

Alongside Harlem: Dorothy Scarborough in New York

Peter Hulme

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Dorothy Scarborough (1878-1935) is one of those names that now appear only in the margins of books.¹ In those about the Harlem Renaissance she might be listed as one of the judges for *Opportunity* magazine's literary prizes or it be noted that the eminent West Indian author, Eric Walrond, took one of her writing courses at Columbia.² In books about the history of folk-song collection she might be credited as a minor figure alongside contemporaries such as Howard W. Odum and John Lomax.³ In histories of Texas women's writing she will merit a few pages.⁴ Just occasionally, it has looked as if she might gain a little more prominence. In 1979 her major novel, *The Wind* (1925), which had been made into a 1928 film starring Lillian Gish – one of the last silent films released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer – was reprinted and Sissy Spacek acquired the rights to make a new film version; but no new film has appeared.⁵ Then in 1999 a case was made out for Scarborough as the first academic critic of science fiction.⁶ Now, in

¹ This essay draws extensively on the Dorothy Scarborough Papers at the Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas (Texas Archives 153), henceforth DSP series, subseries, folder. I was able to study this collection thanks to awards from the Wardlaw Fellowship Fund for Texas Studies and the BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants, both of which are gratefully acknowledged. My research was facilitated by the staff at the Texas Collection, with special thanks to Amie Oliver, Edwina Powell, Paul Fisher, Benna Vaughan, and Geoff Hunt.

² For example, James Davis, *Eric Walrond: A Life in the Harlem Renaissance and the Transatlantic Caribbean*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 129.

³ For example, Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 474n3.

⁴ Sylvia Ann Grider, "Dorothy Scarborough", in *Texas Women Writers: A Tradition of Their Own*, ed. Sylvia Ann Grider and Lou Halsell Rodenberger, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997, pp. 134-40.

⁵ Dorothy Scarborough, *The Wind*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979; *The Wind*, dir. Victor Sjöström, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1928.

⁶ Gary Westfahl, "On the Trail of a Pioneer: Dorothy Scarborough, the First Academic Critic of Science Fiction", *Extrapolation*, 40, no. 4 (1999), pp. 292-303. In fact, on the basis of Westfahl's argument, Scarborough's chapter, "Supernatural Science" from her *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917) was recently republished: Arthur B. Evans, "Dorothy Scarborough. Supernatural Science", *Science Fiction Studies*, 48, Part 2 (July 2021), pp. 193-217.

2023, a full-length biography has been announced, perhaps heralding a new wave of interest.⁷ Time will tell.

Born in Texas, Scarborough lived half her adult life in New York, residing at two addresses in Morningside Heights, now one of the constituent neighbourhoods of West Harlem.⁸ She always considered herself a Southerner and kept her links to the South, especially through extensive collecting trips, but after 1915 she never lived there. From the mid-1920s her summers were often spent in West Cornwall, in the Berkshires, where she bought (in 1924) and renovated Towerdale, a dilapidated eighteenth-century farmhouse.⁹ In New York, just to her east, on the other side of Morningside Park, was black Harlem. She always took an interest but its streets remained a puzzle, as they did to many white writers in the 1920s. This article attempts to describe and assess Dorothy Scarborough's response to the challenge of living and writing alongside Harlem.

Since Dorothy Scarborough is not a well-known figure, a brief biographical sketch is in order. Dorothy's father, John Bledsoe Scarborough (1847-1905), the son of slave-owners, was a Confederate Civil War veteran from Louisiana who had moved to Texas, married Mary Adelaide Ellison, the daughter of slave-owners, and become a successful lawyer and surveyor. The Scarborough family was living near the Texas town of Tyler when their youngest child, Emily Dorothy Scarborough (though she never used the first name), was born, soon moving to Sweetwater, in West Texas ranching country, where Dorothy spent her childhood years, before relocating in 1887 to Waco so that the three children could attend Baylor University, where they all received their BAs. The eldest, Martha Douglass Scarborough (1873-1944), took an MA at Vassar before marrying a prominent Baptist preacher and moving to Virginia. George Moore Scarborough (1875-1951), went on to law school at the University of Texas and worked in his father's firm before moving to New York, where he became a moderately successful playwright, and later to Hollywood. Dorothy herself stayed at Baylor for her MA (1899) and was

⁷ Meanwhile, biographical notes include James W. Neatherlin, "Biographical Sketch", in his *Dorothy Scarborough: Form and Milieu in the Work of a Texan Writer*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1973, pp. 11-54; Grider, "Dorothy Scarborough"; Michael B. Dougan, "Dorothy Scarborough", *American National Biography*, vol. 19, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 345-46; Ann Fears Crawford, "'I Have Books I Must Write': Dorothy Scarborough", in *Women in Texas: Their Lives, Their Experiences, Their Accomplishments*, ed. Ann Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, rev. ed., Austin: State House Press, 1992, pp. 244-57; "Dorothy Scarborough: Song-Catcher", *Wacoan*, October 2007, pp. 70-76. The 64 boxes of material in the DSP have seemingly been winnowed of whatever intimate or personal material they may have contained, either by Scarborough herself or by her sister, who donated the papers to the Texas Collection.

