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Abstract

ART FRONTS: VISUAL CULTURE AND RACE POLITICS IN THE MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES
Erin Park Cohn Supervisor: Kathy Peiss Art Fronts argues that visual culture played a central and understudied role in the African American freedom struggle in the middle part of the twentieth century. In particular, it traces the political lives and cultural productions of a generation of visual artists, both black and white, who seized on the Depression-era ethos of art as a weapon to forge a particular form of visual activism that agitated for social, political, and economic equality for African Americans. Participating in the proliferation of visual culture that characterized early twentieth-century America, the activist artists of this generation took advantage of opportunities to reproduce images widely and thus convey political messages in powerful and immediate ways. Art Fronts traces the careers of these artists from the early days of the Depression, when artists affiliated with the Communist Party first created images in service of African American civil rights, through the Cold War, which limited but did not destroy the links they forged between art and activism. By highlighting changes and continuities in African American cultural politics over the course of four decades, it offers fresh perspectives on the contours of the long civil rights movement. Art Fronts thus participates in recent efforts to challenge the classic narrative of the history of the civil rights movement, yet draws that scholarship in a new direction, pointing to the importance of culture, and particularly visual culture, in all phases of the movement. Indeed, visual artists were highly active in the long civil rights movement, while the images they created and circulated in service of the cause served as a necessary visual forum for a range of competing ideas about the politics of race and civil rights.

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ART FRONTS: VISUAL CULTURE AND RACE POLITICS IN THE MID-
TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

Erin Park Cohn

A DISSERTATION

in

History

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2010

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When I entered graduate school, I attended orientation meetings in which various professors and deans described the process of pursuing a doctoral degree. One metaphor, offered by Walter Licht, really stood out for me; he compared it to running a marathon – a hugely exhausting task that requires inner fortitude and strength as well as the ability to continue to put one foot in front of the other until suddenly you cross the finish line. While the metaphor is apt in a number of ways, running a marathon is a far more solitary pursuit than getting a Ph.D. While I'm immensely proud of having crossed this finish line, I never would have made it to the end of the race without the intellectual training, encouragement, and support of advisors, mentors, friends, and family.

I had the pleasure of working with a wonderfully open-minded and enthusiastic dissertation committee that encouraged me to engage in interdisciplinary work and provided me with a perfect combination of diverse perspectives on my project. Tom Sugrue served as an example of a historian who leaves no stone unturned in his research and a model for writing clear and compelling prose. His advice, ranging from leads for research sources to suggestions for “thickening” my argument, was always very helpful. While she joined my committee after the project was well under way, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw also did much to shape my dissertation by providing me with an art historian's perspective and helping me hone my skills in visual analysis. I especially appreciate her willingness to take on an unknown advisee from outside of her department and her openness to my taking an alternative, interdisciplinary approach to the study of visual culture.

I could not have asked for a more dedicated doctoral advisor than Kathy Peiss. Having received a bachelor's degree in medieval European history, I entered graduate school with virtually no background knowledge of the twentieth-century United States. From the beginning, Kathy showed tremendous patience and faith in me as I developed that foundational knowledge from the ground up. She has shaped me as a scholar in ways I can only now appreciate in retrospect, pushing me at every turn to my intellectual limits and thus helping me to surpass those limits time and time again. These "pushes" usually took the form of a mind-bending, three-page, single-spaced response to every piece of written work I ever gave her, or casual but brilliant suggestions that were difficult to wrap my head around at the time and only made sense later. I fully recognize how rare such dedication is in a graduate advisor, and I'm honored to have had a chance to be the recipient of Kathy's mentorship.

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Stack housed and fed me in royal fashion during research trips to Washington, D.C.

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importantly, I want to thank David and Dahlia for balancing me out, challenging me to leave my brain and cultivate my heart. I dedicate this dissertation to them, my favorite and my flower.

