of these performances erases both the performances themselves, as well as the memories that were concealed to craft a more palatable image of the real stakes of these performances. In the government-sponsored image of recreation and quotidian life in the CCC camps, absent is the real significance of the CCC program, and impact of the FTP script writing and theatricals, to many of the young men of the CCC.

⁴²³ Ned H. Dearborn, “Once in a Lifetime: A Guide to the CCC Camp,” U.S. Civilian Conservation Corps Records, Acc. No. 1251-001 (Box 1). University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA (Charles E. Merrill Company, New York, 1935), 35.

Margo Canady writes that the Civilian Conservation Corps was, “so popular, in fact, that Congress seriously considered making it a permanent agency.”⁴²⁴ However, amidst a war era with focus on the exigencies of safety in public life, the popularity of the program couldn’t prevent its closure in 1942. What was lost alongside the removal of coveted CCC camps? Many narratives of the CCC will frame the necessity of early conservation efforts in the United States. In an early 21st century era where humankind is facing the catastrophically severe stakes of climate destruction, the loss of the CCC’s wilderness initiatives alone may be worth grieving. However, fifty years after the closure of the CCC, the nation will wrestle with civil rights concerns for 2SLGBTQIA+ folks, and the mortality of gay men during the HIV epidemic; eighty years later, trans identity and queerness will become more polarized by the rise of the global right. Perhaps the Federal Theatre’s intervention in CCC camps—helping to support cultures of queer performance that took place there—is a place to begin charting the loss; initiating questions about the development of queer identity that could have bloomed earlier in the 20th century.

⁴²⁴ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 92.

Chapter IV

“He’s a human being, same as you and me”: Racial Pedagogies of the Seattle Negro Reperatory Company’s *Natural Man*

Flashback: Board of Park Commissioners Meeting—Seattle, 1937

On December 9th, 1937, Mr. B. Gray Warner, acting Prosecuting Attorney for King County, petitioned the WPA and local officials to build better recreational spaces for children of the global majority in Seattle.⁴²⁵ Warner presented at a Board of Park Commissioners meeting that “... the black areas of Juvenile Delinquency were in the localities where there were few playfield facilities and but little supervision and the white areas were where there were adequate playfields and supervision.”⁴²⁶ Warner’s urging to the convening of Park Commissioners and Works Progress Administration officials raises a number of questions about the racial dynamics of childhood in Seattle, and throughout the United States, in the late 1930s. More unique,

⁴²⁵ In the use of the term “global majority” in this study, I’m utilizing terminology concordant with the rhetoric offered in text and professional development by theatre industry members like Nicole M. Brewer and Sharrell D. Luckett. More common in European scholarship and society, the term—now added to the Cambridge Dictionary—is defined as encompassing “the group of people in the world who do not consider themselves or are not considered to be white.” Rosemary M. Campbell-Stephens explains the term as significant as “a collective term that first and foremost speaks to and encourages those so-called to think of themselves as belonging to the global majority. It refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or have been racialised as ‘ethnic minorities’”. Globally, these groups currently represent approximately eighty per cent (80%) of the world’s population.” In using “global majority” rather than the more contemporaneously used term in the United States “BIPOC” (or, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color”), or “-of color,” I am attempting to avoid terms that center whiteness in this study. More prevalently, throughout this chapter and study I attempt to name specific communities, races, ethnicities, and peoples rather than grouping all non-white individuals into a single category. Rosemary M. Campbell-Stephens, *Educational Leadership and the Global Majority: Decolonising Narratives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁴²⁶ B. Gray Warner, Board of Park Commissioners, minutes, August 1933-October 1939, December 9th, 1937, Seattle Municipal Archives, 1937 (Seattle, WA). The rhetoric of writing a lowercase vs. uppercase “black” will be noted elsewhere in this chapter. Instead of using a [sic] here, as I’ll use predominantly “Black” when referring to racial identity, I’m keeping this writing as found in the archive without recognition if Warner himself wrote or spoke the term. The honorific “Mr.” added to introduce Warners as he is listed in the archival record.

however, is the argument that can be positioned about the relationship between play and childhood; between recreation and citizenship. A late 1930s Seattle Public Schools and Division of Recreation professional development session asserts, for instance, that the “physical, mental and moral development of the individual” directly connects to their engagement in recreation and consumption of entertainment.⁴²⁷ The testimony offered by Warner therefore serves as an opening still frame; a foregrounding for the central conceit of Chapter IV’s case study on Seattle’s chapter of the Federal Theatre Project, the influential Negro Reperatory Company, and Theodore Brown’s adaptation of the famous John Henry myth for theatrical production as *Natural Man*.

Access to opportunity—to safety, supervision, and resources—was divergent for members of Seattle’s community, across racial and socioeconomic boundaries in the late 1930s. Yet, the productions and program engagement of the Federal Theatre Project and other WPA programs were able to serve young people across Seattle in ways that not only mitigated disparities and discrepancies in the divided landscape of racial citizenship in the era, but used pedagogy (teaching and learning through the arts) to generate these changes. However, in a social fraught with complicated social inequities, even these efforts of support and community care brought with them staggering questions—seismic imbalances—problematizing narratives of progress for the citizenry of Seattle, and for the children of the United States during the life of the Federal Theatre Project.

⁴²⁷ Seattle Educational Bulletin, November 1937, District Publications Box 1: 1913-1947, A2000-231379 (Seattle Public Schools Archives, Seattle, WA).

A Period of Beginnings

If the moments shared in the Introduction of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*—Hallie Flanagan’s speech at the National Theatre Conference in 1939; Pinocchio’s “death” on stage; the stoppage of the Federal Theatre which had been “Killed By Congress”—were endpoints to the story of the Federal Theatre Project, then perhaps the National Theatre Conference (NTC) of 1935 offers an apt opposing bookend for the Federal Theatre’s pivot from initial idea to embryonic initiative. Witham, too, notes that “although it is frequently overlooked in studies of the Federal Theatre, the history and activity of the National Theatre Conference provided a skeleton upon which (Flanagan) erected the edifice of her new organization.”⁴²⁸ Just prior to the National Theatre Conference in Chicago on December 20th and 21st, 1935, Hallie Flanagan had met and delivered a speech titled “Is This The Time and Place?” to the first meeting of regional directors for the Federal Theatre Project in Washington, D.C. In Flanagan’s remarks, she outlined the two-tiered foci of the Federal Theatre as offering relief to unemployed theatre practitioners, and (as a call-to-action for the directors) that “underneath this, however, let us continue to think how that it can help the theatre.”⁴²⁹ Meanwhile, other factors that set the table for Flanagan’s leadership in the NTC and national theatre industry were taking shape. In 1935, the long-time leader of the NTC, George Pierce Baker died. As Pasadena Playhouse founder Gilmore Brown was elected the new president, the Carnegie Foundation announced its decision to withdraw future sponsorship and support of dramatic activities. The NTC now had leadership *and* funding issues, with the backdrop of the mid-1930s fiscal instability plaguing the arts industry most broadly (outside of the then thriving Hollywood film industry). After the NTC voted at their

⁴²⁸ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22.

⁴²⁹ Hallie Flanagan, “Is This the Time and Place?” speech transcript. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Box 1, Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.).

Chicago conference to dissolve, the various leaders of the conference decided to save the intended structure of the conference. Entering the year 1936, they would proclaim the beginning of a new national circuit for the proliferation of theatre leadership around the country: the Federal Theatre Project.

“It was a period of beginnings,” wrote Flanagan, “not only of governmental procedure as related to theatre operation, but of lines of theatre activity never before attempted in this country, or, so far as I know, in any country.”⁴³⁰ Between the various “Negro” Theatres, the Bureau of Research and Publication, the *Federal Theate Magaine*, the Living Newspaper as a medium for creation and then theatrical form, as well as countless regional initiatives that would utilize the federal government’s philosophical and financial gift of the Federal Theatre to create new theatre programs, Flanagan’s Federal Theatre Project moved quickly to build.⁴³¹

⁴³⁰ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 120.

⁴³¹ Like many racially charged terms, colloquial, academic, and governmental uses of the term “negro” have been disputed over the past century—with clear social recognition in the 21st century that the term is antiquated and problematic at best, and more aptly pejorative and incredibly offensive depending on use. United States census data creates a straightforward—and still complex—image of the term’s use, as the 1890 census attempted to eradicate the term offering alternatives of “black, mulatto, quadroon” and “octoroon” depending on the individual and populations percentage of Black parentage; the Census Bureau offered guidelines to carefully distinguish between each distinction. As soon as in 1904, the census report for the United States reintegrated the term “negro” on the basis of reclamation efforts by Black social and intellectual leaders, citing W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Philadelphia Negro* and Booker T. Washington’s *The Future of the American Negro* as evidence for the topicality and relevance of the word. Over the course of the 20th century, use and recognition of racial injustices through the civil rights movements and other important epochs in race activism changed social and formal use of the term leading to the 2013 decision by the Census Bureau to drop the term; the U.S. Army made the same decision in 2014, citing its equal opportunity policy. In 2016, President Barack Obama signed a law (H.R.4238 - To amend the Department of Energy Organization Act and the Local Public Works Capital Development and Investment Act of 1976 to modernize terms relating to minorities) that worked to “modernize” 1970s-era legislation by replacing “Negro” with “African American”; that decision also replaced “Oriental” with “Asian American.” Accordingly for scholarship in the 21st century, this project uses the signifier “Black” to describe Black and African American creators, artists, legislators, and figures in the story of the Federal Theatre Project. I will, however, refer to the “Negro Unit(s)” or “Negro Theatre(s)” as such when indicated in archival or secondary source documents—as these were the formal names for subdivisions of the Federal Theare Projects’ production companies in 1935-1939, and are often referenced as such by the Black theatre makers whose artistic efforts comprised the many achievements of these units.

Doreen B. Heard illuminates that this “period of beginnings” didn’t overlook, but rather promoted, a series of beginnings for the work of theatre and theatres serving children, as well. The Federal Theatre expanded nationwide, with regional directors carrying the mission of Hallie Flanagan and central government from the New York City ideological center of the project to smaller sites and cities across the country. Meanwhile, in most regions Children’s Units were organized independently from adult theatres; yet it was children’s theatres that “would be among the earliest units set up.”⁴³² Just as the FTP, with Flanagan as the dreamer-in-chief, would imagine a new system of adult professional theatres from New England to the Midwest, the American South to the Pacific Northwest, Heard expands that Federal Theatre officials also, “dreamed of a nationwide network of children’s theatre established in every large city and extending into every town and hamlet.”⁴³³

This study’s final location of exploration—a site much more than a hamlet, yet not quite a large city at the start of the 20th Century—is Seattle, Washington. Why end in the Pacific Northwest as a region, and Seattle as a city, that were so far from the central locus of creation for the Federal Theatre in New York, and the decision-making center in Washington, D.C.? Why is it so important to follow Doreen Heard’s argument that children were really at the center of the FTP’s mission and operations? What necessity is created, in the argumentation of this project, for examining productions that were not necessarily created as purely children’s entertainment as pedagogical mechanisms for child rearing during the depression?

Following the logic of both Elizabeth Osborne and Barry Witham in the selection of Seattle as a paradigmatic site of creation for the Federal Theatre’s operations and production

⁴³² Heard, Doreen B, “Children’s Theatre in the Federal Theatre Project” in *Spotlight on the Child: Studies in the History of American Children’s Theatre*, edited by Roger L. Bedard and C. John Tolch, *Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies*, no. 28 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 100.

⁴³³ Ibid.

models. Osborne's writing in *Staging the People* focuses on Federal Theatre projects in Chicago, Boston, Portland, Birmingham, and Atlanta, largely in an effort to avoid New York City and the Living Newspaper modality as areas heavily trafficked in scholarship. Osborne contends that Hallie Flanagan herself "cautioned against considerations of single productions or units as indicative of the entire organization," in promotion of studies of the lesser-investigated chapters of the Federal Theatre outside of New York.⁴³⁴ Though this project won't avoid New York City—the ideological epicenter of the Federal Theatre—opening in Seattle allows for examination of a smaller regional creation center more representative of the Federal Theatre's work in smaller regions and rural areas throughout the country. Witham's foundational study of the Federal Theatre similarly takes up Seattle as a site for drawing broader conclusions about the Federal Theatre based on the way that the city formed a kind of model of regional projects around the United States outside of the Northeast. Seattle's importance to scholarship and historicization of the Federal Theatre can be seen as significant because, as argued by Witham, "it survived to the final days and thus illuminated all of the tensions and contradictions that were played out across the country."⁴³⁵ The execution of labor and artistic resources also make Seattle a useful location for the Federal Theatre Project, and for this study's focus on youth programs and productions. While The Children's Unit in Seattle was its own freestanding subdivision of the Seattle Federal Theatre, the low priority placed on the unit led to their production staff, artists, and company ultimately being an amalgamation of the other units—primarily using vaudevillians and members of Seattle's Negro Unit as actors for the children's productions.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ Elizabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People*, 7.

⁴³⁵ Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 5.

⁴³⁶ Evamarie Alexandria Johnson, "A Production History of the Seattle Federal Theatre Project Negro Repertory Company: 1935-1939," University of Washington: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1981) 1.

Due to this constitution, examining children's, or youth-facing, productions in Seattle creates a window for better understanding the Seattle project at-large, and inferring the historical positionality of the Federal Theatre in Seattle, and in the Pacific Northwest.

Witham recounts that when Flanagan and her chosen Regional Directors for the Federal Theatre Project departed an October 1935 orientation assembly in Washington, D.C., they “left with a vision of theatre which would reach out to all — blacks[sic], children, poor and all the political and class shades that made up the United States of America.”⁴³⁷ In a number of ways, this is a rather remarkable articulation about the significance of theatre serving children being a core component of the Federal Theatre Project’s mission. In speaking about marginalized, excluded, and overlooked populations of a theatre-going public in the United States, Witham includes “children” amongst the subaltern identities of Black Americans and economically disadvantaged citizens during the 1930s and surrounding era.⁴³⁸ Can we image *children* as an underserved or culturally neglected population during the Great Depression? Flanagan’s address to the assembled national and regional personnel of the yet-unformed Federal Theatre Project can then be seen as a mission statement for the creation of a national children’s audience for theatre. As artists and organizers gathered to hear Flanagan outline her version for a “great national theatre” (to borrow Witham’s words), she was naming a theatre that would transcend the dictates of theatrical reason preceding it; that transcendence held a promise for including—and,

⁴³⁷ Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 29.

⁴³⁸ In regards to the uppcase "B" in Black—an ongoing 21st century debate in journalism, politics, and scholarship—this project will use "Black" when referring to Black and African American figures. This operates in line with the arguments by race theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah who note that writers should (quoting *The Seattle Times*) "Capitalize Black because it is a reflection of shared cultures and experiences." Scholars Lori L. Tharps and Anne Price further Appiah's claim explaining the power dynamics and danger of cultural erasure by taking away power behind the maneuver to capitalize "Black". These arguments are corroborated by formal decisions to standardize use of “Black” by the Associated Press, Columbia Journalism Review, and the New York Times. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black,” *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2020.

in fact, raising—children as a part of a theatrically literate American public. Similarly, in her study close reading the Popular Front ideals nested inside of the Children’s Unit productions of the Federal Theatre as ideological apparatus of the New Deal, Leslie Frost argues that in order to better understand the cultural importance of children in the American 1930s, historians must consider this an era where “nursery and nation were inextricably linked.”⁴³⁹ Following this consideration, my earliest work with Seattle as a project site for the FTP avoided direct consideration of children’s theatre productions as the only ways that the Federal Theatre, WPA, and U.S. government were working to create ideal citizens through child rearing methods and consideration of the whole child in Seattle as a current, and future, United States citizen.

Childhood, Race, and Utility in the Seattle Case Study

As has been common in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, rather than historicizing the juridical, industry-based, or policy-bound features of the Federal Theatre that permeate many studies, my intention in the concluding chapter of this project is to end on a paradigm for the project’s import. By asking how the Federal Theatre was able to herald significant social and educational changes in Seattle through productions staged for and consumed by children, I’ll slice into the Federal Theatre’s impact on Seattle’s community with a child-centered and community-serving lens. This Seattle case study therefore argues that the Seattle Federal Theatre was both complicit with, and worked to trouble, contentious racial dynamics of the 1930s through the city’s youth community, and broader public sphere. To do so, this study first investigates how public schooling, parenting, and social measures of child rearing were created across racial discourses in the late 1930s. I then tease apart complicating and reifying efforts

⁴³⁹ Leslie Elaine Frost, *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children’s Plays of the Federal Theatre Project* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 5.

behind staging of the Seattle Federal Theatre's Negro Repertory Company's (NRC) production of Theodore R. Browne's *Natural Man* to propose that authentic, culturally responsive images of Black Americans were being staged in the 1930s by the Federal Theatre, and by the very subaltern communities waging against racial traumas of the era. By close reading and then unpacking the sociopolitical complexities of *Natural Man*, I open *Grieving the Federal Theatre* with another model of the project's intentionality: illuminating the often overshadowed productions of theatre practitioners speaking from poignant intersectional positions about what American and "Americanness" are and could be. It is my hope that doing so uplifts and further develops the histories of productions by the Federal Theatre of immense theatrical and cultural significance created by historically marginalized theatre makers. The project ends on an effort to continue the busy web of questioning: whose story has the story of America been? Whose story is the story of the Federal Theatre Project? How can we create scholarship and performances that bolsters the works of marginalized creators, and in doing so expand the American canon in Theatre and Performance Studies—and our understanding of the vast accomplishments worth grieving created by the Federal Theatre? In the 2020s, amidst a sociopolitical epoch in need of blueprints for how performance culture and social life can carry on in the hardest of moments, I'll attempt to signal ways that the oppressed voices of the American social public are often singing loudly and in accord: if America will only open its ears to listen.