⁸ 542 West 113th Street and (from late 1928) 50 Morningside Drive (between West 115th and 116th Streets), Apt 51.

⁹ "Texan Buys Farm", *Dallas Morning News*, 12 October 1924, p. 7. Scarborough called it her "antique farm" (Letter to Mrs John Carroll [Elizabeth] Ames at Yaddo, 19 January 1931), Yaddo records 1835-1997 MssCol 4795, File on Dorothy Scarborough, Series V b. 219 f. 12. NYPL.

immediately employed on the faculty. Eager to become a writer and to spread her wings, she attended summer classes at the University of Chicago between 1906 and 1910, studying with Robert Morss Lovett. Then she took a year's leave of absence from Baylor in 1910-11 to study literature at Oxford University – of which she left an unflattering account in her autobiographical novel, *The Unfair Sex* (1926), and published an appropriately-entitled book of poetry, *Fugitive Verses* (1912).¹⁰ *The Unfair Sex* is her most personal work, although it's unclear just how far its autobiographical elements stretch. In the novel the heroine, Nancy ("Ginger"), studying at Oxford, hesitates between two suitors before choosing a Scotsman who is then killed in the early days of the First World War. That is the one and only indication of Scarborough's possible love-life.

In 1915 Scarborough moved to Columbia University in New York to write the thesis that would complete her Ph.D. When her chosen topic, Negro folklore, "was not looked favorably upon by her professors", she wrote *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, which was immediately published to critical acclaim and some commercial success.¹¹ Initially employed (from July 1918) on short-term contracts at Columbia, she established herself as a valuable and hard-working teacher, eventually becoming Assistant and then Associate Professor, making her one of the most senior women teaching at the university at that time. She offered courses in English and Comparative Literature, but also in the novel and the short story, courses therefore in the burgeoning discipline of Creative Writing. Here her influence was substantial. Among the writers she taught were Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Roark Bradford, Anzia Yezierska (whose *Salome of the Tenements* [1922] was written for Scarborough's novel course), and the black writers Eric Walrond and Dorothy West. Some of Scarborough's students – not always the most talented – would continue, years after they'd taken her courses, to send her draft after draft of their novels, on which she would patiently comment. Walrond's further contact with Scarborough would have come later through *Opportunity* magazine, but West and Scarborough corresponded for many years as West tried to get her work published.¹²

By the early 1920s Scarborough was an established figure in the New York literary scene. She wrote a column for the *New York Sun* (later *Herald*), often reviewing new books, contributed to and edited anthologies, and wrote essays and short stories for

¹⁰ *The Unfair Sex* was serialised in *The Woman's Viewpoint*, 2 (November 1925), pp. 11-13, 77-80; 2-3 (December 1925-January 1926), pp. 3-34, 87, 91, 94-95; 3 (February 1926), pp. 21-22, 50-51, 68 3 (March-April 1926), pp. 40-44; 4 (May 1926), pp. 39-43; 4 (Jun 1926), pp. 42-44; 4 (July 1926), pp. 53-58; 4 (August 1926), pp. 41-43; 4 (September 1926), pp. 45-49; 4 (October-November 1926), pp. 54-61; 4 (December 1926), pp. 55-62; *Fugitive Verses*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 1912.

¹¹ The quotation is from Mabel Cranfill, "Dorothy B. Scarborough: An Account of the Career of the Most Representative Texas Novelist and Teacher", *The Texas Monthly*, 4 (September 1929), pp. 212-227, at 215

¹² On Scarborough's consistent assistance to West, see Karen Rose Veselits, "Prologue to a Life": Dorothy West's Harlem Renaissance Years, 1926-1934, Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2001; and Verner Mitchell and Cynthia Davis, *Literary Sisters: Dorothy West and Her Circle, A Biography of the Harlem Renaissance*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011, pp. 114-16.

other distinguished publications.¹³ She then published a series of novels: *In the Land of Cotton* (1923), *The Wind* (1925), *The Unfair Sex* (1926), *Impatient Griselda* (1927), *Can't Get a Redbird* (1929), and *The Stretch-Berry Smile* (1932).¹⁴ Only *The Wind* – originally published anonymously – made much of an impact. That same year her major folk-lore study appeared: *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (1925).¹⁵ At the time of her death in November 1935 she had completed two further works, a collection of short-stories to be used for teaching purposes and a second folk-song study: both were published posthumously.¹⁶

Alongside her teaching and writing, Scarborough was a tireless organiser with a wide range of friends who included Worth Tuttle Hedden, Vachel Lindsay, Irvin Cobb, Ignacio Zuloaga, Muna Lee, Luis Muñoz Marín, Vilhjalmur Stefannson, Louise Driscoll, Clement Wood, Constance Lindsay Skinner, Blair Niles, Burton Rascoe, Jessie Rittenhouse, Aline Kilmer, Edna Ferber, Constance Murray Green, and Margaret Widdemer.¹⁷ Her summer home in West Cornwall was part of a transplanted literary Manhattan: Carl and Mark Van Doren and Margaret Widdemer also had houses there. In connection with her novel and short-story courses Scarborough founded the Writers Club of Columbia University and invited speakers to its twice-monthly meeting such as Amy Lowell, Ford Madox Ford, Anita Loos, Hamlin Garland, Zona Gale, and Fannie Hurst. As well as the Writers Club, which met on Wednesdays, she would regularly organise Sunday literary teas at her apartment for friends and students, many of them Southerners looking for home comforts. With New York housing a Dixie Club, a Texas

¹³ *Humorous Ghost Stories*, ed. Dorothy Scarborough, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921; *Famous Modern Ghost Stories*, ed. Dorothy Scarborough, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921; for example, "War and the Supernatural in Current Literature", *The Bookman*, 47, no. 2 (April 1918), pp. 115-124.