ABSTRACT

ART FRONTS: VISUAL CULTURE AND RACE POLITICS IN THE MID- TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

Erin Park Cohn

Supervisor: Kathy Peiss

Art Fronts argues that visual culture played a central and understudied role in the African American freedom struggle in the middle part of the twentieth century. In particular, it traces the political lives and cultural productions of a generation of visual artists, both black and white, who seized on the Depression-era ethos of art as a weapon to forge a particular form of visual activism that agitated for social, political, and economic equality for African Americans. Participating in the proliferation of visual culture that characterized early twentieth-century America, the activist artists of this generation took advantage of opportunities to reproduce images widely and thus convey political messages in powerful and immediate ways. *Art Fronts* traces the careers of these artists from the early days of the Depression, when artists affiliated with the Communist Party first created images in service of African American civil rights, through the Cold War, which limited but did not destroy the links they forged between art and activism. By highlighting changes and continuities in African American cultural politics over the course of four decades, it offers fresh perspectives on the contours of the long civil rights movement. *Art Fronts* thus participates in recent efforts to challenge the classic narrative of the history of the civil rights movement, yet draws that scholarship in

a new direction, pointing to the importance of culture, and particularly visual culture, in all phases of the movement. Indeed, visual artists were highly active in the long civil rights movement, while the images they created and circulated in service of the cause served as a necessary visual forum for a range of competing ideas about the politics of race and civil rights.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1939, Alain Locke published a short piece in *Opportunity* entitled “Advance on the Art Front,” in which he singled out the arts as the most important arena of civil rights activism. Encouraged by what he saw as culture’s power to bring about political change, Locke employed a military metaphor that, while associated with the Communist left, had become mainstream by the end of the 1930s. He described the recent invigoration of African American art as “a courageous cavalry move over difficult ground in the face of obstacles worse than powder and shell - silence and uncertainty.” For Locke, this advance on the art front proved that the arts could be effective in arguing the case of black social, political, economic, and cultural equality. Art was African Americans’ “most persuasive and incontrovertible type of group propaganda, our best cultural line of defense.” With great confidence, Locke concluded that “we may justifiably say that Negro art has inaugurated a new phase of public influence and service.”¹ An intellectual leader positioned at the center of African American culture, Locke clearly sensed a shift in the role of art in black political life. His adoption of leftist conceptions of art as weapon and culture as a “front” in a larger struggle is telling, hinting at the degree to which culture and civil rights politics had come together by the end of the Great Depression. Indeed, Locke’s declaration of a new era in socially committed African American art marked an important break from the Harlem Renaissance that he had been so instrumental in bringing about in the 1920s.

This dissertation examines the shift to which Locke alluded in his essay, uncovering the ways in which visual culture became a central weapon in the African

¹Alain Locke, “Advance on the Art Front,” *Opportunity* 17 (May, 1939): 132-36.

American freedom struggle in the middle part of the twentieth century. In particular, it traces the political lives and cultural productions of a generation of visual artists, both black and white, who seized on the Depression-era ethos of art as a weapon to forge a particular form of visual activism that agitated for social, political, and economic equality for African Americans. I argue that this form of cultural activism played a central, if understudied, role in the early civil rights movement. Participating in the proliferation of visual culture that characterized early twentieth-century America, the activist artists of this generation took advantage of opportunities to reproduce images widely and thus convey political messages in powerful and immediate ways. *Art Fronts* traces the careers of these artists from the early days of the Depression, when artists affiliated with the Communist Party first created images in service of African American civil rights, through the Cold War, which limited but did not destroy the links they forged between art and activism. By highlighting changes and continuities in African American cultural politics over the course of four decades, it offers fresh perspectives on the contours of the long civil rights movement. *Art Fronts* thus participates in recent efforts to challenge the classic narrative of the history of the civil rights movement, yet draws that scholarship in a new direction, pointing to the importance of culture, and particularly visual culture, in all phases of the movement.² Indeed, visual artists were highly active in the long civil rights movement, while the images they created and circulated in service of the cause

² For an excellent articulation of the importance of expanding the temporal and geographical boundaries of civil rights scholarship, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March, 2005). For recent works that have done this, see Charles M. Payne and Adam Green, eds., *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Glenn Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

served as a necessary visual forum for a range of competing ideas about race and civil rights.³