Seattle Public Schools & 1930s Racial Problematics

Cultural Hegemony & Seattle Schools

Asking the question "who were the children being served by the Seattle Public School system in the American 1930's" yields all too clear a set of hegemonic roles. In November 1936, the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Board of Directors and Superintendent of Schools, Worth

McClure, published the system's district bulletin with some ready-made citizen-making aesthetics on the front. The image—with Rockwellian soft-lines, and cartoon images continuing waves for motion—depicts a white boy with slicked back hair and tie blowing in the wind with two school books under his arm, a hand tucked in his left pocket. The boy is leaving a neatly figured house with a long driveway and joined by a dog at his left foot, both with their eyes peeled off to the left of the frame. It is clear from images like this who SPS envisioned as their “ideal student.” Even as the first announcements of the bulletin proudly announce “A Kindergarten for Every Child” the curated images supporting their universalist headlines intimate exact given circumstances for where, how, who the children served by the system were.⁴⁴⁰ Seattle Public School's archival documents repeatedly show young, white boys reading, writing, conducting experiments—all while the images of young women are few and far between, and mostly related to occupational training in nursing or in the early 20th century conception of “Home Economics” training. One SPS publication—a model for many of the issues between 1935-1939—offers a headline for “Young Dressmakers” celebrating the sewing skills coursework for young women in the school system, and expanding on the necessity of learning housekeeping skills for women and girls in the school district.⁴⁴¹ The same is true for the omnipresent use of “he/him/his” pronouns when referring to SPS students. Meanwhile, images of children of the global majority are seemingly absent from the archive.

In a school system claiming directly in a 1937 bulletin that they are “Making Tomorrow's Citizens in the Schools,” the isolation of homogenous and hegemonic white young men as

⁴⁴⁰ McClure, Worth, “Seattle Public Schools Bulletin,” Board of School Directors, November 1936, 3. The “A Kindergarten for Every Child” note reads “For the first time in the history of Seattle, each child has the opportunity of attending kindergarten regardless of where he lives. Extension of kindergarten facilities to all schools was begun last year by the Board of Education and completed this year.” Other titles for the Bulletin corroborate this idea of “building an intelligent gentry” including announcements and notes on “Making Intelligent Citizens.”

⁴⁴¹ Seattle Educational Bulletin, November 1937, District Publications (Box 1: 1913-1947), A2000-231379, Seattle Public Schools Archives (Seattle, WA).

subjects for learning is both expected and concerning. The same is true for more blatant racially exclusionary documents that frame the culture of the 1930s for young learners. Statistics on science and math achievement leave off intersectional data for students of the global majority entirely, or name communities of color solely under the distinction of “at-risk”—or worse, using rhetoric that presupposes communities of color as poverty-stricken. In teaching and learning itself, English-Language Arts (ELA) curricula center whiteness, stories of white children’s coming-of-age, and only surface identities of the global majority in occasional folk-literature lessons. While gesturing to these always-already racialized permutations is trite in both scholarly and social senses by the 21st century, it is worth noting the figurative water that citizens of the 1930s were swimming in was clearly inked with the confluence of American racism and inequitable education policy: two rivers with “polluted” water, serving as the vehicular terrain carrying students on a path towards infelicitous patterns of learning. The significance of anti-black racism, the United States’ colonial history and genocide of Indigenous Americans, and hegemonic modes of oppression are—though hackneyed in articulation—always at play when it comes to the structures of citizen-making and learning impacting students of the era.

Racism & Seattle Public Schools Curricula

These features of culturally accepted (or potentially worse and far more common: unrecognized) discrimination by white administrators at the helm of the Seattle Public School system set the stage for more identifiable and documented forms of caustic, subversive curricular interventions that depict the educational climate of the late 1930s. Uncovering some of the forms of racism that impacted students in Seattle schools may give a picture of the polarities that fashion the Federal Theatre’s inhabitation of an in-between space as a child-serving institution in

the late-1930s that was neither fully successful at their attempts at progressivism, nor purely harmful or imprudent in their failings to produce a cultural plurality for children in the era.

During the lifespan of the Federal Theatre Project, SPS's archival curricular documents list extensive interventions to "Speech Training" and "Exercises for Speech Improvement." Objective three for district wide Speech Training programs in elementary school names "recognition of clear speech and pleasing voice as assets in business and social life" as a fundamental learning objective.⁴⁴² The use of this curricula in Language Arts for students in SPS indicates a correlative of educational theatre, and language and rhetoric studies, for years (both at the start of the 20th century, and as far back at 18th century presupposition to the importance of elocution). That the 1936 officials and educators in Seattle were focused on how speech and dialect could be used to craft children is no mystery. But what are they crafted into? Who holds the tenets of good speech? Objective number four: Development of a desire for self-improvement; Objective six: development of emotional stability. Each pamphlet on speech training codes morality and clear, professional speech as synonymous in rhetoric that we fully recognize in the 21st century as tied to racialized citizen-making, and a forced sublimation of rhythms of speech to a white hegemonic center that is both racist and ableist.

Drama & Public Schooling in the Early 20th Century

Before further teasing out the positionality of the Federal Theatre Project in the tainted waters of Seattle and American racialized education in the 1930s, it is useful to contextualize the instruction of theatre, speech, and creative dramatics in the public schools and outreach programs around the country that guided the curricular interventions that led to student learning in the arts

⁴⁴² Emma R. Martin, "Manual for Exercises for Speech Improvement," Seattle Public Schools, 1.

during the FTP's timespan of cultural impact. Why teach theatre as a mechanism for child development in the first place?

During a recreation leaders' in-service training course titled the "Growth and Development of the Individual" during the spring semester of Seattle Public Schools (SPS) academic year in 1939, arguments were constructed about the primacy of recreation, play, and the arts as significant features of lifespan development, and cultural learning, for the child. The meeting's concluding report signals that "a study of all aspects of mental development of the individual, including general and special abilities, play, social and moral attitudes, behavior and emotions—chiefly the period from birth to maturity" demonstrates a belief that "changes which are incident to the individual's advancing maturity" can be fostered in the arts and recreation."⁴⁴³ The report expands on a belief that "the theories of growth and the fundamental factors of the physical, mental and moral development of the individual in the interest of or as related to recreation as a practical solution of leisure time problems."⁴⁴⁴ This report culminated in a professional development course with the aim searching for "meanings as adequate guides to practice" for parents, teachers, administrators and recreational supervisors, and others "who share society's responsibility to the education of the youth and the adult" a means towards creating impactful recreation programs for youth in Seattle.

This guide and professional development guide further offers summary and distillation of textbooks, such as Florence Goodenough's *Developmental Psychology*, to posit Piagetian and Eriksonian guidance for the social, physical, and intellectual maturation of the child. The professional development and broader cultural education around children and childhood

⁴⁴³ SPS archive. Youth Organizations, 1939-1994 Child Growth and Development, 1939.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

maturation would have been specifically useful for the FTP teaching artists and organizers—“recreational supervisors” in the eyes of this publication—for the sweeping arguments regarding imagination and play. The classification that growth and development from three to six years old was an Early Childhood “Age of Imagination, Imitation and Questioning” was directly congruent to the theatrical aims of creative drama in the era. It lists the characteristics of the child in this age range as “eagerness to learn - how - why” and a need for “singing games” and “construction play” nearly synonymous with the WPA recreation activities supported just two years prior in 1937. Once students hit the age of 11 the guide moves away from arguments for creative dramatic or artistic interventions in the act of childhood and towards physical education, athletic exertion, and sociologies of sport. However, upon age sixteen, recommendations are given by the WPA for inclusion “dramatics, music, art, social activities, and the hobby classes offered by the Community Recreation Program.”⁴⁴⁵ Accordingly, we can think of some of the divisions in the FTP (such as the aforementioned argument by Children’s Unit Director Jeremy Rennick that the youth and teen divisions be separated by intention and play genre) as fueled by the sociological fascination with children’s growth at this time—not merely as artistic enterprises, or searches for the right creative content for children.

In Theatre and Performance Studies, as well as actor training methodologies, these course titles immediately offer resonances to foundational considerations for performance and mimetic art. As early as articulations by Aristotle that “Artists imitate men involved in action” and “man is differentiated from other animals because he is the most imitative of them,” theatre practitioners have grafted meaning onto the art forms of performance based on the ability for

⁴⁴⁵ Works Progress Administration, Northern California, “Growth and Development of the Individual,” Recreation Leaders’ In-Service Training Course of Study, Spring Semester, Division of Recreation, 1939.

theatre to imitate “real” life.⁴⁴⁶ However, the linkage to teaching and learning theory is particularly generative in regards to mimesis and acts of imitation. Constructivist educational theory, most foundationally the works of Jean Piaget foreground that (using Piaget’s words) “the child learns to imitate, and this learning process, like any other, raises all the problems involved in sensory-motor and mental development.”⁴⁴⁷ Correspondingly, early 20th century approaches to arts-based learning often center on imitation, mimetic action, and character creation based on creating “realistic” images both in concordance with the burgeoning significance of Historical Realism as an aesthetic form in theatre, and as a methodology for teaching and learning in educational sciences. Walter Benjamin extends the logic of Aristotle and Piaget, philosophically grounding mimesis as one of human beings “higher order functions”—evidenced by children’s behavior as an exemplar for the manner in which mimetic behavior is not restricted to humans imitating each other. In what Piaget would describe as an example of formal operational cognition, Benjamin describes the way in which the “child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train.”⁴⁴⁸ The WPA’s proposed guide to children development is further encoloured by not only revolving considerations in the field of theatre and performance philosophy and labor, but by the social delicacies of the Depression era. Guidelines for children aged 9-11 assert that “The child’s world is continually challenging him to combat, to chat, to hunt, to track down, and to fight,” ideologies that read as both profoundly essentialist and evolutionary, as well as fuelled by an unstable social world experienced by children in the era.

⁴⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, Prentice-Hall, 1968), 4-7.

⁴⁴⁷ Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 5-29.

⁴⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On The Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 333.

Racial Problematics in the WPA

In the WPA itself, seen and unseen racist actions were abundant.

Most concerning when examining Works Progress Administrations curricular documents in the extensive archive of educational materials from the WPA is a suggested 9-week course in cartooning (that archival documents seem to triangulate as having been taught) that offers a week long unit of studio art instruction of “Characters and Study of Nationalities.” The curriculum intends to instruct the difference between the “Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar, Thief” as visually representative. It goes further to include the “Jew” and pejorative terms for Indigenous Americans and Black characters as easily and aptly represented by racialized caricature. The racial aesthetics and hegemonically complicit images of a Jewish character with a big nose and beard; an Indigenous character with feather headdress and indelible facial features; and Black character imagined as a Blackface minstrelsy character are jarring to the contemporary eye as they are forebodingly augmented by the symbol: “ETC.” What other caricatures would be forwarded by the cartoonist teaching this WPA class? While the segregationist zeitgeist of the era makes this brand of racism unsurprising to see, as artmakers, the speed of restoring to performed (minstrelsy) and aesthetic (cartoon caricature) stereotypes is useful in crafting an image of children of the global majority’s experience of art making and art makers during the 1930s.

The Federal Theatre & Race on Stage

Seattle’s “Negro Repertory Company”

The Federal Theatre was ripe for political dissidence from the onset. As a WPA program, relief effort, and artist-centered space—artists, afterall, being under the microscope even prior to the 1938 creation of the House of Un-American Activities Committee, and subsequent interrogation of artists around the world as proliferators of socialist propaganda—the FTP was

always-already considered a progressivist mechanism of the state. This unspoken (and shouted) alignment of the Federal Theatre and its artist-laborers as “socialist” sympathizers led to further criticism of the FTP even in early months of the project, and opened the door for members of private enterprise spheres to protest the Federal Theatre’s efforts widely. However, despite the historical and contemporary championing of the Federal Theatre’s popular front ideologies and leftist intentions, the Federal Theatre—like other WPA programs—was very much aligned with early 20th century programmatics and performatics of anti-black racism.⁴⁴⁹ Black Seattle theatre maker, and later a member of the Federal Theatre’s Seattle Project, Charles Monroe described the Seattle theatre industry prior to the start of the Federal Theatre’s programs, noting that, “in the white company they had a few actors from the theatres around there. But the colored people, as they called them in those days, black people now, they didn’t have a chance really, with the exception of some people who tap-danced or something like that or maybe worked in a few nightclubs around there.”⁴⁵⁰ How did the advent of the Federal Theatre change this stasis?

⁴⁴⁹ At times in *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, I use the less-utilized term “performatic” rather than “performative” or “theatrical” to denote behaviors that are adjacent to an act or performance, or intimate performance without actually involving a moment of theatre creation. This draws on Diane Taylor’s use of the term “performatic” as a way of denoting behaviors or actions that are based in performance—drawing on the Spanish-language articulation of “*performático*.” Doing so is helpful rhetorically, as it delineates “performatic” and the colloquial contemporaneous use of “performative” (i.e. an inauthentic display or performance; or, an self-aware moment of theatricality) which already contaminates the concept of a philosophical or rhetorical “performativity” articulated by J.L. Austen, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and others (i.e. a rhetorical or cultural device that creates a new state of being, or as Austen explains, a case where “the issue of the utterance is the performing of an action”). Taylor, accordingly, suggests performatico as a term to “denote the adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance.” Correspondingly, my use of the term in similar cases may be simplified by creating a parallel: theatre II theatrical as performance II performatic. Diane Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” in *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 5-6. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, William James Lectures, Harvard University Press, 1962), 6.

⁴⁵⁰ Charles Monroe, Works Progress Administration oral histories collection R039/C4/S4 Box #7, George Mason University Federal Theatre Project Collection, Fairfax, VA.

For Black Seattleites in the theatre industry, the Federal Theatre offered new opportunities. In 1935, the Seattle Project of the FTP created their own Negro Unit, formed in conjunction with the earlier 1930s Civic Repertory Theatre. Seattle's "Negro Repertory Company" was a central division of the Project, constituting one of the five units of Federal Theatre Project makers in the city.⁴⁵¹ The company would grow in size and influence on the Seattle FTP and surrounding theatre scene, eventually mounting fifteen original productions in addition to contributing actors and production staff to other Seattle Federal Theatre units.

However, by the 1937, Negro Repertory Company members were quitting as they lost faith in prospects of their continued employment; a stark challenge from the theatre project that was created expressly for the purpose of putting people back to work. Flanagan sent her protegee Ester Porter to remedy the situation alongside Edwin O'Connor, then the head of the Seattle project; the two devised to center the Seattle project's productions on children's theatre and comedy to in an effort optimize the talents of a number of ex-vaudevillian actors, and to produce theatre that was "marketable and non-controversial."⁴⁵² Barry Witham's instrumental student of the Seattle Federal Theatre details how—despite a few early successes and Porter's early leadership attempts to champion the Negro Unit actors in production of children's drama—productions became contentious in racially ignorant and damaging direction was offered to Black actors. In a commercially successful production of *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*, the uncomfortable and unsteady rehearsal process was all but halted as the lead character asserted "I'll do anything but I won't put a red kerchief on my head" when Porter attempted to make the costuming decision complicit with racist "mammy" character representations.⁴⁵³ Leslie Frost

⁴⁵¹ Johnson, "A Production History," 1.

⁴⁵² Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 93.

⁴⁵³ Ibid, 95.

explains how the script of *Brer Rabbit* intimated that “violence is an expected and natural aspect of Black family life” due to the treatment of the adapted Uncle Remus figure as a mammy figure delighted by and embracing white children over her own. Elsewhere, in Civilian Conservation Corps camps around the country, minstrel shows were frequently performed; so, too, were puppet shows like one in Seattle at the Convalescent Home of the Orthopedic Hospital that enacted a racist storyline based on “Topsy & Eva” (characters of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Marionette shows in Miami also included racist caricatures in creating dolls representing Black characters and in other performance iconography. In production, the majority of design renderings archive costumes for the FTP Negro Units, or integrated productions, where Black actors are rendered in pre-production as white. These features of production beg continued proverbial scale weighting for FTPs efforts of good and ill in addressing race in production.

Minoritarian Nuancing: Natural Man

That the Seattle division of the Federal Theatre Project, broader WPA, and national divisions of the Federal Theatre, were complicit with racially harmful discourses is of no shock given the landscape of racial inequity in the American 1930s. However, this also opened doors to a paramount importance for the creation of more responsive theatres and productions. A Seattle parenting and child rearing magazine that names the “establishment of... (children’s) attitudes” and worldview as “created by an environment inside of the school as well as out of it.” How did the Seattle Federal Theatre work to create more equitable, nuanced depictions of Black American life? In what ways was the NRC central to the reformulation of both representations for Black identity, and pedagogies of racial sensitivity for children in the social epoch?

In 1936, the Seattle Federal Theatre devised and mounted a production of *Natural Man*. Originally titled *The Ole Hammer*, the play was an nine-scene episodic drama theatricalizing the

legendary folk tale of John Henry testing his Herculean physical might against a steam engine.⁴⁵⁴ The production ran an hour and forty-five minutes in length with no intermission and starred Joe Staton in the leading role.⁴⁵⁵ Anthony Duane Hill explains that the NRC production served a dual role in forwarding social commentary about racial injustice and oppression and articulates that, “John Henry epitomized the African American’s indomitable spirit and will to survive against almost impossible odds.”⁴⁵⁶ The production, though performed for all ages—due to length and correspondence with local curricular units on folk tales like John Henry and Paul Bunyan—was undoubtedly intended for children. What image of race, citizenship, and integrated community was being crafted from children through this production of *Natural Man*?

Even in pre-production, it is clear that *Natural Man* offered a more thoughtful and authentic image of Black Americans than many other FTP productions. Compared to the aforementioned costume renderings, the Seattle project employed designer Rhonda Morgan for the production. Morgan was a Black artist who had previously been tasked with costuming a number of other NRC performances. Morgan’s renderings—like one of “Lavinia” in *Androcles and the Lion*, later performed by the NRC—are frequently respectful, nuanced, and artistically elaborate. They render designs intended for Black actors: ones with various genres and periods, but all linked by the well-constructed figures and attention to the character’s body site. Archival documents indicate that extensive marketing and production attention was given to the majority-Black cast of *Natural Man*, with features on Staton’s career and the production itself

⁴⁵⁴ Various reflections on *Natural Man* across newsprint, internal FTP correspondence, and productions reviews list the drama as containing anywhere between seven and nine episodes; archival copies authors original playscript include both the title and composition of the work with nine episodes—which I’ll refer to as the text composition throughout this chapter.