¹⁴ *In the Land of Cotton*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923; *The Wind*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925; *Impatient Griselda*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927; *Can't Get a Red Bird*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929; *The Stretch-Berry Smile*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932.

¹⁵ *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925. Page numbers are included parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation OT. The book was effectively completed in the fall of 1923 but was rejected by Harcourt, Brace, and G. P. Putnam's Sons on grounds of expense, delaying its publication. It was accepted by Harvard University Press in June 1924, presumably on the recommendation of George Lyman Kittredge, whom Scarborough had met in 1913 (Letter from George L. Kittredge to Dorothy Scarborough, 17 May 1913 (DSP 1, 1, 1)).

¹⁶ *Selected Short Stories for Today*, ed. Dorothy Scarborough, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1935; *A Song Catcher in Southern Mountains: American Folk Songs of British Ancestry*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1937.

¹⁷ Scarborough wrote a short appreciation of Widdemer, probably as a publicity pamphlet in connection with Widdemer's novel, *More than Wife: Margaret Widdemer: A Biography*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, [1927]. In 1923 Constance Lindsay Skinner was living in the same building as Scarborough, 542 West 113th Street (possibly in the same apartment?). Skinner was Rafael de Nogales's agent and Muna Lee translated one of Nogales's books.

Club, and a Baylor Club—to all of which she belonged—Scarborough was kept busy on the home front as well as in her office.¹⁸

At some of those Sunday *soirées* a Baylor friend and colleague who was also a professional musician, Ola Lee Gullidge (1888-1967), would sing Negro folk-songs accompanying herself on the piano while Scarborough provided a scholarly commentary on the backgrounds, meanings, and possible origins of the various songs that she was now collecting.¹⁹ Scarborough's interest in Negro folk-songs went back, she often said, to her childhood but the collecting began around the time she became one of the 92 charter members of the Folk-Lore Society of Texas [FLST] in 1910. The FLST was founded by Leonidas Payne, a professor in English at the University of Texas with a lively interest in Texas writing and lore, and John Avery Lomax, whose deep knowledge of Southern songs had eventually led him to Harvard, at that time the centre of US folk-lore studies under the leadership of George Lyman Kittredge, a well-known scholar of Chaucer and Shakespeare as well as an expert on English and Scottish popular ballads. Lomax had returned to Texas in 1907 to resume his teaching position at A&M and with Kittredge's support published his ground-breaking collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910, sparking a national interest in folk-song collection.²⁰

Elected president of the FLST for 1914-15, Scarborough gave her presidential address in May 1915 on "Negro Ballads and 'Reels'". Her first publication in folk-lore studies came the following year in the first volume of the FLST's own publication, which also features a preface by Kittredge and an essay by Lomax.²¹ Perhaps in deliberate counterpoint to the painstakingly rigorous survey offered in her thesis on the supernatural in literature, Scarborough next wrote a series of loosely-linked essays, as if *From My Southern Porch*—actually her sister's house in Richmond, Virginia. Occasional Negro folk-songs were included, as they would be in her first novel, *In the Land of Cotton* (1923).²²

With a strong foothold at Columbia, Scarborough returned with gusto to her folk-song project. With typical thoroughness she mailed a letter in late 1920 to scores of

¹⁸ For a warm appreciation of these teas, see Ruth Cross, "Southern Hospitality is the Feature of Texas Author's Literary 'At-Homes'", *Dallas Morning News*, 23 March 1924, p. 9. Mattie Ruth Cross (1887-1981) was herself one of Scarborough's successful students: her 1924 novel, *The Golden Cocoon*, went through five editions, was bought by Warner Brothers for \$25,000, and made into a film in 1925.

¹⁹ See Sylvia Ann Grider, "The Folksong Scholarship of Dorothy Scarborough", in *The Bounty of Texas*, ed. Francis E. Abernethy, Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990, pp. 96-103.

²⁰ John Avery Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1910.

²¹ The presidential address was never published; "Traditions of the Waco Indians", in *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*, no. 1, ed. Stith Thompson (1916), pp. 50-54.

²² Dorothy Scarborough, *From a Southern Porch*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919; *In the Land of Cotton*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923.

institutions, schools, and universities throughout the South, asking for help.²³ Through her deceased father (a judge and a Baylor trustee), her sister, and the members of the FLST, she also had a whole slew of personal contacts to draw on. Beyond this, she went into the field, touring the South in the summers of 1921 and 1922, and then more extensively in 1923, with primitive recording equipment and a fast-moving pencil.