In developing strategies of visual activism, artists of the early civil rights movement seized on the rise of an increasingly visual mass culture in the United States in the early twentieth century. As capitalist developments in the late nineteenth century brought about social and economic organization on a larger scale than ever before, as technological developments allowed for both mass communication and consumption, and as modern urban life began to subject Americans to a barrage of sensual and especially visual stimuli, the visual image became an increasingly important mode of conveying information.⁴ Citing the rise of the cinema and the proliferation of cartoons, billboards, and other visual advertising, Vachel Lindsay observed in 1915 that “American civilization becomes more hieroglyphic every day.”⁵ In addition, the invention of halftone printing around the turn of the century allowed for wide reproduction of photographs, and newspapers and other periodicals increasingly included visual materials in their pages in the 1910s and 20s.⁶ By the 1930s, with the creation of large picture magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, in which the photograph was the key feature, American

³ Surprisingly few scholars have examined the role of culture in the civil rights movement, and those who have looked at it have largely focused on music and performance art. See, in particular, Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 91, v.4 (March, 2005). On freedom songs, see Kerran L. Sanger, “*When the Spirit Says Sing!*”: *The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland, 1995); and T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). On jazz musicians, civil rights, and Cold War cultural diplomacy, see Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Mary L. Dudziak, “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (Sept., 1994): 543-570.

⁴ For the relationship between modernity and visuality, see Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988).

⁵ Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1915).

⁶ Historian Neil Harris has described the invention of halftone printing as a cultural development as transformational as the print revolution of the fifteenth century; see his essay, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Halftone Effect,” in Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 304-317.

culture had become dominated by the visual. The result, in the words of historian Warren Susman, was “the emergence of new ways of knowing that stood in sharp contrast with old ways of knowing available in the book and the printed word.”⁷ As political activists committed to influencing and motivating viewers through the images they created, artist-activists of the early civil rights movement drew on the rising visual literacy that characterized American culture.

Because images were so ubiquitous in American culture, they played a central role in the construction of relationships of power, as numerous scholars and theorists, as well as visual artists, have recognized. In his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argued that the economic development of mass production, and the concomitant ability to reproduce images mechanically, changed the definition of “art” altogether; by stripping it of its “aura,” or its originality as a tangible thing, mass production transformed art from a cult object worshipped for its uniqueness into a mode of communication. “For the first time in world history,” he proclaimed, “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”⁸ Infinitely reproducible, the artistic image now held the potential to carry messages to large numbers of people. This potential excited Benjamin, expressing as he did in another essay his delight that photography could possibly “open the field for politically educated sight.”⁹

⁷ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 111.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” reprinted in Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 556.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” reprinted in Michael Jennings, ed., *Selected Writings: Walter Benjamin*, v.2 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996).

In recent years, scholars have begun to examine in greater depth the relationships between images and power in American history, exploring both the ways in which images have been used by those in power as a tool for maintaining political dominance and how the powerless have employed images in their challenges to the hegemony of the ruling classes.¹⁰ Scholars have illuminated the degree to which activists for African American freedom harnessed the power of the photograph from its earliest invention, pointing for example to the ways in which abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth made strategic use of their image in daguerreotypes and cartes-de-visite.¹¹ While this scholarship has revealed a great deal on the role of the visual in racial politics, much of it focuses on the period prior to the early twentieth century, however, and emphasizes photography to the exclusion of other forms of visual art. *Art Fronts* seeks to apply the insights scholars have gained in their pathbreaking work on American visual culture to the largely uncharted territory of the long civil rights movement, drawing connections between politics and the visual deep into the twentieth century.

By illustrating the ways in which widely circulated political images served as an intellectual forum for a range of ideas about race and civil rights, this dissertation also serves as a corrective to scholarship that largely looks to written texts as the sole locus of debate and intellectual exchange. The pamphlets, cartoons, illustrations, and prints that circulated in the mid-twentieth century, as well as murals that sought to reach wide

¹⁰ See, for example, Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Mary Niall Mitchell, "'Rosebloom and Pure White,' Or So It Seemed," *American Quarterly* 54 (Sept. 2002), 369-410; Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Ardis Cameron, ed., *Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), among others.