⁴⁵⁵ See Appendix E, Figure 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Anthony Duane Hill, “Theodore R. Browne (CA. 1910-1979),” *Black Past*, February 13th, 2008.

appearing in FTP newsletters and press releases. This works counter to many other Federal Theatre design renderings available throughout nation and regionally-specific archives for production, where there are limited depictions of Black models for productions (even those being produced by Negro Units). Further, the available renderings other than Morgan's seem to depict Black actors in caricature, with a reduction of sensitivity and clear depiction of Black actors using, instead, white stock actors. This starting place from the design side of production gives a picture of the production team and rehearsal process of *Natural Man*, which Black identity is not seen a divergence from the expected or stock offers of a Federal Theatre Project, but rather foundational to the aims of the production.

Performing Natural Man

Archival copies for the text of *Natural Man* corroborate the activist intentions and societal significance of the production. The play follows the traditional model of a John Henry myth. Henry is a powerful steel worker, assisting in the process of building the United States' first railroads. A standout in might and character amongst his peers, the community of workers turns to Henry when shaken by the intervention of an inventor and salesman who proposes a new way to work: with the aid of a steam-powered drill. Henry accepts a challenge by the inventor, competing against the drill to prove the power of human strength. Though victorious in the competition, the physical exertion is too much, and John Henry collapses—dying from the output. A labor rights parable, and racialized storyline, the story raises themes for children and adults alike about innovation, technology, pride, oppression, and the dawn of a new age in American cultural history.

Aside from more facile arguments for Black equality held in *Natural Man*'s adaptation—such as the support Henry garners from white bettors placing money on him in the contest, or

praise he receives for his physical might—the Federal Theatre’s production includes several moments articulating a need to Black liberation in the United States. The character of John Henry himself protests to a jailor: “White man’s country. White man’s world... Black man got to bow and scrape to him like he was God Almighty himself.”⁴⁵⁷ Henry later proclaims that he is “every inch a king” just “a king without a throne.”⁴⁵⁸ Browne’s playscript includes various humanizing elements for Henry and other Black laborers, prisoners, and runaway slaves in the text, including the development of romantic relationships for Henry that removes him from roles of modern Hercules, or convicted murder, and instead frame him as a lover and gentle man. Following the folk tale’s dynamic and saddening climax, as it becomes clear that Henry will die from his participation in the contest (and being trapped amidst the fire he caused through his laborious fervor), the white machine salesman he competed against scolds Henry’s capital-crazed boss for putting him up to the task. The salesman in Brown’s adaptation then shifts from villain to *raisonneur*, voicing the line’s most echoing appeal to white audience members: “He’s a human being, same as you and me. And a mighty damn fine human specimen, you ask me.”⁴⁵⁹

The gravity and activist potentialities for the production were recognized, as a reviewer of the production praised the Federal Theatre’s mounting an approach to the tall tale’s storyline far different from common storybook tellings. Paralleling the production to white parables and productions, Staton’s John Henry was described by the press as “a Black Peer Gynt.” The direction offered by the Federal Theatre Project was celebrated as a “quick moving, stylized,

⁴⁵⁷ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man (A Play in Eight Episodes)*, Federal Theatre Project Collection, S11(G) Theodore Browne, 2.3, George Mason University Federal Theatre Project Collection (Fairfax, VA, 1936), 4-2.

⁴⁵⁸ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 4-3.

⁴⁵⁹ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 7-4.

cinematic development of the Negro race's Paul Bunyan"[sic].⁴⁶⁰ The inherently comparative references to Henry alongside other white storybook and theatrical characters show that the production was likely viewed by Black and white audiences alike. Further, the reviews can therefore be understood as equalizing the Black John Henry with Bunyan, Peer Gynt, and other models of white identity readily accepted and praised by white audiences.

Seattle Federal Theatre's Natural Man as Historiographic Intervention

Volume three, number three of the Federal Theatre's own magazine publicly applauded *Natural Man* as the NRC's "most ambitious effort."⁴⁶¹ Given the structure of similar NRC productions for all ages, the production was likely witnessed by a wide and robust audience of Seattleites in 1936-1937. As the cultural and instruction backdrop crafted caricatures of Black citizens, the Federal Theatre's production gave children a fully-recognized, fully-dimensional, image of both Blackness and Americanness—an image created by a Black playwright and devised primarily by Black actors and theatre makers. The Seattle NRC would go on to produce eye-raising and notable productions of *Lysistrata*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *An Evening with Dunbar* (a bio-fiction on the noted poet), and even a biblical reimagining of Noah's arch.

Natural Man was a far cry from other reductionist stage depictions of Blackness on stages in Seattle. However, it is productions for children that challenged the cultural imaginary in this era—the same period of W. E. B. Du Bois' reformatory politics, the New Negro movement, dandyism, and other performance mechanisms that offered interventions in the white American consciousness of a complex and fundamentally human Black American existence—that helped

⁴⁶⁰ *Federal Theatre Project*, vol.3, no. 3, Federal Theatre Project Holdings, clippings 1938-83, MWEZ + N.C. 28,444, New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY), 23.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

to take the early 20th century steps needed to set the stage for later more radical and still insufficient changed to racial status quo.

A case study of the Seattle Federal Theatre's *Natural Man* also raises a number of historiographic questions about both the archival holdings of the Federal Theatre, and our remembrance of the institution of the FTP through our historicization of dealings of the FTP. As intimated at the start of this chapter, narrativization around the Federal Theatre that marks the organization—always-already a governmental organization with white theatre makers and arts organizers at its helm—as a purely leftist and progressive organization lack nuance of an organization nested inside of the cultural problematics of the American 1930s. The stakes of creating a balanced image of the Federal Theatre is certainly noted and provided for in other studies of the FTP. *Natural Man*, and the history of the Negro Reperatory Company in Seattle, specifically sparks remembrance of the Federal Theatre as progressive—and enriched by the rhetoric and imagining of the pro-Federal Theatre voices that opposed the Dies Committee, and federal government's closure of the project. However, it also raises the semiotic and historiographic contamination matriculated by framing the operations of the Federal Theatre as monolithic. *Natural Man* reminds us of the very complex relationship between race, theatre making, and producing through the federal government that was housed inside of the multidimensional work of the Federal Theatre Project.

Racial Pedagogies and the Politics of Aesthetic Ambiguity

Was the Federal Theatre's production of *Natural Man* able to offer a form of racial instruction for young people in the city throughout its run? The FTP production of *Natural Man* was clearly consumed by the Seattle public, but how can we read it's significance as of altered importance from other productions by the Negro Reperatory Theatre, or by productions that

served children, like those that the NRC collaborated with other children-facing units of the Federal Theatre to produce? In the following section of Chapter IV, I'll argue that by using an inventive aesthetic system that merged the aesthetics of experimental theatre modalities with modalities of performance contrary to—and concordant with—melodrama, Browne's *Natural Man* was able to create a counter hegemonic and therefore challenging depiction of Black identity using the Federal Theatre stage as a communicative device for audiences in Seattle. In mapping how Browne's intention and text, I'll propose that the production offered a bifurcated system of meaning making, allowing white and Black audience members in Seattle to perceive the characterizations in, and importance of, the play differently. In doing so, it is my intention to continue charting a history of *Natural Man* that recognizes it as philosophically curational for young people in Seattle. The play worked to foster an image of Black identity, masculinity, and citizenship in the early 20th century United States that was counter to the mainstream, and therefore culturally transgressive, for all audience members of the Federal Theatre in their conceptions and considerations of Black identity.

Natural Man's Narrative and Audience

Produced by the Negro Repertory Company, rather than a purely children-centered unit of the Federal Theatre, *Natural Man* isn't traditionally narrativized as a theatre for young audiences production. However, the nature of the drama as a storybook tall tale, as well as corroborating evidence about what children of the era (and in Seattle, WA specifically) would have been exposed to as source texts for theatre reveals that the John Henry myth would have very much been a target production for children audiences. In a study on the play's interventions in the politics of Depression-era Black masculinity, Harry J. Elam Jr. acknowledges that all audiences of *Natural Man* would have carried a familiarity with the tale, noting that "because of

the familiarity of the legend, John Henry's fate is never in doubt from the outset of *Natural Man*.⁴⁶² How familiar would have young audiences in particular been with the tale? Several contemporary edited collections of children's stories and reading material for young people not only included the tale, but indicate its widespread recognition as a feature story for children's and young adult literature. In 1936 James Daugherty's illustrated children's collection *Their Weight in Wildcats* selects the John Henry myth for inclusion alongside Paul Bunyon, Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and other frontier heroes.⁴⁶³ Carl Carmer's 1937 collection *The Hurricane's Children* contains the John Henry myth amongst similar notable others, and frames the included stories whimsically and comically for children's consumption.⁴⁶⁴ In her recapitulation of material evidence on Paul Bunyan published in 1942, Gladys J. Haney indicates that Carmer's collection includes Henry separate from "a few newcomers"—intimating the already widespread appeal of the Henry myth.⁴⁶⁵ Separate from children's collections, in 1929 Guy B. Johnson built a collection of letters, music (including over 50 ballads of the tale), and phonograph records detailing the John Henry myth's already-prominent place in American mythology in his *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend*.⁴⁶⁶ Undoubtedly, by the Federal Theatre's tenure in 1935-1939, the John Henry myth was already a widespread, well-known tale for children and adults alike.

⁴⁶² Harry J. Elam Jr., "The Politics of Black Masculinity in Theodore Browne's *Natural Man* (1937)," in *Experiments in Democracy: Interracial and Cross-Cultural Exchange in American Theatre, 1912-1945*, edited by Lisa Jackson-Schetta (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 129.

⁴⁶³ James Daugherty, *Their Weight in Wildcats* (Boston: Houghton, 1936).

⁴⁶⁴ Carl Carmer, *The Hurricane's Children*. New York: Farrar, 1937.

⁴⁶⁵ Gladys J. Haney, "Paul Bunyan Twenty-Five Years After," *The Journal of American Folklore*, published by the American Folklore Society 55, no. 217 (1942): 167.

⁴⁶⁶ Guy B. Johnson, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929).

The cultural apperency of the myth catapulted it into the FTP's repertoire of known stories for creation of original plays—as *Natural Man* was only one of several retellings of the myth to hit the Federal Theatre and WPA stages. In and outside of the FTP and WPA, the John Henry myth is repeatedly suggested for use for children's entertainment—as are fairy tales and folk takes as a source texts. The WPA Recreation Project Reports in Seattle show that on March 20th, 1937 Earle F. Cook writes that WPA drama officials should select “scenes from certain fairy tales of plays” according to the age of students.⁴⁶⁷ Around the country, tall tales and fairy tales were often the subject of marionette performances, as well.

Natural Man as a folk tale, and the writing of Theodore Browne as a playwright, also served to meet an initiative enacted by Hallie Flanagan for the Federal Theatre's projects around the country just prior to the production of *Natural Man*. In December 1936, Flanagan penned Florence and Burton James about an intention of the FTP to produce more new works in the coming year. The James were de facto controllers of the theatrical climate of Seattle in the time of the FTP—alongside original Seattle project director Glen Hughes—due to their output and expertise, which was recognized throughout the city. Florence and Burton James founded and ran the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, and were both professors of Drama at the University of Washington at the time. During the creation of *Natural Man*, the James were heading a number of productions of the Negro Repertory Compay; Florence James would go on to direct *Natural Man*, as the two most prominent NRC leaders were already committed to the production: Theodore Browne as associate director and resident playwright, and Joe Stanton (an artistic director of the group) acting in the lead role of John Henry, his first principle part for the NRC and Federal Theatre.

⁴⁶⁷ Cooke, Earl F., Works Progress Administration, Seattle, Music and Drama, 1936-1939. Identifier: 5807-01, 1937.

Flanagan's plan for the coming works of the Federal Theatre nationwide was twofold.

She wrote to the James:

“I want to suggest two other plans for emphasizing both the national and regional aspects of the Federal Theatre... we want as many Federal Theatres as possible to open simultaneously, each with a different, new, hitherto unproduced play. . . such scripts may include regular drama, musical comedy... preferably, though not necessarily, each play should come from a dramatist of your own region, and if the script itself has regional or local interest, so much the better.”⁴⁶⁸

In addition to having an unproduced play written by a dramatist from the FTP subdivision's local region, Flanagan wanted every FTP unit—vaudeville and puppet theatres included—to produce an anti-war play or production in April 1937. Flanagan's urging highlights two curiosities relevant to *Natural Man*. First, that production of *Natural Man*—despite mixed successes of earlier NRC productions, including their most recent production of *Lysistrata*'s lack of commercial success, was likely forwarded by Browne's position as a local playwright. Secondly, the desire to have puppet theatres included in groups producing anti-war plays works in concert with not a simple belief that Popular Front ideals were being presented to young folks via FTP productions—but rather than ideals of anti-violence, social and racial equity, and global citizenship were a part of the Federal Theatre's impact on American culture. Read together, though *Natural Man* was not an anti-war play or a purely children's theatre productions, it stands that producing the John Henry myth likely held the intention of both championing Browne's work, while factoring in social commentary on anti-violence in race politics for discussion by the 1937 season audiences of the Seattle division of the Federal Theatre Project.

⁴⁶⁸ Hallie Flanagan to Florence and Burton James, 1 December 1936, The National Archives. Quoted in Johnson, “A Production History,” 86.

At the most rudimentary level, the John Henry myth served in this way to promote an image of Black identity that might be read as aligned with late 19th and early 20th century dictates of sentimentalism, and a desire to promote an image for white and Black audience members alike of the simultaneous humanity and exceptionality of Black Americans. Browne had openly discussed his belief in the activist potential of Black theatre, explaining “I’ve always felt strongly about a Negro Peoples Theatre that emphasizes the heroic aspects of the black experience—the Exemplars who triumph over the odds.”⁴⁶⁹ In doing so, one could argue for the latent perspective that *Natural Man* continues the traditional “man vs. machine” morality behind the John Henry myth. In proving his physical might in defeating the machine, Henry forms an exemplar for the Black experience in America, and demonstrates a mythology that anyone—including a Black, lower class, physical laborer—can persevere with enough determination and hard work. The tale itself has become paradigmatic of this moral in the United States, perpetuating a myth of requisite Black exceptionalism that has carried into the 21st century. Claude Steele, for instance, frames the work of social psychologist Sherman James, who used the term “John Henryism” to describe “a psychological syndrome that he found to be in association with hypertension in several samples of North Carolina blacks: holding too rigidly to the faith that discrimination and disadvantage can be overcome with hard work and persistence.”⁴⁷⁰ The exceptionality forwarded by the tall tale, and inherent to many theatrical productions of the John Henry myth would be congruent with what Browne signals for in

⁴⁶⁹ Quoted in Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898–1965* (New York: McFarland, 2010), 132.

⁴⁷⁰ Claude Steele, “Thin Ice: ‘Stereotype Threat’ and Black College Students,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1999, 51. Steele’s work expands to describe the exhaustion and psychological toll taken on high achieving Black undergraduates in higher education—noting that the mythological perils of the John Henry myth as a model for overcoming discrimination through strength and resilience is one that far outlasts the era of the Federal Theatre, and extends to modern life in the United States.

needing to frame a Black dramatic hero (in both the Grecian sense, and as a protagonist of period drama), who creates a representative image of success for the Black social public. However, Browne's John Henry does not rise in triumph after defeating the machine; there is no hero's perishing, replete with Henry's traditional collapse in front of the crowd. In text and performance, Browne's John Henry outlasts not only the machine he is pitted against—but also the flaccid narrativization of American exceptionalism often prescribed to the John Henry myth by white readers. How can we read *Natural Man*'s John Henry as a different nature of dramatic hero and, in doing so, rethink Browne's intentions in formulating the myth as one created for separate readings by members of the same audience?

White Spectatorship of Natural Man

Guy Johnson's writing on the NRC offers an apt description of *Natural Man*'s need to transcend a single modality of spectatorship, clarifying the unrecognizable intentions of the text beyond the monolithic metaphor of man vs. machine. In analysis of Browne's play, she writes, "the contents of 'natural man' against machine, as a metaphor for the black man's struggle for survival with personal dignity in a social machine designed and defined by a white world is clear."⁴⁷¹ Still: white audiences in 1937 viewing *Natural Man* were perplexed by *Natural Man*. Dian Manzer, a white critic for the *Seattle Argus* noted in a review of the production that "many were quite puzzled" at the conclusion of the episodic drama; the critic continues by gesturing that if the play had been more "universally appealing, audience reaction would undoubtedly have been more encouraging."⁴⁷² Writing for the *Seattle Star*, a different white critic named Anne

⁴⁷¹ Johnson, "A Production History," 88.

⁴⁷² *Seattle Argus*, Feb. 9, 1937, press clippings in *Natural Man* Production Notebook, Box 1046, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress. Quoted in Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 123.

Wilson described her experience of confusion while watching the production, in having witnessed a “braggart character” rather than her mentally drawn depiction of John Henry as a “lovable destroyer;” Wilson writes that, “the most difficult problem with which Browne was faced in writing the play was that John Henry, a negro man[sic] who wanted to be left alone by white men to drive his sledge hammer and throw his shoes in any door he pleased, is a *character of the imagination* and cannot be portrayed on the stage without objections.”⁴⁷³ Perhaps Wilson’s writing is best edited for a contemporary eye to read as “without objections by a white audience member.” Wilson’s claim that for a Black man with agency to exist outside of the white man’s system of inculturation is an impossible or fictitious form of identity reads in agreement with her own disidentification with the authorship of Browne in the article’s title: “Negro’s Own Play Proves Interesting.”⁴⁷⁴ For Wilson and other white audience members, John Henry as a “character of the imagination” describes an illegibility of the character—and in doing so demarcates agency and autonomy as features not included in realistic Black identity. The turn of phrase is jarring and extends the severity of misrecognition for white audience members unable to understand a Black character operating with a ferocity of spirit to cling to choice, control, and “freedom” in their unwilling fixedness on white sociocultural life. However, it also show that *Natural Man* was well-received by white audiences, and led them to engagement with Black identity.