Despite all the letters she received, Scarborough's book tends to emphasise the serendipity of collecting: "I chanced upon an old woman in Atlanta, Georgia, one summer, as I was sauntering down a street by myself"; in Birmingham, Alabama, "I was strolling leisurely in the colored section of the town"; "I was wandering about in the suburbs of South Waco"; "I was enjoying a solitary horseback ride".²⁴ Racial stereotypes abound: "The Negro loves a ballad... The Negro is by nature a mimetic creature... The Negro is a born dramatist..."; "by nature is aquiver with rhythm". There is even reference to "the lighter, happier side of slavery".²⁵ As Karl Hagstrom Miller notes, "Scarborough's understanding of the supposed interracial harmony of the slave era, her narrative implied, granted her a special ability to bridge the twentieth-century color line".²⁶ Jim Crow and lynching don't feature. She joins a long list of white collectors clearly motivated by nostalgia for the fading world of the Old South, some of whom, as Sundquist notes, "blithely reinscrib[ing] racist norms within the crucial work of cultural preservation".²⁷ As Marybeth Hamilton suggests, *On the Trail* is less a songbook than an impressionist record of her journey through the South into the past, on the trail of "the transracial intimacy she felt she had known as a child".²⁸

If anything, Scarborough tends to underplay the songs, valuing them for "their homely simplicity, their rough humour, their awkward wistfulness", lacking, she suggests, the literary quality of the Scottish and English ballads. Although "they would not stand the rigid tests of poetry", they're to be valued simply because they are "made in America".²⁹ Despite all this, her opening description of folk-songs is oddly erotic. You have to speak to them gently, she writes, otherwise they will fly off saucily from under your nose. "You must know how to mask your trembling eagerness in their

²³ "I ask your aid...", DSP, 1.1.3.

²⁴ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, pp. 13, 13, 43, 130.

²⁵ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, pp. 65, 97, 128.

²⁶ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, p. 258. See also, in the same vein, Lily Young Cohen, *Lost Spirituals*, New York: Walter Neale, 1928.

²⁷ Eric J. Sundquist, "Swing Low: *The Souls of Black Folk*", in his *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 457-539, at 476.

²⁸ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p. 78. In the most hostile assessment of her work Chris Thomas King calls her "an antebellum romanticist" with "deeply held racist beliefs" (*The Blues: The Authentic Narrative of My Music and Culture*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2021, pp. 134-141, at 135 and 138). He also calls W. C. Handy an "appeaser" (134) and a "usurping protagonist" (139). Ironically, he agrees with Scarborough that the blues has nothing to do with Negro folk music (139).

²⁹ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, p. 74.

presence", feigning indifference, wooing and coaxing and wheedling "with all manner of blandishments and flatteries".³⁰ But then any potentially dangerous traits, such as sensuality or obscenity, are hived off into the Creole songs of New Orleans. Here she refers to George Washington Cable's work on the Place Congo, telling "of primitive, sinister dances". Cable is not without a tone of moral disapproval with regard to the dances, but he uses neither of these adjectives in his account.³¹

Running through Scarborough's account is a geographical division which clearly has personal connotations for her. Negro folk-songs come from the South whereas New York is home to the commercial recording business. The black folk-singer "is bound by no traditions, but sings what pleases him. He is liberated from conventional concepts, first because he is born free of nature, and then because he makes his song for his own pleasure, not to please some crabbed editor shut up in a dark cell in Manhattan".³² One of the victims of "some crabbed editor... in Manhattan" is of course Scarborough herself, scrabbling to make a literary career while looking back nostalgically to the world of her childhood. In *From A Southern Porch* she'd lamented that "In the city where I live, I have a little square of roof that is my own, and which I fondly call my porch, gloating over less favored mortals who must huddle on stoops or hang over fire-escapes to get a breath of air. But it does not serve the purposes of a real porch, – it is only a pathetic substitute. When I retire there hopefully to think, my neighbors' maids shake angry dustcloths over me, my neighbors' husbands raucously discuss the monthly bills, my neighbors' victrolas try to outsound the hurdy-gurdy in the street beyond, while my neighbors' babies cry incessantly".³³ This is exactly Herder's "der Pöbel auf den Gassen", except that his rabble are not wielding victrolas churning out ragtime and blues.³⁴ Even down South, she recalls, "the promise of folk-songs" often resulted only in "age-worn phonograph records, ... or Broadway echoes, or conventional songs by white authors!"³⁵ Persistence was always needed to dig deeper towards the folk roots.

³⁰ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, p. 3.

³¹ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, p. 118; George Washington Cable, "Creole Slave Dances: The Dance in Place Congo", *Century Magazine*, 31 (1886), pp. 517-32.

³² Scarborough, *On the Trail*, p. 192.

³³ Scarborough, *From A Southern Porch*, p. 31.