¹¹ John Stauffer, "Creating an Image in Black: The Power of Abolition Pictures," in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

audiences, articulated complex ideas in visually immediate ways, reaching and potentially influencing audiences that social scientists and other intellectual leaders might have had a more difficult time accessing. These images included approaches to the “race problem” that ranged from sectarian Marxist understandings of racial oppression that stressed its economic foundation and advocated revolution, to assertions of the utter American-ness of African Americans, to psychological approaches that appealed to white viewers to transform their attitudes. Indeed, the full catalog of twentieth century approaches to race politics appears in activist art from this period, in many cases competing within the same image. A closer look at visual art created in service of the African American freedom struggle thus offers us an opportunity to move beyond the assumption that ideas are only communicated and contested through words, as well as the tendency to understand the history of the civil rights movement as a tidy progression from one intellectual framework to another. Indeed, by demonstrating the complexity of political ideas and aesthetic strategies throughout this period, this dissertation works to move away from the “one movement at a time” approach that informs the history of both social movements and the visual arts.

As a study that attempts to link developments in visual culture with social movement politics, this dissertation traces shifts in aesthetic strategies alongside shifts in political ideas. While these two threads match up in given moments, and changes in aesthetics coincide with changes in politics, at other times they do not. *Art Fronts* is thus largely the story of the *practice* of visual activism over the course of the long civil rights movement rather than an argument about the ways in which images were received by viewers. Indeed, the impact of these images on historical change – the degree to which

they motivated viewers to action, or changed their perspective on race and civil rights – is impossible to measure. Despite the fact that such an impact is unquantifiable, I would argue that scholars of social movements need to take them, and other forms of culture, seriously as effective political tools. At the same time, my interest in this dissertation has been to illuminate the variety of ways in which cultural producers have imagined the possibilities of their involvement in political activism, as well as larger conceptions within the movement of the role culture could play in engendering social and political change. The story of how visual artists grappled with a range of strategies for representing racial violence and injustice is itself a story worth telling, I argue, in that it provides new perspectives on possible intersections of cultural and political practice.

Indeed, I share with the subjects of this study the conviction that visual artists are more than simply producers of beautiful objects, but rather thinkers rooted in a social world who have the power to influence ideas and shape history as it unfolds. Marx and Engels saw the artist “as thinker, as educator, as unfolders of social truths, as one who reveals the inner workings of society, as ideologist who pierces the veil of false consciousness,” in the words of Maynard Solomon.¹² Art therefore not only reflects the given material conditions and prevalent intellectual constructs of a society but also transcends them; art is of history, but it also makes history. Guided by this principle, *Art Fronts* takes seriously the aesthetic and political practice of visual artists and sheds light on the importance of their participation in the long civil rights movement.

A major goal of this study is to illuminate the contours of a particular form of cultural activism that emerged in the middle part of the twentieth century, characterized by aesthetic and political strategies that distinguish it from the “New Negro” movement,

¹² Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art*, 11.

or Harlem Renaissance, that preceded it in the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement that developed in the late 1960s and early 70s.¹³ Art historians have tended to classify the visual art of individuals such as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and others as part of the Harlem Renaissance, despite the fact that these artists were young children in the 1920s and came of age only by the end of the Depression era.¹⁴ To be sure, the Harlem Renaissance served as an important precursor to the artistic activism of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s; the development of a distinct cultural community in 1920s Harlem set the stage for the emergence of young black visual artists during the Depression, while the idea of culture as potential propaganda that could be used for racial advancement remained tenable in the following decades, and indeed through the remainder of the twentieth century. Yet visual artists largely remained on the margins of the Harlem Renaissance, which was for the most part a literary movement.