In her writing on *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, Kate Dossett explains that for a white audience in 1937 to see legibility in *Natural Man*’s performance of Black identity, “required audiences not only to witness the suffering black body, but ultimately, to recognize the

⁴⁷³ Ann Wilson, “Negro’s Own Play Proves Interesting,” *Seattle Star*, 1937, 6. My italics.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

virtue of the victim-hero. John Henry's virtue in *Natural Man* was not easily discernible to white spectators.⁴⁷⁵ In text, John Henry's death follows the expressionist tendencies of Browne's writing for the play, in offering a symbolic depiction of Henry's death, rather than one in line with historical realism. Henry acknowledges that—per the original myth—he is dying, as he explains to the salesman (playing a role of aggressor-turned-ally) who asks Henry how he can help only to hear: “Brother, you just cain’t help a dying man.”⁴⁷⁶ Yet, Browne's stage directions indicate that Henry does not die on stage, and instead, “John Henry, hammer across his shoulder, symbolically sets out for parts unknown.”⁴⁷⁷ In creating this figurative, and *chosen*, death at the end of the play, Browne introduces a number of critical nuances and alterations to the myth—specifically for white audience members. The death is, for John Henry, now an elected moment; it is a chosen death, rather than a product of the hard-won fight to beat the Salesman in his inequitable competition. In this way, Henry is a victor of the competition but a loser of the representation of American societal anti-Blackness, rather than a victor of the competition and a loser of the corporal question of life-and-death. Henry's “choice” to die is further complicated because Browne's stage directions indicate that John Henry chooses to leave the social climate where he now recognizes an inability to survive. “I seen the hand writing on the wall. My whole life done passed before me in that tunnel,” Henry explains before triumphantly echoing “I don’t mind a thing, no, not a solitary thing in this world!” before Browne's stage directions create a swell, “(His voice rising lyrical and eloquent)” and Henry utters: “I’m as free now as the Blue-ridge Mountain, the Mississippi River, the Tall Lonesome Pine!”⁴⁷⁸ It is in death that Henry

⁴⁷⁵ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 123.

⁴⁷⁶ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 8-3.

⁴⁷⁷ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 8-4. The exit “for parts unknown” creates a form of hermeneutic code for the reader—an enigma barring the audiences from the actual (literal or figurative) outcome of Henry's life.

⁴⁷⁸ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 8-3. Words in parentheses are Browne's original manuscript stage directions.

finds freedom from the oppressive social confines of American culture and the spectatorial landscape of the American public sphere. This mode of storytelling, and most significantly Henry's choice to die, created dissonance for white audiences of Browne's play. Johnson's close reading of *Natural Man* aligns, as she argues "in 1937, the concept of a black man electing death rather than the life white society has defined for him, was incomprehensible for some whites."⁴⁷⁹ This seems to have been true for at least the Manzer, who argues in her *Argus* review that John Henry's struggle, as performed in *Natural Man* is "vain" and recommended a "play less obscure, one which avoids the race question."⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, it seems that for Manzer—and perceivably other white audience members of *Natural Man*—in order for the production to reach a point of legibility, Henry would either have to die a victim-hero, or live as a victor of the competition solely revered for his physical strength and labor capital. The lack of this necessary reading feels aligned with what Dossett points to as more common performances of Black identity for white audiences in the era. "Browne's drama subverted the mode of representing race that was expected and well understood by American audiences" Dosset writes, noting that unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Stevedore* (both of which were staged by the Seattle NRC), in *Natural Man* Henry's character which would normally portend a paradigmatic Black victim-hero, "is not rewarded by a recognition of his virtue on the part of white figures, nor is it redeemed through a triumphant death."⁴⁸¹ Clearly, the minoritarian nuancing that Browne undertook was successful in creating an image of John Henry that outperformed the simplicity of white hegemonic images of the character. But how then were these moments received by Black audience members? In

⁴⁷⁹ Johnson, "A Production History," 88.

⁴⁸⁰ *Seattle Argus*, Feb. 9, 1937. Quoted in Johnson, "A Production History," 97. Several other documents on contemporary white audience responses and reviews for *Natural Man* use the term "the race question" to indicate flaws in the play, and its potential activist aim in performance.

⁴⁸¹ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 123.

what way can we read a 1937 audience as bifurcated by Browne's chosen curation of the John Henry myth, and the structural interventions of his mode of playwriting and storytelling?

Black Spectatorship of Natural Man

In unpacking the nature of Black audience reception of *Natural Man*, it is first significant to consider ways that Browne's writing may have used signification systems for Black viewers that evaded the recognition of white audiences. After doing so, it may be of use to expand on the ways that the NRC's production, while created by a Black dramatist and cast, was still "co-authored" through production and direction by white theatre practitioners—adding to the complicated representation of Black identity that reacted the moment of the play's performance event. In connecting these threads to the optics of spectatorship on the Black body, I'll attempt to ask a pivotal question: how would these narratives and perceptions of racialized performance have been read by young Black audience members? Arguing that the theatrical genre of melodrama may have actually been an apparatus for instruction, making *Natural Man* a vehicle for racial *raisonneurship* for young audiences, I'll articulate a primacy of intention and generativeness for Browne's authorship contrary to typical readings of *Natural Man*'s modality of performance.

In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. alters the critical inquiry posed by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* ("How does it feel to be a problem?") asking of the Black man in America: "How does it feel to be a paradox?"⁴⁸² Perhaps

⁴⁸² Du Bois' question is originally posed at the beginning of his text, and asked as a question "between my and the other world." He goes on to intimate interactions between himself and white interlocutors, where the white person attempts to engage in conversation often to dislocate themselves from the aggressions of whiteness or other white folks (i.e. dissent against the "Southern outrages"). The question prevails as a subtext, or undercurrent, in interactions—and Du Bois implies it is an ever-present undercurrent in conversations between white and Black folks. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Modern Library, 2003), 3-4.

Gates' framing of the question is a stronger articulation of the puzzlement that white audiences felt in 1937 watching the Federal Theatre's production *Natural Man*. That is to say, that perhaps white audiences were not confused—but rather had an inability to resolve the contradiction of the John Henry they watched exit the stage in comparison to the paradigmatic image of Black identity held in their minds. A John Henry whose penultimate line heralds his now being “free” *in* death is a Black man who has not only chosen death rather than existing as a stereotype encased within white society, but also a Black man who evades representation and comprehensibility for the diegetic audiences of the mining competition inside of the play's narrative.⁴⁸³ In this way, there is an act of double-seeing: the white audience members of the Federal Theatre's production of *Natural Man* watch a character who transcends their own white expectations for Black identity, while simultaneously the white audiences of the competition inside of the play “watch on” as a Black man elects to die—as his white competitor defends the Black man's humanity, to boot. It is hard to question the 1937 white audience's confusion.

This dissonance harkens Harvey Young's inspiring prose in *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. In his study, Young seeks to illuminate the ways in which “an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected

For Gates, the question of being a “paradox” arises in reaction to the 1995 Million Man March. The March, called for by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Minister Louis Farrakhan, was a march in Washington, D.C. promoting the centrality of Black men's transgression against sociopolitical struggles of anti-Blackness in the United States. Attended by an estimated 870,000 people (though projections vary widely), Gates uses the reference to point to Black men's simultaneous singularity in cultural optics as “prone to wickedness” and yet also “distinctively suited for the role of racial uplift. Farrakhan—akin to Gates' assertion about the paradoxical and misunderstood nature of the Black man in America, explained in his speech concluding the march that whoever is entrusted with the task of pointing out wrong, depending on the nature of the circumstances, is not always loved... in fact, more than likely, that person is going to be hated and misunderstood.” The concept of misunderstanding directly integrates with this chapters insistence in the critical acts of misunderstanding the guided spectatorship of the NRC's *Natural Man*. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House Value Publishing, 1999), xvi. Farrakhan, Louis. “Million Man March.” Washington, D.C. 16, October 1995.

⁴⁸³ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 8-3.

across actual physical bodies” by chronicling “how the misrecognition of individual bodies as ‘the black body’ creates similar experiences.”⁴⁸⁴ The project brings two (of many) revelations to this analysis of *Natural Man*. First is the recognition of expectations for the white viewer of *Natural Man*—who would have prescribed their own viewings of a modular or paradigmatic “Black body” onto Joe Staton playing John Henry: effectively viewing Staton’s John Henry as simply a Black man rather than the character of the myth they were seeing dramatized. Secondly, is an urging to cross read the performance John Henry in *Natural Man* as a performance of a Black man in an arena of sport. Afterall, the core plot device serving as a thematic guidepost—or major dramatic question—in *Natural Man* (and the John Henry myth most broadly) is the competition between man and machine. The play, and myth, ultimately ask: will John Henry outmatch the machine—and in doing so validate his position as not only a Man capable of defeating innovation and machinery, but as a (Black) *natural man* capable of outperforming even the technological imaginaries of his white peers? Using the logic that this is a sporting contest, I want to employ Young’s argumentation that the Black body in athletic exhibition is always seen as “a captive body.”⁴⁸⁵ In close readings of sports performances by Muhammad Ali and Jack Johnson as boxers in the ring (a la, on a stage) subjected to white spectatorship, Young recounts how white members of the American public reacted with dissonance and disdain at Ali’s refusal to join the military when drafted for the Vietnam War in 1967. After declining to respond to his name being called five separate times during his presumable induction ceremony, Ali remembers the voice of an old white woman shouting at him as he left the room; the woman waved a miniature American flag and taunted “You goin’

⁴⁸⁴ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 4.

⁴⁸⁵ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 81.

straight to jail. You aint' no champ no more."⁴⁸⁶ Young contends that this moment and others surrounding Ali differing from enlistment seem to suggest that, for white spectators, "Ali's body could operate only within—and, therefore, was trapped within—three spaces: the military, the boxing ring, and the prison cell."⁴⁸⁷ The puzzlement indicated by white reviews of *Natural Man* parallels that of the old woman in Ali's story. Correlationally, perhaps the source of puzzlement for the reviewers—and white audiences of *Natural Man*—is the inability to sort the victor, John Henry's body site. Having won the competition, but lost his life—yet heading to death with liberation and triumph—Henry is neither victim-hero, nor Black labor subject; he is seen as neither a target of ridicule, nor as a victorious exemplar in the "sports arena" of the competition. Even by the late twentieth century, Gates denotes the cultural cache of hegemony heralding "if you're a black man in your twenties and thirties, you're more likely than not to be unemployed or, in the gingerly euphemism, 'underemployed.'"⁴⁸⁸ Accordingly, the spectatorial white gaze at the body of John Henry in *Natural Man* is one that is semiotically "projected" upon, to use Harvey Young's language, with the juxtaposing image of only a few available routes or roles of identity. In this way, Browne's John Henry avoids recognition as a stock character for white audiences—a nuanced characterization that disrupts the coherence of simplistic looking by white audience members of the FTP's *Natural Man*.

A question is posed by Browne's John Henry: does an entire audience ever view a play with the same aesthetic characterizations and, effectually, the same genre of theatrical performance? Returning to Henry Louis Gates Jr. may tool us to disprove the prerequisite

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 78. Quoting a recountment, and the words, of Muhammad Ali.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 80.

⁴⁸⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, xv.

assumption. In his crucial 1988 critical theory from *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Gates articulates the mechanics of multiplicitous communication systems, using traditions of African and African American culture, mythology, religion, and language to create an epistemology of rhetorical systems of signifying. Amongst the many applications and adjacent meaning-making structures detailed in *The Signifying Monkey*, for Gates signifying can become a process by which Black spectators (or readers, translators) can interpret or decipher a “simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe.”⁴⁸⁹ Accordingly, Gates details the way that “the open-endedness of figurative language, rather than its single-minded closure, is inscribed in the myths of the Signifying Monkey,” and argues for potentialities during the meaning-making processes undertaken by Black audiences.⁴⁹⁰ As Black audiences interpret figurative language outside of the expected hegemonic system of meaning created by white makers and audience members—including that of the written word itself—second non-hierarchically oriented readings emerge as esoteric, cryptic readings for specifically Black readers. Gates utilizes, amongst others, a description of signifying offered by Roger D. Abrahams that explains signifying as a “*technique* of indirect argument or persuasion,” and “a language of implication;” Abrahams notes that amongst the breadth of applications for the term and technique, “it can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and

⁴⁸⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, first published in 1988 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 54.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

gestures.”⁴⁹¹ Gates’ theoretical distinction for signifying allows the term to be critically used to denote situations where a speaker, text, argument, or performance, is “doubled voiced” (or has a “dual voice”), allowing authorial intent or intended reception to be bifurcated, and meaning making to be stratified between the intersectional identities of audiences. In the case of *Natural Man*, this differentiated presentation of meaning would have happened as separate meaning-making modalities for white and Black audience members. That is to say, that using Gates’ argument for the ability for Black vernacular, rhetoric, and mechanisms for storytelling to carry separate, stratified meanings, we can interpret that audiences members viewing the performance event of *Natural Man* may have actually been a part of separate *circles of readers*.⁴⁹²

Natural Man: Melodrama and Fantastical Tragedy?

The White Fantastical Tragedy

E. Quita Craig’s research in *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* led to a deduction that Browne was, in fact, aware of and utilizing a series of signifying elements in the characterizations and dialogue of *Natural Man*. Craig refers to Theodore Browne as “thoroughly conversant with the dual communication system,” and argues that he uses it in *Natural Man* to infuse “enough ambiguity” to convince white audiences that the play is solely about “the struggle

⁴⁹¹ Roger D. Abrahams quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 59.

⁴⁹² This conception of “circle of readers” draws on reader response theory, and the belief that a performance text isn’t a completed text until read by an audience. Reader response has long upheld the centrality of the reader’s interpretation of text in the act of meaning-making *by* the text. Elizabeth Freund referenced the early criticism of I.A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) to reach a summarization of a tenant of reader response theory articulating, “the experience of art is definitely, even defiantly, continuous with the rest of our experience.” In turn, the subsequent belief would be that readers with separate lived experiences—such as the division between white and Black audience members of *Natural Man* would hold separate readings of their single performance text. Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2003, 24.

between the natural man and the forces of mechanization.”⁴⁹³ Johnson concurs, characterizing a belief that the “play’s theme is presented in a way which suggests that Browne was instinctively aware of the potential of ‘the dual-communication system.’”⁴⁹⁴ What Johnson and Craig term a “dual communication system” in the logic of Gates’ seminal referents for signifying amongst Black media, literary, and performance texts points to *Natural Man* as a play with a single performance event, but separate “performance texts.” Still, the presentation of those texts in terms of aesthetic and genre is a characterization of *Natural Man* infrequently, and sparsely, discussed. If the reception of communicative elements in *Natural Man* was bifurcated between Black and white audiences—is there also a chance that the play’s presentation would have been characterized, and therefore experienced, in a separate theatrical *modalities*—or genres, aesthetic modes, or “perspectives on human existence?”⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³ E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 47.

⁴⁹⁴ Johnson, “A Production History,” 86.

⁴⁹⁵ Defining genre by the way that different theatrical genres approach a “different perspectives on human existence” is a coining I am borrowing from Stephanie Arnold’s writing to introduce theatre as an art form to beginners and students. What I find compelling in Arnold’s explanation is using categorization as a “tool for exploration.” For Arnold, there is an available belief that “each particular form of drama contributes to our understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world or the universe,” which I find useful in considering how white and Black audiences would have viewed separate relationships between human subject and world when spectating the Black body in performance. Stephanie Arnold, *The Creative Spirit: an Introduction to Theatre*, 4th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 450-475.

A separate way of approaching genre in this paper may be by thinking through Eric Bentley—who characterizes and categorizes traits of tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and farce in *The Life of the Drama*. I’m curious, as well, about Bentley’s distinctions about genre creation and stratification in *Playwright as Thinker*. In his discussion of the bourgeois tragedy, Bentley explains that “toward the close of the nineteenth century came the New Drama and with it other serious efforts to create a genre *with the depth, dignity, and lyric power of tragedy*.” These later italicized words (my italics) seem to indicate that different genres offer different affordances (i.e. dignity) to the characters and approach of a given play—which also connects to the separate readings of each performance event for *Natural Man*. Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 90.

The aforementioned descriptions of *Natural Man* based on the white audience expectation that viewers would experience pity for John Henry (recognizing his triumph in contest, but death at the end of the play) seem to indicate a play that would be presented in the melodramatic form. This feels aligned with other late-19th early-20th century plays intended for white audiences that would have employed the aesthetic properties of sentimentalism in performance, via the melodramatic mode, to depict a Black character experiencing suffering, and in order to create the Black body in performance as a body deserving of compassion. I gesture towards melodrama here as a presupposed aesthetic mode familiar to audiences in 1937 for two reasons. First: even amidst early 20th century interventions of historical realism burgeoning as a core aesthetic form for Western theatre, melodrama would have likely been the most familiar mode of theatre making and presentation in the eyes of the American theatre-going public. Matthew Buckley writes that “scholars have come to recognise that melodrama was not only the most vital, popular and influential genre of the European and trans-Atlantic nineteenth-century stage but by the close of the last century, that of film and television drama everywhere on the globe.”⁴⁹⁶ Even prior to considering melodrama a style more fit for the silver screen, we can see early twentieth-century residues of melodrama as a primary genre for cultural import—and familiarity of reception—for audiences in the United States. Secondly: using previously citing examples, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* being written ostensibly to promote refutation of the Fugitive Slave Act, to the Federal Theatre’s production of *Stevedore* which fought for a position of Black and white unity in broader U.S. political labor uprisings, the aesthetic center of melodrama persisted in the 20th century as a fairly compelling form of theatrical persuasion. The form itself also creates a mode of communication with audiences that has potential to generate change in

⁴⁹⁶ Matthew Buckley, “In Between: British and American Melodrama and Modernity,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 48, no. 2 (2021): 171.

action, behaviors, and ways of thinking for society. “Melodrama has expanded beyond the borders of genre and fiction to become a pervasive cultural mode” argue Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, “with distinct signifying practices and interpretive codes for meaning-making that assist in determining parameters for identification throughout a variety of discourses and mediated spaces.”⁴⁹⁷ This allows for the recognition that melodrama is, without a doubt, a pedagogical instrument of the theatre. However, as mentioned previously, despite the capacity for melodrama to hold dual and abstracted meanings under the guise of heightened theatricality and a kaleidoscoping of reality through the form’s aesthetic principles—melodrama was *not* the modality experienced by white audiences of *Natural Man*. In search for the victim-hero of Henry, white audiences could be considered to have attempted a semiotic classification of the play as a tragedy. John Henry does, in fact, die—and does so in a way that could perhaps have been legibly understood as an act of hubris, or an adjacent form of hamartia; but only to white audience members. Kate Dossett’s inclination is to not think of *Natural Man* as a melodrama; for white audience members in particular, Dossett details that “because virtue was hard to read, the ‘spectacle of racialized bodily suffering’ had come to serve as the necessary prelude to what Peter Brooks calls “moral legibility.”⁴⁹⁸ I’ll return to Brooks’ shaping of melodrama, but Dossett’s reading indicates continuity in the puzzlement from white audiences at the final moments of *Natural Man*. With Henry not suffering, but proclaiming his freedom—what modality *could* Browne’s play be read as? If not melodrama, or tragedy, how else might have white audience members have understood the intended genre and theatrical shaping of *Natural Man*’s text?