³⁴ From its beginnings folk-lore studies has been obsessed with distinguishing the supposedly 'authentic' from various debased or inadequate forms. The forefather himself, Herder, made it clear that the Volk of which he was speaking, anonymous authors of the songs he was collecting and celebrating, were entirely different from "der Pöbel auf den Gassen", the vulgar rabble in the alleyways outside his house, who would shout and sing in an entirely different manner (Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* [1784], Tübingen: Ed. V. Müller, 1807, p. 69).

³⁵ Scarborough, *On the Trail*, p. 3. A similar view was expressed by Newman I. White in his *American Negro Folk-Songs* (1928), dismissing the "popular blues of the cabaret singers, sheet music, and phonograph records" as simply "factory product" (p. 56).

Despite her persona as a Southern lady travelling alone with pencil and notebook, and despite her evident distaste for victrolas and phonograph records, Scarborough herself used recording devices, a heavy one in New York, a lighter version when she travelled.³⁶ She corresponded extensively with the Edison company in an effort to get the best equipment, frequently requesting financial assistance from Columbia to do so. Erika Brady notes the irony of the phonograph—symbol of technological change—being used to record the lore and songs in the process of disappearing on account, in large part, of the invention of the phonograph. “It provided an apparently ‘authentic’ recording of a song and undermined the possibility of authenticity; it was the cause of the tradition’s vanishing, and the mechanism of its preservation.” It was the enemy, “the means of disseminating commercial products of the music hall among the as yet ‘uncontaminated’ rural populace”.³⁷

Recording black voices with modern technology initially tended to leave its supporters uneasy since the value of the black voice lay in its primitive authenticity, unaffected by the scourge of modernity. Amateur collectors were relatively open about their use of wax cylinders for recording, but professionals tended to understate their reliance and often managed to avoid mention, perhaps because a machine was reminiscent of other instruments such as calipers that they wanted to put behind them or because the presence of a phonograph would suggest the absence of the kind of interpersonal empathy called for by the mystique of participant-observation.

As well as sending her tons of material, several of Scarborough’s respondents suggested that the person she needed to talk to about Negro folk-songs was W. C. Handy who, handily, had his office on West 46th Street in New York. She telephoned and he issued her “a cordial invitation” to visit him with her friend and collaborator Ola Lee Gulledge.³⁸ She wrote an account of her visit which exists in three forms: an early draft (probably 1921), a published essay (1923), and as the last chapter of *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (1925), which confirmed the further division of secular black folk-song into the respectable and non-respectable.³⁹

³⁶ Hamilton suggests that Scarborough actively developed her persona as a ‘southern lady’—while pursuing a career as a New York intellectual and novelist, acting out her own masquerade (*In Search of the Blues*, p. 78).

³⁷ Brady, *Poetry and Bondage*, p. 214 and 84. See also her *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999; and William Howland Kenney, “African American Blues and the Phonograph: From Race Records to Rhythm and Blues”, in his *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 109-143. The first use of the phonograph for ethnographic purposes was by Jesse Walter Fewkes in Calais, Maine, in 1890.

³⁸ “The Blues” [typescript] (DSP 2.15.10), p. 1. Further page numbers are included parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TB.

³⁹ “The ‘Blues’ as Folk-Songs”, *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*, no. 2, ed. J. Frank Dobie (1923), pp. 52-66. Further page numbers are included parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TBFS. The last chapter of *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* restores some of the original material about Handy omitted in the published essay but is otherwise amended only slightly. “The ‘Blues’ as Folk-Songs” was reprinted

The form of Negro music with which Handy was associated was the blues, “the peculiar type of negro music now so popular” as Scarborough calls it in her draft, the first of many adjectives she deploys to keep such music at a distance from ‘authentic’ Negro folk-song. The reception room was busy and in Handy’s office their conversation was constantly interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. The blues *is* folk-music, Handy asserted: “Each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the south” (OT 265). The scene is telling. Two Southern white women interested in Negro folk-song are lectured on the blues by a black musician and entrepreneur who is pioneering a new form. *My* blues is not a term heard in the cotton fields and levees; nor is *based on*. Handy is occupying and indeed embodying a new commercial world; Scarborough wants to capture what that new world is in the process of deploying and destroying. Ironically, of course, Handy and Scarborough were both attracted to New York from the South because it was fast becoming the intellectual and commercial centre of the country with one of the most forward-looking universities and thriving publishers of books and music. (Handy had moved there in June 1918). They had more in common than she realised.

Scarborough questions Handy about his career before the blues and he gives a potted version of his life-story.⁴⁰ Asked whether the blues are a new invention, he says that they’ve been sung for many years but only recently “developed and exploited”. He was the first to publish one: “Memphis Blues” in 1912 (OT 269). After explicating the blues for his visitors – with Scarborough presumably transcribing his words, which she gives as quotations and without intervention from herself or Gullledge – Handy invites them downstairs and summons his pianist and quartet to play blues for two hours.