⁴⁹⁷ Jörg Metelmann and Scott Loren, *Melodrama after the Tears* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 9.

⁴⁹⁸ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 123.

The act of production offers some hints to both white reception, and white interpretation in production, of *Natural Man*. Under the direction of Florence James (a white theatre practitioner), the play certainly altered its delivery intentionality from Theodore Browne's original writing; so operates the pragmatics of theatrical collaboration. However, the very modality of performance may have been in question, allowing Browne's text to represent one aesthetic form—and James' direction another. In her director's report, James describes *Natural Man* as "basically a fantasy set to music," in which John Henry "wins, but only to realize, with his own heart breaking, that the machine is going right on, that he can never really defeat it."⁴⁹⁹ Reading this alongside Browne's text which rather literally has Henry speaking an avowal of his own freedom in death creates an image of page and stage narratives that are out of concord. James' interpretation is aligned solely with the white morality of the play as a "man vs. machine" parable. Reading James' program note further details her simplistic reading of the myth, text, moral, and figure of John Henry in *Natural Man*:

NOTE: The original plan was simple. Man and the elemental forces were one. But something happened and changed all this. Man became lazy and imaginative, and the dreams he dreamed became concrete realities. Ways and means were invented to harness the elemental forces. They became his slaves and did the work intended for him. Man is smart, but not smart enough. For in bending every effort to dodging work, he lost his pride and glory - the pride and glory of being a solid, natural man.

John Henry refused to change. The original plan was to his special liking. All he knew was hard work and that was all he wanted of life: hard work and to be free to walk the earth like a natural man. The hellishness of it is that he is never free. Wherever he turns, forces rise up like ghosts and scare him away. The natural man, who was once king of the earth, has been cheated and exiled, and

⁴⁹⁹ *Natural Man* production bulletin, Research Center for the FTP. Quoted in Johnson, "A Production History," 92-93.

*all that is left of his earthly kingdom is the crown which he still wears on his head.*⁵⁰⁰

James' description directly calls *Natural Man* a "fantasy" while promoting Henry as a sort of tragic hero—out of alignment with Browne's intended writing. A question of aesthetic style for writing and performance pokes itself into the margins here as well. *Natural Man* was written as a nine scene episodic sequence; Browne's text repeatedly turns away from tenants of realism, opting to imply a more expressionist aesthetic for performance. The same is true for design elements. The scenic design contained only a few chairs and set pieces; an episode including impoverished characters was set out for by only a small cooking fire with a can hanging into it. Reports indicate that reviewers took note primarily of the small single jail cell which, with Staton inside, created the image of a larger-than-life John Henry.⁵⁰¹ Johnson and others imply in their reactions to *Natural Man* that the jail cell was likely positioned this way to augment John Henry's actual diegetic size in the production—however, my reading of this document works in line with the text's insistence on a modernist theatrical approach. That is to say, that John Henry's literal size wasn't augmented, but the sensorial impression of his largeness remained. The experimental nature of *Natural Man*—whether we classify it as more closely resembling expressionism or Brecht's epic theatre—seems to also play into the bifurcation of the audience along racial lines based on text and direction.

In a prior NRC production, Florence James' capacity to direct this kind of episodic, experimental text came into question. As the NRC produced *Lysistrata*, the production received a move from the smaller two hundred and fifty seat Seattle Repertory Playhouse to the nearly one thousand seat Metropolitan Theatre in Seattle in September 1936. The move reflected

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ See Appendix A, Figure 1.

expectations that the production would receive a long, well-attended run. However, the show closed after only one performance, after state director of the WPA, Don Abel, received word of the potentially risqué nature of the play's performance. The surrounding controversy led Hallie Flanagan to send senior FTP official Howard Miller to Seattle with the intention of resolving the conflict and reopening the play at once. However, once in Seattle, Miller felt the play had been "badly cast" and "badly directed," explaining in his report to Flanagan that, "the James' always seem to fall down on anything experimental."⁵⁰² Could *Natural Man* have been another production that Florence James' happened to "fall down on" in the direction process? Despite the inclination of Johnson to defend Florence James' direction—she claims, that "James' program note may very well have been a direct attempt to make the revolutionary notions that emerged in the play more palatable to white audiences"—a reading is available that James was directing the production with the genre and theatrical style of tragedy and fantasy in mind.⁵⁰³ Doing so would have contaminated Browne's playtexts—filtering it for reception intended for white audiences.

The Black Melodrama

The potential that James directed *Natural Man* for the Federal Theatre Project's Seattle production with a genre focus separate from that of Theodore R. Browne's playscript doesn't necessarily mean that the script itself failed to reach the stage as intended. However, I'd argue that for Black audience members, the text and actor's performances would have illuminated a very different production, and even modality of performance. This extends Gates' considerations of rhetoric to the performatic domain of acting, and could have meant that the Black audience

⁵⁰² Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 128.

⁵⁰³ Johnson, "A Production History," 92-93.

experienced a melodrama in *Natural Man*, afterall. Joe Staton, artistic director of the NRC and starring actor as John Henry recounts James' direction, explaining:

“We would listen to the comments that different people would make and those who were directing us would listen because out of the mouths of babes come pearls of wisdom. And after all, if I were to direct a white group in a show, how in hell could I tell them how to react to certain situations. You see what I mean? So these people left a lot of the things to us because it made them look better in the sight of those who watched the show and those who wrote about it and everything else.”⁵⁰⁴

Staton's words clarify the likelihood of a collaborative production and rehearsal process, where Black artists as members of the NRC voiced direction for the production alongside Florence James. This collaboration, too, likely created separate signs and signifying elements ripe for bifurcated meanings, readings, and modalities of performance.

But what were the NRC artists illuminating through the act of production? What did Browne's text offer, in the ways of dual-communication and systems of signifying for *Black* audiences of *Natural Man*? To attempt answering this question, we can return to the characterization of melodrama that Peter Brooks harkens in *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks cites Eric Bentley's description of the four dramatic types (melodrama, farce, tragedy, comedy) to agree that melodrama “embodies the root impulse of drama—the need for dramatization... for acting out.”⁵⁰⁵ For Brooks, “the melodrama mode” holds the fundamental characteristic of desiring to express—or perhaps, desiring to *perform*. Brooks details the genre, explaining: “Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and

⁵⁰⁴ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 128.

⁵⁰⁵ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 12.

utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship.”⁵⁰⁶ Several components of this description pique a re-reading of the final scene of *Natural Man*. As John Henry makes a claim that in death he is as “free now as the Blueridge Mountain, the Mississippi River, the Tall Lonesome Pine,” viewers can read the dramatization, the affective weight—the melodrama—in his words. Henry’s ideas are clearly stated; Browne’s voicing of the character, though lofty, is one that gives the character a voice to speak his deepest feelings, just as Brook implies.⁵⁰⁷ The guidance of separate readings of this text is provided for in what Roland Barthes may refer to as a *cultural code*—or the way the references or conditions residing outside of a text could change the reading of the given text. Unchanging, the lines of *Natural Man* alter in genre based on the cultural presuppositions of the play’s audience members. Accordingly, the sentiment of reading “freedom”—which also matches a piece of dialogue that meets Brook’s description of “uttering the unspeakable” may have built for the puzzlement of white audiences, but what kinds of affect or cognitive reactions did it stimulate for Black audiences members?

In imagining Black children of the late 1930s watching *Natural Man*, we can again employ Brook’s description of melodrama—specifically the terminology that the melodrama mode creates an avenue by which “the whole *lesson* of (the character’s) relationship” is revealed.⁵⁰⁸ This “lesson” would have perhaps taken shape as a racial pedagogy, effectively teaching young Black Americans about the “relationship” of race between Black and white people in the United States, all under the obfuscation of genre disorientation. In 1935, just two

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁰⁷ Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, 8-3. Words in parentheses are Browne’s original manuscript stage directions.

⁵⁰⁸ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 12. My italics to augment the direct use of “lesson” as a pedagogical term inherent to Brook’s text.

years prior to the NRC production of *Natural Man*, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in *A Negro Nation Within The Nation* that “the colored people of America are coming to face the fact quite calmly that most white Americans do not like them, and are planning neither for their survival, nor for their definite future if it involves free, self-assertive modern manhood.”⁵⁰⁹ Du Bois cites, in one sentence, *Natural Man*’s two central thematic arguments. First, that white Americans are not eager to provide for Black survival or “free” existence—thus ratifying Henry’s claim that in death he has finally found the only way of conquering the system of oppression that has systematically refused him freedom. Second, that “manhood” is the root stakes of the play, and that John Henry’s ability to be a “Natural Man” is not determined through the mode of his beating the machine during a white man’s chosen competition—but rather through the access of agency and autonomy created through his avowal of death as he walks off into the “unknown.”

Described primarily under the terms fantasy, tragedy, and tall tale in other scholarship, I’d like to offer a reading of Henry’s death aligned with melodramatic mode by comparing John Henry’s final moments to a seemingly unlikely parallel: Marguerite’s death of tuberculosis in Alexandre Dumas’ *La Dame aux Camélias*. A paradigmatic representative of the melodramatic modality, Dumas’ play ends as Marguerite’s lover Armand whispers to her fantasies of how they’ll live happily together, as she instructs him to instead find a miniature painting of her hidden in a desk drawer, allowing it to be her surrogate in death. It is in Marguerite’s death that, as she believes, Armand will attain happiness—and that “the best and purest of me will be yours forever.”⁵¹⁰ In the melodramatic genre set within an expressionist style of Browne’s framing, it is

⁵⁰⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Negro Nation Within the Nation,” *Current History* 42 (New York, NY: New York Times, 1935), 2.

⁵¹⁰ Alexandre Dumas, *La Dame aux Camélias*, first published in 1847, translated by Edith Reynolds and Nigel Playfair, in *Camille and Other Plays*, edited by Stephen S. Stanton (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 163.

not another character, but rather the audience that receives John Henry's words and instruction. Just as Marguerite proclaims, "I am dying, but I am happy too," John Henry's insistence on reaching freedom through death offers an alternative for Black audiences members.⁵¹¹ This alternative, perhaps not marked by happiness, is still one that creates the image of an Afrofuturist time still-yet-to-come.⁵¹²

This is not to say that Browne's text argued for death—but rather an upheaval of the hegemonic confines for Black identity, and releasing of Black perception from the limitations of white society, white competition, and white eyes. What Browne seems to instruct through the signifying John Henry is an alternative to the psychological domination of racism portended by Franz Fanon. In his instrumental writing in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon details the psychological captivity that racism, slavery, and racial oppression caused for Black individuals and their conception of identity. Fanon would go on to write in 1952: "as painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white."⁵¹³ Browne's John Henry offers both the racial instruction to young people that the world they are living in is one without agency, and where even winning the "competitions" set before you is not a license to freedom, or satiation. Still, Browne's text seems to imply a happy, "free" Henry as he leaves the

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² In utilizing Afrofuturism here, I am working in agreement with Michael Bennett's curated descriptions of Afrofuturism. Bennett cites Alondra Nelson to describe Afrofuturism as "works expressive of 'African-American voices... with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come.'" In this way, akin to Muñoz' queer futurity, which indicates queer performance that imagines a better future rather reaction in the present (articulating: "Queerness is an ideality... we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality"), Afrofuturism works to "speculate" or imagine a better, happy future with a reclaimed power of Blackness, and dissolution of hegemonic ideals surrounding racism, white supremacy, and inequality. Michael Bennet, "Afrofuturism," *Computer* (Long Beach, Calif.) 49 (4), *Los Alamitos*, 2016, 92-93. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵¹³ Franz Fanon, "Introduction" in *Black Skins, White Masks*, first published in 1952, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xiv.

stage—an offering of a silver lining, or the possibility of life outside of the systems of compulsory whiteness and hegemonic power that Henry falls victim to. This works in the Afrofuturist modality that Ytasha Womack refers to as inclusive of “speculative fiction,” or where the imagined moment of liberation is implied as possible, yet not yet attained in the present moment.⁵¹⁴ The moment concluding *Natural Man* is then both an experience of heightened, theatricalized spirituality—as well as a moment where the semantic field of meaning making for the audience is akin to the crossroads of what Gates details rhetorically as a meeting point between Black vernacular and “Standard English.”⁵¹⁵ Described in this way *Natural Man* could be argued, as Craig does, to have used its modality and genre as a way to achieve a “synthesis of form and content that perfectly expresses the mood, vision, and reality of the black experience.”⁵¹⁶ Meanwhile, as white young people joined the adults around them in likely puzzlement at the tragic death of Henry, young Black audience members could have perceived a subversive form of instruction from the play. This instruction was far different from the surrounding instruction of the Federal Theatre outside of the NRC, of the WPA, and of sociocultural life in the United States of America in 1937 detailed early in this chapter. Far from the first time, but in an early occurrence in a public performance event viewed by both white and Black audience members, Browne’s play dissolved the racial caricatures instructed to Black young people in the late 1930s—creating a far different image for transgressive Blackness than

⁵¹⁴Michael Bennet, “Afrofuturism,” 92.

⁵¹⁵ See Appendix E, Image 2.

⁵¹⁶ Craig refers to Browne’s stylistic interventions in *Natural Man* as “Brechtian expressionism”—matching my insistence on the two forms connecting in Browne’s text. However, Craig doesn’t seem to argue that form and genre itself was bifurcated in *Natural Man*, as I do here—instead that the production was experimental in form, and that the moral or thematic center was bifurcated, or stratified in significance between white and Black audiences. E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era*, 71.

the stereotypes and imprecise monikers of “problem” (to harken Du Bois) otherwise permeating United States educational culture in the early 20th century.

An Alternative: Browne’s *Natural Man*

In *Natural Man* and the broader era surrounding the Federal Theatre Project’s tenure, the mythological spectre of John Henry’s Black body in performance is one that would likely have been misread—or read with bias—by some audience members. Even prior to Theodore Brown’s playtext or the 1937 premiere of the NRC’s production of *Natural Man*, the John Henry myth was being subscribed to drama by other Federal Theatre Project makers. In the autumn of 1936, the Los Angeles Negro Unit staged a production of Frank B. Wells’s setting for the myth in a play titled *John Henry*. During the production process, “there was considerable resistance to the white dramatist’s portrayal of the black hero both among members of the black troupe of the L.A. Unit and in other parts of the project.”⁵¹⁷ The Los Angeles production was originally scheduled for a remount in New Jersey, before being postponed due to “local objections to some of its scenes.”⁵¹⁸ Elsewhere in the Federal Theatre, Paul Green—confided in by Hallie Flanagan, documented at the start of this chapter—wrote numerous plays with Black characters and was the most frequently produced contemporary playwright of drama for the Negro Units inside of the Federal Theatre. Kate Dossett jests in recounting Paul Green’s own version of the John Henry myth, “in fact, the white folk tradition of what a black hero should be owed much to the white southerner.”⁵¹⁹ Storybook after storybook, production after production of the John Henry myth, a

⁵¹⁷ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 130.

⁵¹⁸ Hiram Motherwell, “Play Reports: *John Henry*,” 3, in National Office, General Corr., E829, Box 229, RG69, NA. Cited in Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 130.

⁵¹⁹ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 133.

white-authored John Henry stood in front of audiences speaking words written for reception by white audience members. What critical intervention was offered through production of Browne's text: of a Black-authored and produced John Henry? Did the Federal Theatre's *Natural Man* teach a different form of racial coexistence to Black and white audience members alike through the words and intentionality of Black self-representation carried by Browne's text?

Scholars of the Federal Theatre Project have celebrated the way that Browne's John Henry gave Black audiences and performers alike a protagonist for *Natural Man* written and conceived of by a Black man. The play's later New York City run, produced by the FTP's American Negro Theater, "recruited several players for Broadway productions" and was received favorably by Black, white, and multiracial audiences alike. Once again, white reviewers noted that "the Browne adaptation does not deviate from this legend," and reflect primarily on the man vs. machine morality, as the larger race activism and racial pedagogies went largely unnoticed, while being trafficked, consumed by, and learned from, by Black audiences.⁵²⁰ The dual-communication systems present in the play had clearly continued to make the work tenable for white spectatorship as a play about labor, and a man vs. machine narrative, yet communicative about racial oppression for Black audiences. By considering the persuasive optics of pedagogy, it is coherent that modality of performance also served Browne's task of penning an "authentic" John Henry figure. In the Black-melodramaic John Henry, children were seeing, perhaps for the first time, the clear cut image of John Henry as worth emulation for his freedom and agency, not might and peril (as would have been the case in a tragedy) or victimhood (as would have been the case white sentimentalist melodrama), but a new kind of Black personhood—a new kind of John Henry. Perhaps even more remarkable, is that by

⁵²⁰ Ernest Johnson, "John Henry Legend Is Told In New Drama: 'Natural Man' Well Received..." *Atlanta Daily World*. May 19th 1941.

educating young people of the global majority in this complex way, Browne was working to re-write who the “ideal student” of cultural texts was in the surrounding pedagogical era of the Federal Theatre and New Deal. In doing so, *Natural Man* operates to place education of Black young people as of primacy to the NRC’s—and therefore Federal Theatre’s—instructional mechanisms of performance. Browne’s John Henry is one who not only speaks against racial oppression, but who is able to convince white characters to join the fight with him. Browne (though Henry) challenges the hegemonic conceptions of white spectatorship. As John Henry dies in the concluding moments of Theodore Browne’s *Natural Man* he willingly chooses death over a life subservient to white society—charting a new form of American identity that would live in the echoes and deep cultural memory of Black Americans for years to come. Henry dies, selecting death over continuity with failed American myths of equality, over centuries of dreams deferred—choosing a life instead, as a Natural Man.