Scarborough sent her first draft to Gullledge, who returned it with scribbled notes in pencil on the backs of two of the pages, the most telling of which reads: “Why not say that it was typical of all publication offices – filled with vaudeville stars (both genders – black and white) + cigarette smoke. Do you think it out of place to stress how business-like it was when the man said ‘Mr Handy is in his office & is very busy and will not be able to see you’ – and so forth” (TB 8-9 verso).⁴¹ Gullledge had clearly been more upset by their reception than Scarborough herself – though Handy *did* see them and clearly spent considerable time with them – but when she came to publish an account of the visit Scarborough’s language betrayed her reservations about the blues, “a peculiar barbaric sort of melody” with “a jerky tempo, as of a cripple dancing because of some irresistible impulse”. She pedantically wonders – or pretends to wonder – whether a singular song should be called ‘a blue’ (“what is the grammar of the thing?”). The

in *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): An Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Karl Koenig, Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2002, pp. 112-16.

⁴⁰ Some of this had appeared in newspaper articles such as W. C. Handy, “Blues”, *Chicago Defender*, 30 August 1919, p. 9. A longer version was eventually published as W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* in 1941.

⁴¹ Although, perhaps unsurprisingly, none of this emerges from Scarborough’s account, Handy’s business was in freefall during 1921.

three-line stanza “makes the listener gasp, and perhaps fancy that the censor has deleted the other line” (OT 264). But she is perhaps playing the rôle of the maiden lady teacher for her Texas readership.

Scarborough seems prepared to accept the blues as a modern form of folk-music: “It is not often that a student of folk-songs can have such authentic information given as to the music in the making, for most of the songs are studied and their value and interest realized only long after the ones who started them have died or been forgotten. Rarely can one trace a movement in folk-song so clearly, and so I am grateful for the chance of talking with the man most responsible for the blues” (OT 272). But she struggles to understand and has to fall back on old stereotypes as explanation: “Here, as in much of the Negro's folk-song, there is sometimes little connection between the stanzas. The colored mind is not essentially logical, and the folk-song shows considerable lack of coherence in thought. Unrelated ideas are likely to be brought together, and stanzas from one song or from several may be put in with what the singer starts with, if they chance to have approximately the same number of syllables to the line. Even that requirement isn't held to, for a Negro in his singing can crowd several syllables into one note, or expand one syllable to cover half a dozen notes. The exigencies of scansion worry him but slightly” (OT 272). For someone who did worry in her poetry-writing about the exigencies of scansion, the blues sound uncomfortably – if interestingly from our viewpoint – like a form of modernist poetry. Indeed she does refer to the blues as “negroid free music” (TB 52) and one of her concluding remarks strikes the same note: “These fleeting informal stanzas, rhymed or in free verse that might fit in with the most liberate of verse-libertine schools of poetry, these tunes that are haunting and yet elusive within bars, have a robust vitality lacking in more sophisticated metrical movements” (OT 65). However, when all is said and done, as Abbe Niles pointed out, the six supposed examples of the blues that Scarborough quotes from in the last chapter of *On the Trail* “exhibit no musical characteristic of the blues, old or new”.⁴² There was clearly a very personal dimension to Dorothy Scarborough's collecting of Negro folk-songs: they were a constituent part of her upbringing in the South which she was remembering and valorising in her new northern world – a world she sometimes disparaged but which she also embraced as providing an environment in which she could flourish on her own merits as a woman writer and academic. At the same time, however, she was inserting herself into the new field – or possibly discipline – of folklore studies, although her position with respect to that field always remained on the margins given her primary self-identification during the 1920s as a novelist. In terms of contacts and institutions Scarborough's affiliation was with the literary strand – Kittredge and Harvard – although her primary interest in *Negro* folk-songs serves to complicate matters. The anthropological strand was actually closer to home – the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* had been edited at Columbia by Franz Boas since 1908 – but

⁴² Abbe Niles, “Sad Horns”, in *Blues: An Anthology*, ed. W. C. Handy; with an Introduction by Abbe Niles; Illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1926, pp. 9-32, at 15. Niles didn't mention Scarborough by name but the reference is unmistakable.

although Boas is mentioned as among those who helped her, there is little evidence in her writing that she took any advice he may have given.

The most melancholy view of Negro folk-song – which at least had a certain logic to it – was voiced by Jean Toomer, who thought that mechanisation had already won and that there was no future for folk-songs. He himself, he recalled – in a classic anthropological trope – had been lucky enough to hear a family of “back-country Negroes” during his visit to Sparta, Georgia, the first time he’d ever heard this kind of singing. But he – in a further classic anthropological trope – is the only one to recognise the beauty of the music: the town Negroes object to what they call “shouting”, preferring their “victrolas and piano-players”. “The folk-spirit”, he concludes, “was walking in to die on the modern desert”. His classic book *Cane* was therefore a swan-song, an elegy to a disappearing form.⁴³ And in some respects Scarborough’s ultimate position was close to Toomer’s, although she had experience of those folk-songs from an early age, which Toomer – brought up and educated in Washington DC and points north – did not. She certainly shared his dyspeptic view of how the new mechanical forms of the reproduction of music were replacing the folk songs she associated with the way of life she’d experienced growing up in Texas.