Conclusion

What If? The National Theatre That Was and The National Theatre That Wasn't

The United States of America has never had a formal national theatre.

The Federal Theatre Project is often historized as our nation's best proposal for building a unified national theatre—a theatre-making organization that represents the interests of the U.S. government, culture, and people. Following the stoppage of the Federal Theatre, 86 years has passed without a serviceable replication of an American theatre (in systematic organization, and as a centrally stewarded theatre culture) that could rival or revive the Federal Theatre Project's efforts. In only four years, the FTP was able to reach over 30 million audience members across the nation. If we imagine a world—a United States, a national theatre scene—where the Federal Theatre Project wasn't stopped, what image of theatre in the United States is revealed?

The Federal Theatre through Young Eyes

Within the first month of the WPA's creation, it was clear that imminent change was on the horizon for United States theatre. As the WPA formed in the spring of 1935—subsequent months heralding the swearing in of Hallie Flanagan as national director for the Federal Theatre, and launching the application of roughly 27 million dollars worth of funding allocated to the Federal One Programs—the earliest of sunrise colors painted an image of a new national paradigm for theatre making. Mirroring the pragmatic and philosophical missions of *Grieving The Federal Theatre's* core case studies, I return to youth reflections themselves to ask about the import of the Federal Theatre Project's programs and productions. On May 15th, 1935 the

student-led newspaper for St. Mary's College in Dayton, Ohio (later, University of Dayton), the *Exponent* included an arts opinion piece by a young student named M. J. Hillenbrand.

Hillenbrand asks in the contribution's title: "Has the Stage Revived?" "For years," writes Hillenbrand, "the stage had been going on the rocks, and though the rocks are still there the stage has decided to stop going."⁵²¹ Far from clairvoyant, Hillenbrand's writing on the state of Broadway, and the national commercial theatres, was misguided; the student predicted a steady continuation of trends that saw the early calendar season of 1935 as a peak in theatre-going for major theatre circuits in the country. Instead, the next 5 years would be tumultuous: rises and falls for Broadway attendance, a commercial theatre scene plagued by the interventions and interruptions of the Hollywood movie's entertainment dominance. However, one component of Hillenbrand's writing echoes in significance. While celebrating the return of lyric drama on the American stage Hillenbrand praises, "where once had been none, there was now one— or to be more exact two, for WPA players were pounding the boards in T.E. Eliot's [sic] *Murder in the Cathedral*..."⁵²² Sure enough, the biggest change in the American theatre climate to end the 1930s was the creation and dominance of free, inexpensive, social, and outreach-oriented theatre programs crafted by the FTP. It was the Federal Theatre that revived the American stage.

Similar pieces of student-led newsprint from archives of the Federal Theatre bring gentle smiles to remembrance of contemporary testaments of the Federal Theatre's success, and the might with which the project was working in short time to resuscitate enthusiasm for theatre across the nation. Benjamin Franklin High School in Los Angeles, a March 3rd 1938 article in the *Franklin Press* stamps, "Federal Plays Successful," continuing: "W.P.A. Opens Four Theatres

⁵²¹ M.J. Hillenbrand, "Has The Stage Revived?" *Exponent*, Univ of Dayton, Ohio, May 15th, 1935. Works Projects Administration, RG 69: Boxes 354. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

⁵²² Ibid, "Has The Stage Revived?"

in Various Sections of the City.”⁵²³ As the student author waxes (“All who like ‘drama’ are missing a chance to see well played stage shows when they do not attend the Federal Theatres”), a reminder becomes clear to a 21st century reader that the FTP was not yet a relic of Theatre History textbooks. That single-narratives of the “Voodoo” Macbeth standouts of the Federal Theatre’s reign didn’t yet overshadow the broader shifting of public consciousness for theatre making in the American 1930s. That, in the moment of its operation, the Federal Theatre was offering something far more covetous, and seismic in its application, than thousands of local theatre productions nationwide to U.S. audiences. The Federal Theatre was offering the nation—celebrated by the words of youth of the nation—a gentle and unfamiliar thing for finger-crossers desiring a culture of theatre going in the United States: hope.

As *Grieving the Federal Theatre* has demonstrated, some of the most meaningful palimpsests of impact for the FTP are the least memorialized. National newspapers and mouth-pieces for the theatre industry recognized the permutations of change commenced by the Federal Theatre’s adult productions (in acclaimed productions like *It Can’t Happen Here*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, and *One-Third of a Nation*). Large-scale and commercially-focused youth focused theatre programs, such as the massive Theatre for Young Audience productions showcased children theatre in major cities, or those toured in Caravan Theatres in towns across the county, demanded theatrical attention. However, while these theatres of bright spotlights shined, the Federal Theatre was instituting quieter—more intimate, personalized, and social issues oriented—theatres of change and revelation for youth around the country.

⁵²³ “Federal Plays Successful” *Franklin Press*, B. Franklin High School, Los Angeles Calif., March 3rd, 1938. Works Projects Administration, RG 69: Box 354. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

“Orphans Entertain College Girls” reads a headline for the *Campus Record* at the College of Mount St. Vincent in New York City on November 17th, 1937.⁵²⁴ Striking in its clarity and obvious theatrical dividends, the headline frames a performance event befitting rich complexities of these nuanced successes; these capillaries of life-giving that the Federal Theatre created under the radar of the more mainstream means of theatre making adventured by the project. The children of Holy Angel’s school—an Irish and Italian Catholic parish school in the Bronx—had worked to create a performance of *Alice in Wonderland*. The performance event itself was straightforward: a children’s production of the Lewis Carroll classic performing for the older young women of the college community (31 listed as in attendance); two Alices playing the Act I and Act II divisions of the play; “refreshments” and goodies to follow. But what about the finer details of this kind of community-making? That the girls getting to develop the play were all orphaned children in the Holy Angel’s congregation; that they were using theatre as an outlet for experimentation—telling the story of another little girl, very lost and very brave on her own in the world. That they were performing for admiration-ready college students, who awaited their performance with enthusiasm for a “most enjoyable afternoon;” that after the play, the coordinators gathered the young women at four top tables in the college’s dining room—pairing the girls from Holy Angel’s School with the Mount St. Vincent undergrads for conversation, mentorship, and shared interest in the performance modality undertaken. Unsurprising, the performance event itself was “directed through the courtesy of the W.P.A. Federal Theatres Community Drama.”⁵²⁵ Another remnant of youth performance; another memory of theatre as the grounds for community, learning, and reinvention framed by the Federal Theatre’s backing.

⁵²⁴ “Orphans Entertain College Girls” *College Record*, College of Mt. St. Vincent, New York City, November 17th, 1937. Works Projects Administration, RG 69: Box 354. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

Linden High School in New Jersey—a May 17th, 1938 in the student-published article in the Linden High Chronicle about Bernard Shaw and Eugene O’Neill plays (including *Ah, Wilderness!* a 1933 under-trafficked O’Neill play about traditional interpersonal learnings of the teenage years). Six graduating high school seniors in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, chosen as pseudo-apprentices for the pragmatic stages of a production under professional tutelage. A community college in New York City, where youth journalists review a play in Yiddish produced at Daly’s Theatre. The archive of the Federal Theatre screams. The sheer depth and robustness of the extant documentation from the Federal Theatre makes it easy to footnote these stories under the “bigger” histories of Orson Wells, and Arthur Miller, and (even) Hallie Flanagan. But line after line, article after article, youth voice after youth voice declares: the Federal Theatre Project helped to make theatre happen in the darkest of corners—in the least demanding, and most needing of social spaces, where the arts could change children’s lives.

Arthur Pollack, theatre critic for the Brooklyn Eagle, wrote in 1938 of the Federal Theatre’s impact during the immense successes the project experienced by the FTP prior to stoppage. When commenting on *Big Blow*, Pollack wrote that “The Federal Theatre... promises soon to be the most important theatre in the lives of the people of this country, if it isn’t that already.”⁵²⁶ But who were the “people” being imagined by Pollack? Who were the Americans who were benefitting most from the Federal Theatre? They were actually as wide and diverse as the country itself; different ages, different backgrounds, different desires. In many ways, the audiences of the Federal Theatre Project comprised the American public framed by the otherwise mythological promises of the American Dream. It was a theatre for the people, by the people.

⁵²⁶ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1940), 322. *Big Blow* was a production created by the Federal Theatre Project, which opened on October 1st, 1938 at Maxine Elliott’s Theatre in New York City. The play addressed a hurricane in Florida, and the impact it had on poor residents of Florida at the time.

The Department of Science, Art and Literature

In January of 1937—about halfway into the tenure of the Federal Theatre Project—Representative William I. Sirovich of New York proposed the creation of a permanent fixture in the U.S. government dedicated to the arts. Sirovich offered a joint resolution to the House of Representatives that would have provided for “the ‘establishment of an executive department to be known as the Department of Science, Art and Literature,’ to be headed by an office of Cabinet rank.”⁵²⁷ For the first time in United States history, this department would have been responsible for not only stewardship of the arts, but maintenance and mediation of U.S. arts (and broader) culture. Similar government bodies, and positions such as a Cabinet member for the arts, are not uncommon in Europe but these efforts, largely inspired by the success of the Federal Theatre Project, charted new roads into the future for an American government-to-culture relationship.⁵²⁸ While not initially received successfully, by August 16th 1937, a more robust proposal was generated by Representative John M. Coffee of Washington State for a “Bureau of Fine Arts” which gained more traction than the original Department of Science, Arts & Literature initiative. Backed by Senator Claude Pepper of Florida, the two liberal New Dealers collaborated on what colloquially became known as the “Coffee-Pepper Bill” to forge the Bureau of Fine Arts as an extension of the social welfare and cultural funding programs that the Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre Project, and New Deal philosophies had launched with enticing success in the late 1930s.

Neither of the two proposals would ever reach a vote on the Congress floor.

⁵²⁷ Ibid, 325. Sirovich was a proverbial ace-in-the-hole for Flanagan, and other supporters of crafting a special department in the U.S. government for the arts. A six-term Senator by his death in 1939, Sirovich was also a notable playwright—with several of his plays appearing on Broadway.

⁵²⁸ In France and Italy, the “Ministère de la Culture” and “Ministero della Cultura” (Ministry of Culture), respectively; In Germany the “Kulturstaatsminister” or Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media

Poorly received grandeur in presentation (and more practical concerns of the indefinite nature) doomed Sirovich's proposal; pragmatic hurdles behind the Coffee-Pepper bill (such as frozen pay rates for artists) sunk the creation of the Bureau of the Arts. However, these conversations alone gave Hallie Flanagan and other supporters of a more institutionalized means of governmental support for a national arts program hope for what could be—for what could become.

The Many “Almosts” for an American National Theatre

But what did become of the seed thought of an American National Theatre? How did the imaginations fostered during the Federal Theatre Project era evolve into what we see in the 21st century as the United States' culture of theatre making and going? Hallie Flanagan and her contemporaries dreamed of a federally funded beacon for artistic creation through the Federal Theatre, as well as through plans that would have made the FTP a component of a lasting department in the federal government. Following the closure of the Federal Theatre in 1939, the footnotes of history are instead filled with promising “almosts”—five generations of “what ifs” bombarding the non-existent basilisk on top of the non-existent National Theatre building, community, and culture that the country has been without.

The earliest attempt at a similar force of theatre making was actually concurrent with the Federal Theatre (at least insofar as creation). The American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) was founded in July of 1935 when President Roosevelt signed Public Law 74-199, granting a federal charter to the organization. While ANTA lacked the federal funding that the Federal Theatre had, it evaded stoppage and after a decade without any serious activities was able to hold some significance in the 1950s. Privately funded (unlike the FTP), ANTA focused on performing tours of U.S. productions abroad for the sake of diplomacy. A far cry from the

national theatre whose bricks were being laid by the work of the FTP, ANTA never reached national prominence, or impacted what we may think of a broad domestic national theatre culture.

The National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) was founded in 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act. The NEA is perhaps the best model the United States can point to for blooming a (widespread) national theatre, or government-sponsored arts organization. Unlike the centrally administered goals of the Federal Theatre, the NEA's goal was and is predicated on a grant matching model—offering federal grant money to organizations that then match grant dollars through private allocations in their regional networks. While, again, not the same as the Federal Theatre Project's singular entity, the launch of the NEA in the 1960s set the stage for the Regional Theatre Movement. At Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and beyond, theatres in the mid-century were able to grow—blossoming through the support of federal grant money. While the Regional Theatre Movement dislocated a true “national theatre” akin to the Royal National Theatre in England, or others throughout Europe, it did allow the NEA and federal funding to predicate growth of the American theatre culture from coast to coast. Riddled with stories of censorship, ridicule, and the complexities that are housed in a model that links theatre making to the federal government—not unlike the Federal Theatre—controversies like that of the famed NEA Four encolour a history of the difficulties that emerge from bureaucracy of linkage to the U.S. government.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁹ The NEA Four (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck) were a series of performance artists who were chastised by the NEA after successfully being awarded grants by the organization in the early 1990s. A well-discussed history of governmental sponsorship of individual artists, each had their grant money revoked due to the various sexual (and homosexual), political, carnivalesque, body-humor based, and dissident performances enacted by the artists. After winning a successful legal appeal of the NEA's choice to revoke funding, the case made it to the Supreme Court in *National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley*, 524 U.S. 569 (1998).

The significance and tenure of the NEA is matched only by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Created when President Eisenhower signed the National Culture Center Act into law on September 2nd, 1958 (Public Law 85-874), the world-class center for drama, music, and art stewardship on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. was renamed after John F. Kennedy following his assassination, and named a “living memorial” for Kennedy by Congress. In Public Law No. 88-260, Congress detailed that “a suitable monument” needed to be created for the country’s leader, in alignment with the understanding that John F. Kennedy had “dedicated his life to the advancement of the welfare of mankind; and Whereas the late John Fitzgerald Kennedy was particularly devoted to the advancement of the performing arts.”⁵³⁰ Despite the grandeur of the center, the Kennedy Center operates more as a vehicle for uplift for separate touring and celebrated regional productions—rather than crafting original works, or intervening an original voice in arts manufacturing. That said, the prominence of the Kennedy Center, and its position in the history of “almosts” for American national theatres, is bolstered by its dual public-private model, and frequent connection to the federal government. The Kennedy Center has, in essence, become the country’s touchstone for a national performing arts culture (and host of the nation’s performance exemplars) through its location in D.C., paramount quality of performance, and relationship to the U.S. government.

But what have we missed out on, with none of these organizations or entities becoming a true American national theatre? How has the groundwork (literal anatomies of organization, as well as a prevailing belief in theatre’s meaningfulness) of the Federal Theatre Project gone without expansion in the nearly 90 years since the stoppage of the FTP? The historicization contained in *Grieving the Federal Theatre* cannot answer these questions. It can’t because the United States has never seen such rapid building of a national theatre culture as we did between

⁵³⁰ John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Pub. L. No. 88-260, 78 Stat. 4 (1964).

1935-1939 due to the efforts of the Federal Theatre Project. The architectures of government-sponsorship for theatre have never been lifted with such strength as they were under the direction of Hallie Flanagan. The nation-wide system of plays, productions, and community serving programs that supported those in need (“children... the ill, and aged and the underprivileged”)—and their investment in theatre as an art form—hasn’t been replicated perhaps because it can’t be replicated without adopting many of the tenets of the FTP, the same tenets that made the project feared by political and social conservatives in congress.⁵³¹ This project can’t answer the question of what would have happened if the Federal Theatre Project had never been stopped; but perhaps histories of the Federal Theatre need to stop trying to. Perhaps instead, we should continue to memorialize the project for exactly what it was. For the droves of archival memories that uncover yet another and another and another performance event where the FTP was able to serve the citizenry of the United States with dignity and care. Perhaps our field must usher in a time to grieve the loss of the Federal Theatre—so that we can start to imagine futures even bigger and more impactful than the immense culture of theatrical performance built in the American 1930s by the Federal Theatre Project.

Flash Forward: Trump and U.S. National Arts Culture

There are real stakes to the cultural grip of Fascism.

As we fast forward back to the present. In the autumn of 2024, the United States entered the second term, and second presidential administration, of Donald J. Trump. Following the four year pause to Trump’s dominant (and dangerous) rule over American politics and culture—figuratively furloughed by a dampened single-term tenure in office by President Joseph

⁵³¹ Hallie Flanagan, *New York Times* Op-Ed, August 20th, 1939. Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series I: General Files, Sub-series 1: Correspondence (Box 6), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

Biden—Trump’s unabashed assault of American political norms brandished, rather than weakening, his return to office. Despite a May 30th, 2024 conviction of falsifying business records (guilty on all 34 charges), and public mire caused by Trump’s infidelity and a high-profile sexual assault case, Trump was able to secure 77,304,184 votes of support from the United States to win back the presidency. At what cost?

On December 19th, 2025, Trump placed a more visible crack (or, in this case, alteration) in the fabric of American history and culture by adding his own name to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Shrouded by blue tarps, workers labored out of view of the public to alter the marquee titling of the center. AP News reported that “The board of trustees, handpicked by Trump, voted unanimously... to add his name to what was enshrined as a living memorial to the Democratic president.”⁵³² The latest in a series of various strong-armed gestures at control over national culture control, the renaming followed a February 2025 move to remove 18 members of the Kennedy Center Board of Trustees, and to subsume full control over organization (naming himself Board president). Over the course of the process of Trump’s takeover—and most loudly after his renaming of the center—artist and organizational boycotts served to voice dissent against his actions, as performers dropped out of previous commitments with the Kennedy Center. The Washington National Opera ended their 50 year residency with the Kennedy Center; the American College Theatre Festival (formerly the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, KCACTF) suspended their partnership calling it “no longer viable;”⁵³³ the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Martha Graham Dance Company both

⁵³² Darlene Superville, “The Kennedy Center has added Trump’s name to the memorial Congress created for John F. Kennedy,” *AP News*, December 19, 2025.

⁵³³ Meg Masseron and Diep Tran, “American College Theatre Festival Suspends Affiliation With Kennedy Center; Festival Will Continue On Its Own,” *Playbill*, December 22, 2025. A statement released by the organization tap danced around a direct citation of Trump as the causal agent in the severed ties: “Due to circumstances and decisions that do not align with our organization’s values, the National Committee, which includes regional leadership... has voted to suspend our affiliation with the Kennedy Center.”

cancelled their performance; solo artists as wide ranging as Renée Flemming and Philip Glass stepped back from their dedicated events. Artist backlash rivaled internal turmoil, as members of the organization like Jean Davidson (former executive director and CEO of the National Symphony Orchestra) stepped down from their appointments. “The arts are where a community sees itself, and where it imagines what’s possible next,” Davidson demurred in a statement upon leaving the Kennedy Center to become head of the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.⁵³⁴ Davidson’s works poetically spoke to the sentiments of artists and audiences around the nation, dubious and afraid of what may come next in the Trump regime’s command of culture.

What does Trump’s takeover of the Kennedy Center have to do with the Federal Theatre Project? First and foremost, much like the stoppage of the Federal Theatre by Congress, the decisiveness in making alterations to arts organizations linked to the federal government demonstrates that the U.S. government is very much in the business of cultural mediation, and that the arts are often where they focus on the development of national consciousness. These events—and the many like them throughout the history of the United States—further enliven clear proof that (despite hegemonic opposition) the arts are, indeed, powerful entities of change, forebearers of citizen-making, and a key force in the culture industry of a nation-state. However, the implications of Trump’s attempt to control the nation’s core arts body illuminates aspects of the original stoppage of the Federal Theatre Project that may, in other histories focused entirely on the stoppage itself, or contemporary reflection on FTP termination by Congress, go under the radar in recognition of the Federal Theatre’s importance for the United States as a whole.

⁵³⁴ Hillel Italie, “Kennedy Center exodus continues as National Symphony director Jean Davidson heads to the Wallis,” *AP News*, March 9, 2025.

The Federal Theatre and Fascism

International Reputation of the Federal Theatre

The Federal Theatre Project is often narrativized through the cookie-cutter definition of an arts organization that crafted a palatable form of American socialist thought to disseminate to the national masses. However, what if we alter the rhetoric of that sentiment, asking if the Federal Theatre was (instead of “pro socialist”) actually an “anti-Fascist” organization—in thematic and political commentary, as well as in the shape and scope of the administration of the project’s organization. As my project seeks to rectify the place of children in the narrative of the Federal Theatre, perhaps too we can see *Grieving the Federal Theatre* as a referendum on simplistic narrativizing of the FTP. Faced with the rise of global fascism, and threats on democracy across the globe in the late 1930s, in my proposed optics the Federal Theatre was arguing for a return to a mythologized American national identity—one that demanded egalitarian, community focused efforts to thrive. This logic was backed by Lady Anne Fremantle, the famed English-American author who held a great deal of cultural clout in the era. “The Federal Theatre is a complete answer to both fascism and communism” wrote Fremantle in reflection on productions she had seen in the United States, and reflecting commentary of close acquaintances on the project; “only a free people could do this” she elaborated, “and it is achievement worthy of their freedom.”⁵³⁵ For Fremantle and others, the FTP didn’t signal the demand for Popular Front ideals on stage, or of a purely political ideology, but rather formed a voice for the American consciousness—backed by freedom itself.

The holistic intention behind this argument of the Federal Theatre as anti-fascist voice (rather than “pro-socialist propaganda”) joined with the project’s broader global recognition. Across the globe, by 1939 the Federal Theatre Project had gained acclaim—and even desires for

⁵³⁵ Qtd. in Fanagan, *Arena*, 324.

international replication—from Mexico to China; Czechoslovakia (contemporarily, Czechia or the Czech Republic) to France. England, Brazil, Hungary, Sweden, Denmark; the list of countries and artistic affiliates around the globe with positive remarks on the new Federal Theatre in the United States goes on and on. To continue to reduce the narrative of the Federal Theatre not only the stoppage of the program, but to solely the vantage of American audiences, newsprint, and government dissent is to ignore the immense acclaim for the project around the world.

Attending the International Congress of Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, Helen Tamiris encountered a series of fascinating corroborations of the Federal Theatre's international reputation. Tamiris was sent by Hallie Flanagan as a representative for the United States, and to discuss the work of the Federal Theatre. As a forefront choreographer of the era, and a frequent collaborator with the FTP, Tamaris was well-suited to discuss the import of the project with other practitioners at the global theatre event. "Most active part in the conference" reflects Flanagan in *Arena* "was taken by the representatives of the totalitarian countries, Germany and Italy. Their descriptions of state theatre in those countries were glowing; but privately they came to Tamiris after her report and expressed amazement that the Federal Theatre, subsidized by the government, was allowed to choose plays without dictation."⁵³⁶ When imagining the Federal Theatre as the United States' closest surrogate to a national theatre, it is not infrequent to hear the reminders that a) the Federal Theatre wasn't a formal national theatre, and b) the United States should have been able to (by now) copy the models of Germany, France, Italy, and England in regards to forming a traditional national theatre. However, there is room for a separate narrative that remembers the jurisdictions of control that mediated curation, selection, and identity framed through national theatre efforts. Especially during wartime, or during the process of fascist

⁵³⁶ Ibid, 323-324.

takeover—how did nations like Germany respond through and to the offerings of a national theatre? In the Federal Theatre’s liminal position in relation to the government, it was allowed to be both subsidized by the government and—for a few short years—also acting somewhat independently on an artistic basis; driven by the prerogatives of career theatre makers like Flanagan, rather than lawmakers and heads of state.

Intranational Reputation of the Federal Theatre

Praise for the Federal Theatre Project wasn’t limited to international acclaim, but was further marked by voices from home that championed the successes of the project. In each chapter of *Grieving the Federal Theatre*, these era-based reflections on the project have been offered. Often, these earlier notes speak directly to the youth and child-serving nature of the Federal Theatre. However, testification for the Federal Theatre as an anti-fascist force was part and parcel of domestic rhetoric describing the project. John W. Dunn, State Director of the Oklahoma division of the Federal Theatre, was one of many to refer to the FTP as “the people’s theatre,” commending the ability for the project to transgress geographical and ideological boundaries to impact communities around the country equally. Dunn’s core intentions as a regional director for the FTP was to serve in the development of regionally specific dramas; taking the heart of Oklahoma concerns and putting them on Oklahoma stages. Which is exactly what the Federal Theatre was about to do—in Oklahoma and New York; Oregon and South Carolina. For adults and children alike.

A February 12th, 1936 piece of newsprint from upstate New York continues reflection on the FTP that problematized the simple narrative of Federal Theatre as purely socialist. The archival newsprint announces “Unbiased Current Event Plays” being produced by the Federal Theatre. The article itself is a ratification of internal Federal Theatre support, claiming that Elmer

Rice had to defend the right to use WPA funds for “unbiased” plays in the face of complication and challenge from outside (and governmental sources). What made members of the American public, and congress, so quick to challenge the Federal Theatre as a biased entity? Numerous histories of the Federal Theatre—by Shapiro, Osborne, Heard, and others—more directly address this question. However, of worth to this project is the nature of children and childhood. Where fascism surfaces, the future of the nation’s children come into to spotlight the stakes of an issue. However, rather than thinking of the youth programs by the FTP as purely Popular Front, is there a chance that counter fascism, or even “Americanness” was being taught through productions of the Federal Theatre Project?

The People’s Children’s Theatre

Dunn, Flanagan, and many others framed (and, in fact monikered) the Federal Theatre Project as “The People’s Theatre.” Does a project like *Grieving the Federal Theatre* succeed in amending our collective historical memory to think of the FTP as not “a” but “the” Children’s Theatre as well? Such lofty aims lack generativeness when tracking both the footprint of a dissertation alone on the broader field, as well the limited opportunity to dismantle narratives—in our scholarly division, and in the American public sphere—as strong as those surrounding the Federal Theatre. As it stands, the Federal Theatre Project was *not* a purely children-serving institution; its core purpose was as a work relief program for adults. Some of the most storied and impactful people, productions, and (yes) politics of the FTP were of adults focused on the creation of theatrical art to be consumed by adults. However, in being a theatre of, for, and by the American people—it was also of, for, and by American children; somehow, that centrality continues to be either lost or undervalued in the story of the Federal Theatre.

Throughout its short tenure, the Federal Theatre Project did more than produce works of theatre and put people back to work: the FTP helped to reimagine the American consciousness. It would be a shallow truism to say that some of that sculpting happened through the dissemination and bolstering of Popular Front values and socialist ideals—as is forwarded by some public histories of the Federal Theatre. Despite my, and other scholars of the FTP, efforts to expand the story of the Federal Theatre and its stoppage beyond a static socialism vs. fascism critique, it is true that the values of progressive artists were, naturally, part of the artworks that they created. However, due to the scope, size, and cultural importance of Federal Theatre's work, the American social public was changing their entire relationship to theatre and to the arts. For so many first-time playgoers to have seen their first play because of the Federal Theatre; for schools to be passing on theatre to their students; for summer nights to be populated by masses circled around caravan theatre wagons, from metropolitan centers to rural areas—these are testaments to the Federal Theatre's ability to change how we as Americans looked at not just the business of theatre, or the institution of theatre, but the *art* of theatre and performance.

This new relationship to theatre started with children. The same children who may not have seen theatrical productions for several more years of their lives (or at all) if it wasn't for the Federal Theatre Project. An intention of note for *Grieving the Federal Theatre* is tracing the afterlives of these case studies; attempting in ways successful and rather complex to chart the size of the Federal Theatre's impact by tracing the shape of its absence in American communities following its closure by Congress in 1939. However, a slightly more hyperbolic—but equally as compelling—way to discuss these studies is to return to the original question opening this conclusion: if we imagine a world where the Federal Theatre Project wasn't stopped, what landscape of theatre in the United States emerges?

The Late 20th and 21st Century With a Federal Theatre Project

Following the stoppage of the Federal Theatre, an even more seismic change occurred for the construction of the United States' relationship to theatre, leisure, and performance: World War II. Much of the reshaping of the American theatre happened in the wake of the war; and as well as in the centrality of the regional theatre movement and Tyron Guthrie's effort to create an American theatre culture that served its vastly *different* Americas (geographically, politically, and socially around the United States). Even with the obvious intrusions of WWII, the regional theatre movement, and (in the late 20th century) massive alterations to the financial models supporting theatre due to emergence of technological media(s), social media, and a shift in the generational center of popular culture, afterlives can be imagined for the continued existence of the Federal Theatre as readily as those framing its absence.

In public schools, the shift that allowed theatre to burgeon into schooling in the early 20th century changed dramatically in the mid and late century. Theatre and Dance as disciplines began to be recognized as content areas worth full contract employees; many of the high schools around the country, in particular, have shifted from an afterschool club model for arts programs, to fully operational (and, often, hundred thousand dollar enterprise) theatre production companies in schools. Art-based magnet high schools and other high caliber arts training programs have merged with more traditional scholastic program models. These developments—alongside similar shifts in athletics programs, science and technology programs, and others—have made the United States high school one where capital and business models for running programs both support and obscure the pedagogical missions of high school arts programs. If the Federal Theatre had continued, perhaps these modes become at once more grounded in pedagogy and community, and more interconnected nationally. A model like the

aforementioned American College Theatre Festival can be imagined, linking high schools nationally for competitions, training events, and large theatre symposiums. As we now see in the International Thespian Society (ITS), a large-scale operation of connecting high school students to the gift of theatre, and the gift of each other may have been crafted by the Federal Theatre. Most importantly, in this model and the many others that may have been the emerged reality, federal funding would have underscored the projects. What has taken hold though student financial contributions and school based parent organizations in ITS could be federally funded; don't children deserve these events and organizations like these as a service of their learning?

Drama therapy, meanwhile, has blossomed in the United States as a field and area of academic study. Following the timelines of the Bellevue Hospital puppet theatre study, more and more therapeutic theatres began to emerge nationwide. Some operated in response to the trauma of WWII, Vietnam, and other wars and global conflicts, that returned American citizens who had experienced acute trauma. As mentioned in Chapter II, many of the framing logics used to explain what the Federal Theatre was accomplishing at Bellevue are drawn from later decades of the 20th century: Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Fox & Salas' Playback Theatre, Drama Therapy (from its European iterations, to the American descendents of thought). These theatres and others were allowed to take shape in the mid and late century—but what would have federal funding, and federal architecture of support done to support their application growth? Through colleges and universities, training and spectatorship of these forms has been able to grow; so, too, have the number of communities (and outreach populations) touched by each form. However, if the Federal Theatre had continued, the same speed of transmission that had allowed a play to open in New York, and then have the same playtext—or even production—performed in Gary, Indiana, and Los Angeles, California, and Seattle, Washington within a few short

months would allow the therapeutic benefits of each modality to grow faster. With federal oversight, the government could factor these forms into larger research grants and studies seeking to address wellness through any means necessary. The 21st century advent and insistence on “positive psychology” as a cultural perspective and theory for wellness—positing that all humans need wellness measures, therapy, and to discuss their relationship with the world around them, not just those experiencing pain or crisis—could employ theatre more readily. Arts-based therapies in schools, hospitals, and clinics could be seen as central, rather than ancillary to the support of public good. How we think of wellness itself may be different in the United States of America.

Queerness in the 21st century is a radically different entity than it was in the American 1930s. This is in no small part thanks to the American Musical as a genre, the centrality of queerness to major new works and modalities (such as The TECTONIC Theatre Project’s *The Laramie Project*), and groundbreaking plays that helped the United States fundamentally understand lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and allied community identities (like Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*). In many ways, theatre of the American 1970s through 2010s has helped to write the culture script for how to vision, discuss, and celebrate queer and trans identities on a large national scale. Without wrestling with the proverbial chicken-and-the-egg question that myself and many queer theatre friends and colleagues ask (“is the community and artistic process surrounding theatre as an artform welcoming, and therefore it attracts queer folks... or are the artform and its makers inherently queer, and therefore they create communities that are welcoming and inclusive”), one can more prudently ask how the interconnected relationship between queerness and performance could have developed under the wing of the Federal Theatre. Some (if not many) of the makers of the Federals were some of the

earliest out theatre artists, including composers Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson. Some (if not many) of the productions of the FTP had queer thematics. However, following World War II, the county experienced a sharp step away from socially open address of queerness (even if masked or satirical) amidst the Lavender Scare, and in congruence with the various sociopolitical policies that grew out of the Scare. While a future of queerness in the mid and late 20th centuries that was supported by the federal government *with or without* the Federal Theatre is hard to imagine, Chapter III on the Civilian Conservation Corps shows that amidst the Lavender Scare, theatre could have opened more secretive and subversive tributaries for the release of queer tensions (sexual and performatic). As it did for young men in the 1930s, the Federal Theatre would likely have inadvertently allowed the safety of theatre spaces to extend to spaces where theatre was permitted but queerness was not. How many lives would have been freer as a result?

For Black Theatre in the United States, the mid and late 20th centuries was a time of growing optical clarity and self-representation. With landmark productions from *In Dahomey* (1903), *Shuffle Along* (1921), and even the Federal Theatre Project's Chicago Negro Unit production of *The Swing Mikado* (1938), the early 20th century saw a change in representation for Black identity on the American (specifically musical) stage. However, the mid century brought with it demands for a more personal Black drama—one that told the stories of oppression, segregation, and racism in American culture. While tellings of the Black experienced boomed with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and August Wilson's *Century Cycle*, some of the most powerful demands for a Black theatre consciousness came in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and radical protest theatres that not only accompanied, but were central vocalities of the Civil Rights Movements. After the Federal Theatre had already succeeded in some aspects of forwarding Black theatre makers making an American Black theatre, what

would have happened in its continuation? Perhaps we can think through Hansberry's famed confrontation with then Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in May 1962—where the playwright demanded a more decisive moral commitment to Black safety and support by the federal government, following nationwide violence (specifically flashpoints in Birmingham). Hansberry is said to have stormed out of the meeting unsatisfied; what if she had been speaking on behalf of a play addressing racial injustice that was being funded by the federal government? What if any of the BAM artists, like Amiri Baraka, were able to produce through the FTP? Perhaps the question of the government's allegiance to Black citizens of the United States would have been illuminated further, faster, or (at the very least) in more multiplicitous avenues. While predicting a figurative government reaction to social politics is difficult, theatre has always been and will always be a driving force of the people's voice. What if that voice had been bankrolled by the government itself?

The Pathology of Our People

Example after example, community after community, the what ifs create a mirage of the Federal Theatre that wasn't in ways that can be imagined as larger than life. They are, however, craftings of the imagination alone. What we are left with is a Federal Theatre Project that was stopped in 1939. American social and political communities of this dissertation (from queer folks to those navigating mental health challenges, children to Black Americans) that located their own social, clinical, pedagogical, and communal resilience outside of theatre created on the shoulders of the federal government. If *Grieving the Federal Theatre* asks anything, it is not that we revisit these case studies and the communities encased in their moment of the late 1930s—but rather that we continue to reimagine the triangulated relationship between these individuals and communities with the federal government, and with theatre and performance.

You can see the pathology of a people in how they treat their children.

The pathology of the United States of America is accordingly in crisis. In the year 2020, firearms became the number one cause of death of American children; in schools around the country, mass shootings and gun violence make American childhood a blurry visage of the utopian levity that we mythologically narrativize the early life as meant to be. Led by the emerging fentanyl epidemic—now the *second* leading cause of death for children—drug abuse has led to radical, and formerly uncharted, harm to children across the United States. The perils of improper attachment to social media, and other crutches of mass technological development, have contributed to suicide rates amongst children 1,000% increased from 1939, when the Federal Theatre was stopped. Housing crises, climate destruction, technological oligarchy... the catalogue cascades, crafting a future for children in the United States scarier and more unstable than perhaps we've ever seen before.