Scarborough’s final contributions to the study of Negro folk-song came at the end of the decade. In 1928 Charles S. Johnson asked her to contribute to his anthology *Ebony and Topaz*. “New Light on an Old Song” briefly recounts a third-hand story of a US missionary in West Africa hearing a funeral dirge which was unmistakably identical to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”.⁴⁴ Then the following year the 14th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* contained a composite article on “Negro in American” that included “Negro Art” by Alain Locke, “Negro Folklore” by Dorothy Scarborough, and “Harlem” by Eric Walrond.⁴⁵

In the “Afterword” to *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* Scarborough refers to the *Opportunity* short-story contest for which she was one of the judges, noting that Negroes now “are writing their own poetry and music of a high order... We should encourage their newer art, as well as help to preserve the precious folk-songs of the past” (OT 283). Her name first appears in *Opportunity* in April 1924 when *In the Land of Cotton* was favourably reviewed by Eulalia Osby Proctor, one of a series of novels by

⁴³ Jean Toomer, “The Cane Years”, in *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*, ed. Darwin T. Turner, Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1980, pp. 116-27, at 123. Taken from “Outline of the Story of an Autobiography”, in the Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, JWJ MSS 1, Box 20, folder 514.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Scarborough, “New Light on an Old Song”, in *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, ed. Charles S. Johnson, New York: Opportunity, 1927, p. 59. See Sundquist, “Swing Low”, p. 520.

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., London and New York, 1929, vol. 16: “Negro in American” (pp. 194-201), consisting of Alain Locke “Negro Art” (198), Dorothy Scarborough, “Negro Folklore” (200), and Eric Walrond, “Harlem” (200-201).

young white Southerners welcomed by *Opportunity's* black reviewers: "Richly descriptive, throbbing with the great pulse of the South as she lays her finger here and there to catch its heat, *In Land of Cotton* is well written. There is fiction enough to satisfy the most superficial reader, and there is fact enough to be quoted by a student of science".⁴⁶ Invited to the famous Civic Club dinner in March 1924, Scarborough couldn't attend but sent her best wishes and was soon invited to be on the list of judges for the new literary prizes.⁴⁷ The invitation to the dinner suggests that Scarborough's interests and sympathies were already known about in Harlem by early 1924. Walrond is the most likely conduit given that he was part of the literary group close to Charles S. Johnson.

Correspondence remains between Scarborough and both Johnson and Alain Locke. One of Johnson's letters accompanies the entries for the *Opportunity* prize; the other invites her to contribute to what was to become the anthology *Ebony and Topaz*.⁴⁸ Locke's first letter thanks Scarborough warmly: "Please accept my appreciation of your help to *The New Negro*, – the book and the movement, not only through your generous review in the *Times*, but through your constant interest and cooperation as expressed in your own book and your service in *Opportunity's* projects".⁴⁹ He expresses the hope that he can call on her in order to offer his thanks in person. She had obviously written to Locke at the same time since his second notes that their letters had crossed. He reiterates his intention to visit her the next time he is in New York and mentions his current struggle to finish reading *Mellows*, "which is charming in some respects, but so annoying in others".⁵⁰ Scarborough's full-page review in the *New York Times* had indeed provided a significant boost to Locke's landmark anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, not for any particular insight but for the respectful way in which she treated the work and its contents.⁵¹ Her *On the Trail* had been warmly reviewed by Locke as "one of the most extensive and discriminating collections of Negro folk-songs ever made".⁵²

Opportunity gave a review copy of Scarborough's *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* to the young white sociologist Ruth R. Pearson. Despite some mild reservations about Scarborough's attempts to explain Negro psychology and about the absence of a

⁴⁶ Eulalia Osby Proctor, "A Story About Southern Negroes and King Cotton", *Opportunity*, 2 (April 1924), pp. 111-112.

⁴⁷ "Opportunity's \$500 Literary Prize Contest", *Opportunity*, 2 (November 1924), p. 324.

⁴⁸ Letters from Charles S. Johnson to Dorothy Scarborough, 12 March 1925 and 2 November 1927, DSP 1.2.4 and 1.4.7.

⁴⁹ Letter from Alain Locke to Dorothy Scarborough, 21 December 1925, DSP 1.2.7.

⁵⁰ Letter from Alain Locke to Dorothy Scarborough, 19 January 1926, DSP 1.2.7. The reference is to R. Emmet Kennedy, ed., *Mellows: A Chronicle of Unknown Singers*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925.

⁵¹ Dorothy Scarborough, "From Cotton Field and Levee to the Streets of Harlem", *New York Times*, 20 December 1925, pp. BR 19, 25.

⁵² Alain Locke, "Negro Folk-Songs", *Saturday Review of Literature*, 28 November 1925, p. 339.

scholarly apparatus, Pearson's general assessment was positive, recommending the volume as "one of the soundest and most comprehensive, source-books in the field". But noting Scarborough's desire to take further trips south in search of more material, Pearson ended by asking, somewhat plaintively, though perhaps also provocatively, "Are there no folk-songs in Harlem?"⁵³ Her interest seemingly piqued, Scarborough drafted an essay she called "On the Trail of More Negro Folk-Songs", which was never published.⁵⁴ Although Scarborough had been living in New York, alongside Harlem, while writing her book, it had obviously never occurred to her before that relevant material might be found in the city. The closest she'd come had been in her interview with Handy, but despite him telling her that his blues were indeed folk-songs, anything recorded simply didn't count. Pearson's question must, however, have hit a nerve.