The Federal Theatre Project isn't a magical anecdote that—if reimagined and remounted—would solve all of the 21st century's problems. However, this project looks backward to ask how we handle moments of unprecedented difficulty: of how children are uplifted in moments of cultural despair. If the Federal Theatre taught us anything, it was that children were at the heart of the actions, intentions, beliefs, and initiatives that adults felt most passionate about. That, even if underdiscussed in the history of the Federal Theatre, countless theatre programs were being created and implemented that helped to change children's lives. Varying degrees of success, varied afterlives; but in each of the many real stories behind the studies of this dissertation was a light. A glimmer of hope. A reason to wake up tomorrow, albeit sometimes for an urging as simple as to go see a play with your family. The Federal Theatre Project reminds us that change is possible, and that the current stasis of global conflict, of

divisive American cultural politics, and the dangers to youth in the United States (and around the world) is not a certainty, but a choice. The project reminds us that sometimes a play alone can start a ripple that generates such great things; that, even when nothing else, theatre helps us to remember. And our children cannot be forgotten.

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Johnson, Evamarii Alexandria. "A Production History of the Seattle Federal Theatre Project Negro Repertory Company: 1935-1939." University of Washington. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1981.

Appendix A

Introduction



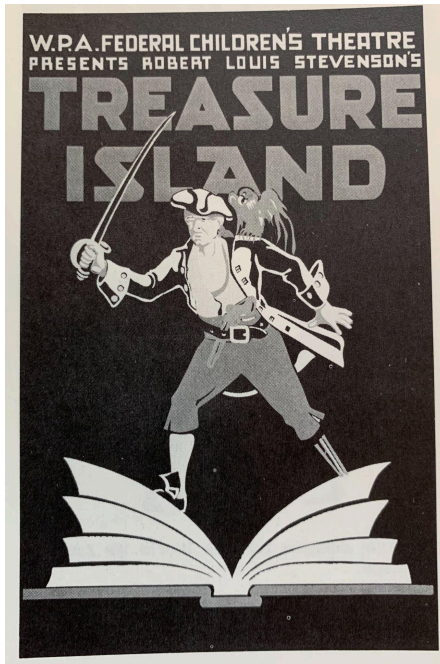
A production of the musical revue "Melodies on Parade" for the FTP's Caravan Theater in Crotona Park in the Bronx (1936).

Photo from the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.



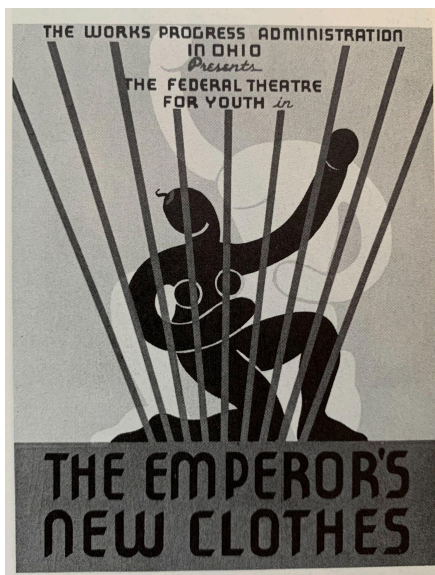
Production poster for *Alice in Wonderland* produced by the Federal Theatre site in Oregon.

Photo from the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.



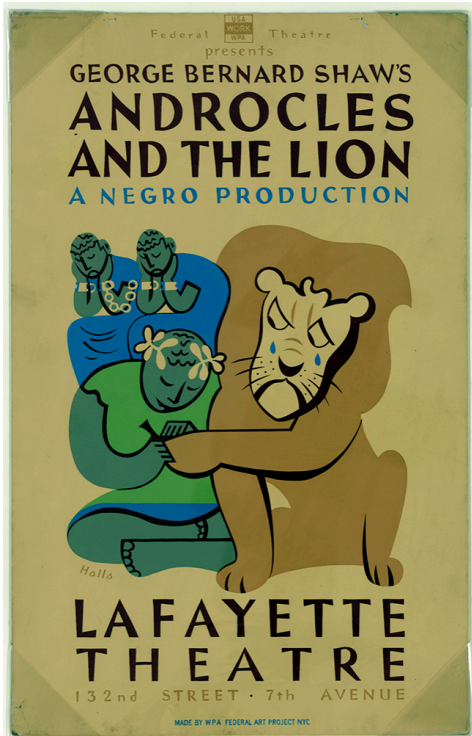
Production poster for *Treasure Island*
produced by the Federal Theatre site.

John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978), 22.



Production poster for *The Emperor's New Clothes* produced by the Federal Theatre site.

John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978), 23.



Production poster for *Androcles and the Lion* produced by the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre site in New York City.

Photo from the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

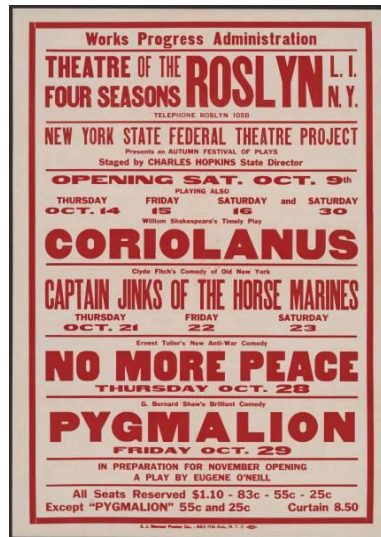
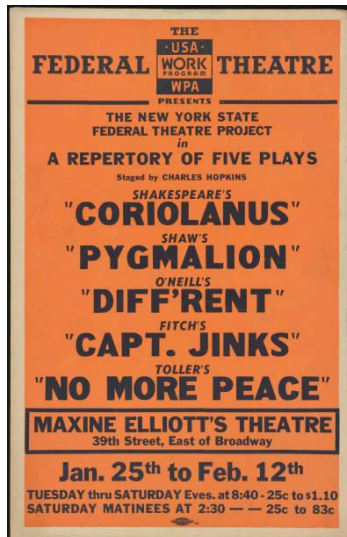


Design rendering for *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a New York City Federal Theatre Project Production.

Photo from the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

Appendix B

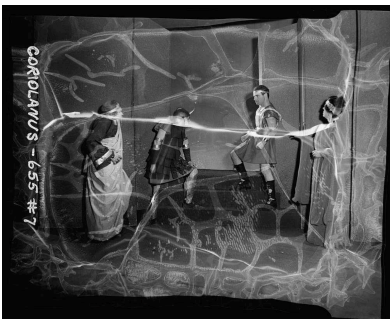
Chapter I (Classical Unit)



Posters promoting *Coriolanus* and other Classical Unit plays in New York City

Federal Theatre Project, clippings. Federal Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C. 28,444), New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).





Images of student audience members at a production of *Coriolanus* in New York.

Production Records, Photographic Negative File.
Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project
Collection. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

NIC HIGH SCHOOL, AN INTERSCHOOL UNIT OF THE NIC FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

20 MACBETH)
 6 AS YOU LIKE IT)
 8 TWELFTH NIGHT) - - - - - Shakespeare
 1 HENRY VIII)
 6 HENRY IV)
 (Parts one and two. Falstaff
 scenes only.)

/ BARTHOLOMEW FAIR- - - - - Jonson

7 THE RIVALS- - - - - Sheridan

13 SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER- - - - - Goldsmith

7 DR. FAUSTUS- - - - - Marlowe

1 MARY STUART- - - - - Schiller

TARTUFFE)
 1 THE WOULD BE GENTLEMAN- - - - - Moliere

9 AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE)
 THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH) - - - - - Ibsen

~ A dramatization of the making of the U.S. Constitution, presented in
 Living Newspaper technique. - - - - - To be written

If modern plays are to be included, a selection of one of
 the following, subject to negotiations with the authors:

5 JUSTICE)
 7 STRIFE) - - - - - Galsworthy

7 YELLOW JACK- - - - - Howard

/ THE DOVER ROAD)
 THE ROMANTIC AGE) - - - - - Milne
 1 MR. PIM PASSES BY)

THE GREAT ADVENTURE- - - - - Bennett

Internal documentation of selection
 processes and voting for which classical
 plays would be chosen for production by
 The Classical Unit

Promotional Department Materials. Federal
 Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C.
 28,444), New York Public Library Billy
 Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

The schools are now making up their entertainment schedules for next year, and
 to achieve anything more than sporadic spot booking next fall, it is
 that we approach them before the end of the current term. Letters or brochures
 not immediately giving details of the program, and inviting them to reserve dates.
 obligation on either side, contracts to be signed in the fall. Thus, while we
 get an early choice of dates, we could arrange them in order to reduce the number of
 At the same time, we would have a practical basis for planning rehearsal-production
 schedules.

The schools close on June 24th, and since the final two weeks are devoted to
 examinations, it is evident that we have only a limited time in which to get the booking
 under way. Further work is, of course, in abeyance pending your approval of the plays
 specified by the First Assistants Association. It is our hope that it will be possible
 for you to consider the Program at an early date, and let us know if we may proceed with
 bookings. The plays which require a 1A are the following:

Shakespeare:	MACBETH	20 votes
Howard:	YELLOW JACK	17 votes
Goldsmith:	SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER	13 votes
Ibsen:	AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE	9 votes

Though numerically the voting for YELLOW JACK is comparatively small, the fact
 that it is the second choice indicates that it was popular with those present, and would
 presumably be equally popular generally. Despite the fact that a royalty would be
 involved, it might be advisable to yield to the wish of the English Chairman, if negotia-
 tions with Mr. Howard proved favorable. It is a play which is admirably suited to young
 audiences, and the picture version, which is somewhat dissimilar to the play would
 stimulate their interest, rather than reduce it. And finally, it is the only choice
 which treats of a modern theme, in everyday vernacular. By presenting it between two
 "classics" it might train the audience to listen more attentively to the more complicated
 scenes of the other plays, and thus generally assist the program as a whole. However,
 if arrangements for its production cannot be effected, may we be permitted to substitute
 TWELFTH NIGHT, which received eight votes at the meeting.

By:
 Alfreda Sill
 Promotion Department.

May 31st, 1939.

Continued documentation of selection
 processes and voting for which classical
 plays would be chosen for production by
 The Classical Unit

Promotional Department Materials. Federal
 Theatre Project, 1938-83 (MWEZ + N.C.
 28,444), New York Public Library Billy
 Rose Theatre Division (New York, NY).

Appendix C

Chapter II (Bellevue Hospital)

Figure 1



Children's puppet theatre production. Labeled "Marionette Show #3, 71-Armory"

Photograph(s), Federal Theatre Project, 1935 to 1939. Production Records, 1934 to 1943: Photographic Prints File, 1934 to 1939 (1 of 2,641). Library of Congress, digital archive. <https://www.loc.gov/search/?fa=partof:federal+theatre+project,+1935+to+1939:+production+records,+1934-1943:+photographic+prints+file,+1934-1939>



Figure 2

Actors from the Caroline Playmakers display their hand puppet and marionette dolls in a Federal Theatre performance in a North Carolina.

Photograph, The Caroline Playmakers. C0002, Box #1, Federal Theatre Project Collection. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

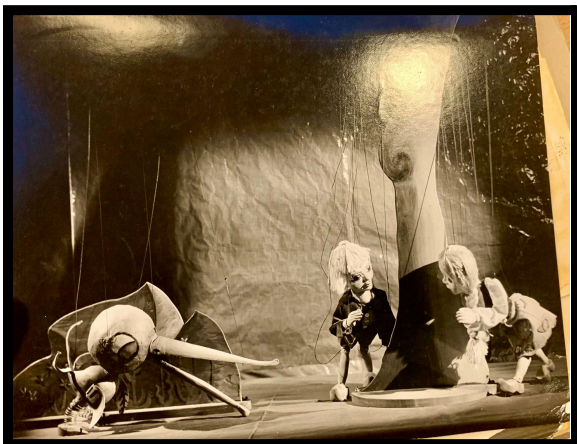


Figure 3

Marionette dolls crafted by the Federal Theatre in photos for us in children theatre settings.

Photograph, Marionette production. Federal Theatre Project. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

Figure 6

Hospital patients who are audience members at a Federal Theatre Project performance in 1930s hospitals

Production Records, Photographic Negatives File. Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project Collection. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Figure 7

Hospital patients who are audience members at a Federal Theatre Project performance in 1930s hospitals

Production Records, Photographic Negatives File. Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project Collection. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Figure 8

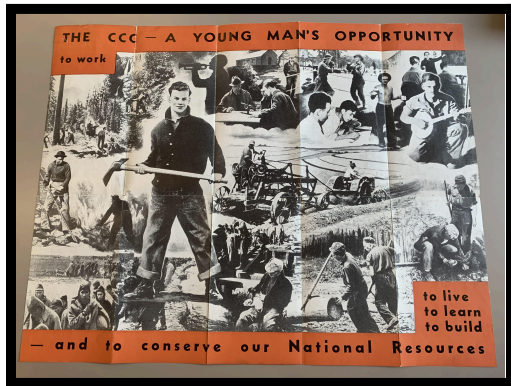
Hospital patients who are audience members at a Federal Theatre Project performance in 1930s hospitals

Production Records, Photographic Negatives File. Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project Collection. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Appendix D

Chapter III (Civilian Conservation Corps)

Figure 1



The billfold cover of a pamphlet marketing the CCC camp programming, with the headline “The CCC — A Young Man’s Opportunity to work”

The CCC, A Youth Program. U.S. Depository Copy. United States, Civilian Conservation Corps, 16-7245. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.



Figure 2

A young man smiled on a poster marketing enrollment for the CCC in Illinois with the headline, “A Young Man’s Opportunity.”

Poster. “A Young Man’s Opportunity.” Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, Illinois Selecting Agency. RG 69: Boxes 354-355. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

Figure 3



A frequent performance mode in the CCC, Members of Provo, Utah's Company 985 pose for a photograph during a "The Shotgun Wedding," or, "womanless wedding." Photograph from *Happy Days* newspaper, August 10, 1935.

Taken from Colin R. Johnson, “Camp Life: The Queer History of ‘Manhood’ in the Civilian Conservation Corps,” in *American Studies*, 48:2 Summer 2007, 19-35 (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 27.

Appendix E

Chapter IV (*Natural Man*)

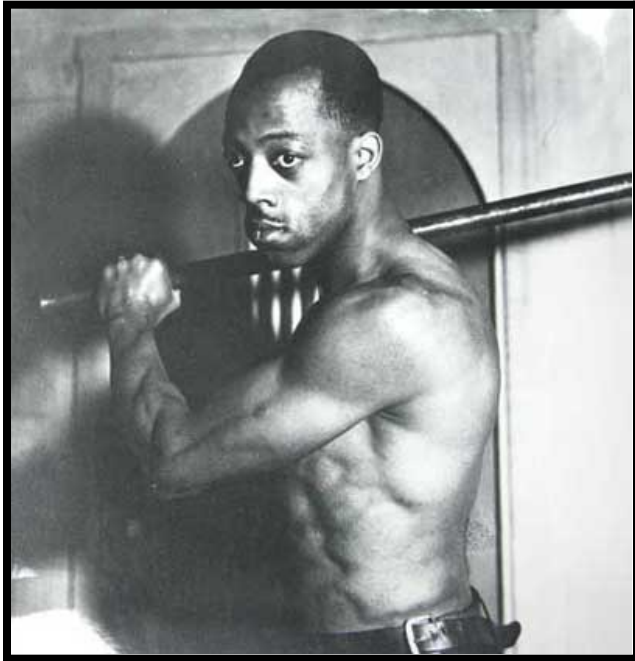


Figure 1

Joe Staton as John Henry in the Seattle NRC production of Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*, pictured inside of the set piece jail cell on stage of the FTP production. 1937.

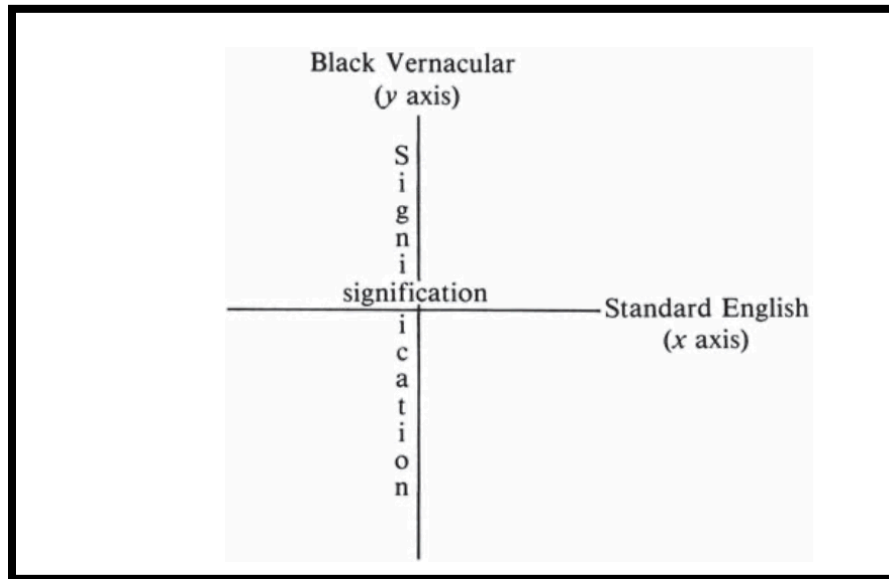
University of Washington Libraries, Special Collection Division, UW Theatres Photograph Collection, (PH Collection #236), box 4, folder 18.)



Figure 2

John Henry (played by Joe Staton) in the Seattle NRC production of Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*, pictured inside of the set piece jail cell on stage of the FTP production during episode 8. 1937.

Federal Theatre Project Photograph Collection, C0205, Box 49, Folder 25. Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University Libraries. Cited in Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre of the New Deal*, 135.

**Figure 3**

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s charting of signification systems—related “Black Vernacular” to “Standard English”

Henry Louis Gates Jr., figure 2.2 from “A Theory of Tradition” in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, first published in 1988 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 54.