In that draft Scarborough puts it laconically "I had a desire to find out what Harlem is doing, if anything, in the production of folk-song" (OTM 1). After a quick run-through of recent writing about Harlem – the *Survey Graphic* number, *The New Negro*, *Nigger Heaven* – she rephrases this thought as "I wished to know if any authentic racial folk-songs are actually being produced in Harlem at the present time" (OTM 1), the word 'authentic' providing her with a trump card, if needed. Scarborough poses as a puzzled researcher. Surely, she notes, Harlem would be a fertile ground for folk-songs to spring up: "But it appears that they are not springing up. In fact, I have failed to find a single instance of an authentic folk-song actually produced in Harlem" (OTM 2). However, although she'd been a fairly intrepid traveller in the South, it doesn't appear as if Scarborough actually climbed down the steps through Morningside Park to investigate in person on the streets of Harlem. The best she can manage is "a drive through that section" (OTM 5). Rather, "I have inquired of many persons who have opportunity to know the racial life and feeling, and have inveigled them into helping with my research". She reports that all of them at first "thought such songs would be

⁵³ Ruth R. Pearson, "Tracking Down the Negro Folk-Songs: A Review", *Opportunity*, 3 (November 1925), 335-37, at 337. Pearson (Iowa 1892-Los Angeles 1968) was a young sociologist at the University of Minnesota who had studied with Robert E. Park at Chicago. She had published poems in *The Liberator* ("Woodrow Wilson" [I, no. 2 (April 1918), p. 10 and "Frank James Burke, C.O. who died at Ft. Douglas, Utah..." [III, no. 2 (February 1920), p. 40]; and in *The Crisis* ("The 'Barrier' (White Womanhood Speaks)", 25, no. 3 (January 1923), p. 122). Possibly at Park's behest she had sent a typewritten copy of her notes on Park's course on "Race and Nationalities" to W. E. B. Du Bois (11 June 1922). At the bottom of one of the pages, she warned Du Bois that the notes were "incomplete and scattered quotations," but that they were "verbatim." The "methods and aims" of the course were to undertake a sociological study of how individuals or groups "will act under certain circumstances" with the view to discover what will make immigrants, and African Americans, "happy" and "good citizens" (Box 20, folder 7): see the account in Joel Robert Wendland, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Re-Imagining and Re-Constructing the African American Community, 1900-1940*, M.A. thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1998. In 1925 she wrote again, asking him for copies of *The Crisis* to assist in the research for her MA on Negro poetry (18 April 1925). Later, having returned to Chicago, she wrote a series of reviews for the *American Journal of Sociology* mostly about pre-schooling.

⁵⁴ Dorothy Scarborough, "On the Trail of More Negro Folk-Songs", DSP 3.3.4. Further page numbers are included parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation OTM.

made in Harlem, but couldn't specify an instance, and promised to look into the matter", reporting, "after study and inquiry, that folk-songs were not being made here now" (OTM 2). These people "inveigled" into helping Scarborough with her research she calls "assistant investigators", proudly mocking her own determinedly amateur approach in an era of increasing specialisation. The only one directly named is the anthropologist Melville Herskovits. One "educated" black woman (perhaps Zora Neale Hurston?) wrote to Scarborough stating that "The Negro wishes to forget the unpleasant" and reporting that James Weldon Johnson had told her of the criticism he'd received for attempting to revive Negro spirituals (OTM 3). The same correspondent noted, Scarborough writes, that white people liked the spirituals "jazzed" and therefore, "for commercial gain, Negroes, some of them, do it" (OTM 3). And another woman, "one of my Negro students in Columbia" (almost certainly Dorothy West), reported talking with Harry Burleigh, whose opinion was that "[f]olk-songs are songs of the soil" and that "[t]he Harlemiter in his surroundings finds little to induce the mood to compose a folk-song" (OTM 4). But why not, Scarborough persists in asking. Why do blacks not sing about the subway or about their jobs? The verdict is irresistible: "While Negro music, jazz and blues, is being turned out in published form, the old-fashioned folk-song is not being made here". Therefore "the outlook for Negro folk-songs of the future is a gloomy one". Throwing her hands in the air, she concludes that "Something should be done about it, but I am not ready with a practical suggestion" (OTM 5).

And that was as close as Dorothy Scarborough got to Harlem. It's obviously possible – and easy enough – to see her reaching her limitations as a Southern lady whose nostalgia for the songs of her childhood didn't allow her to recognise anything of merit in the musical developments which we now value as early forms of blues and jazz. *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* looked backwards, just as W. C. Handy, Abbe Niles, and Miguel Covarrubias were looking forwards in *Blues: An Anthology*. The meeting between Handy and Scarborough in his West 46th Street office is a rare personification of two approaches in conversation, the residual and the emergent. But to leave that as the last word would be unfair on Dorothy Scarborough, who had come a long way from Sweetwater and deserves to be remembered for her considerable achievements as a researcher, novelist, and pioneering teacher of creative writing.