The onset of the Depression transformed cultural politics within African American urban communities, as many were drawn to the political left as a result of the disproportionate economic hardship they experienced. Conditions were ripe in the 1930s for the development of left-oriented visual arts movement in African American communities in the urban North. The black population in northern cities such as New York and Chicago had exploded as a result of the Great Migration that began during World War I and lasted into the 1920s. While the influx of new migrants from the South

¹³ For an example of scholarship that skips over the 30s, 40s, and 50s entirely in making connections between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, see Emily Bernard, "A Familiar Strangeness: The Spectre of Whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement," in Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ For art historical works describing art created in the 30s and 40s as part of the "Harlem Renaissance," see *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Abradale Press, 1987); *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Richard Powell's survey of African American art is an exception; see his *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

ebbed in the Depression years, the migration created newly enlarged African American communities that worked to consolidate a common culture in the 1930s and 40s.¹⁵

Aware of their newfound power as a voting block, northern African Americans also forged new political leadership and became increasingly vocal about civil rights issues in this period, particularly as the Depression took a devastating toll in black communities.¹⁶

While the optimism of the booming 1920s brought many to call simply for opportunities for African Americans to compete economically and culturally (the approach of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals), the Depression highlighted the larger systemic inequalities that kept African Americans on the bottom rungs of society. The generation of activist visual artists that emerged in the late 1930s included a number of southern transplants or children of migrants who were deeply influenced by leftist politics and also keenly aware of their role in these larger community building and political efforts. They carved out a role for themselves within the burgeoning civil rights movement in northern cities, harnessing and participating in the proliferation of visual culture as they experimented with new forms of political activism.

While the idea of art as a means for African American advancement owed much to the Harlem Renaissance, the left-oriented visual activism in service of black civil rights that emerged in the 1930s had its roots in the art of the sectarian left. As the Depression took its toll on the American economy, the Communist Party (CP) grew

¹⁵ James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁶ On rising political consciousness in northern black communities in the early part of the twentieth century, see Martin Kilson, "Political Change in the Negro Ghetto, 1900-1940s," in Nathan Huggins, Martin Kilson, and Daniel Fox, eds., *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1971); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

tremendously in popularity and influence in the early 1930s.¹⁷ The CP included in its orbit a group of visual artists and writers who shared a strong belief in the power of art to act as a political weapon and forged an identity as “cultural workers” whose task was no less than to heighten the consciousness of the masses in order to foment revolution. An overwhelming number of these artists were Jewish, many of them recent immigrants from eastern Europe or the children of immigrants. Gathered around the John Reed Club, an organization with branches in cities across the nation that brought them together for social events, lectures, and exhibitions, these white leftist artists developed a form of visual activism that emphasized the production of easily reproducible images that presented direct illustrations of economic oppression of the working class and the ills of capitalism. These works took the form of political cartoons, prints, and illustrations that were published in leftist newspapers and magazines, circulated in pamphlets, and exhibited in union halls and the John Reed Club. In their attempt to reach as wide an audience as possible, these artists actively challenged cultural hierarchies that reserved the walls of galleries for “fine” art and insisted on the production of art for art’s sake, rather than for political purposes.¹⁸

First and foremost among the themes taken up by proletarian artists of the early 1930s was the economic and racial oppression of African Americans, which white leftist artists highlighted in order to demonstrate the ultimate corruption of the capitalist system.

¹⁷ The literature on the American Communist Party is voluminous. On its rise in the 1930s, see, in particular, Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984); and Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928-1935* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁸ On the rise of a proletarian art movement in the early 1930s, see, in particular, Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1999).

Their work participated in an increase in attention within the Communist Party toward African Americans, whom they hoped to recruit as an oppressed working-class minority during the Depression. Visual artists in the John Reed Club in New York City, in particular, contributed a large number of images to two major political efforts of the CP in the early 1930s: the campaign to end lynching and the legal effort to free the Scottsboro Boys. As they developed their strategies of visual activism throughout the early Depression, these artists produced and circulated a flurry of pamphlets, magazine illustrations, political cartoons, prints, and other images that offered grisly views of lynching or narrated the story of Scottsboro in pictures. As I demonstrate in Chapter One, these images largely reached out to white, working-class viewers in order to train their vision on issues of race, asking them to stand behind their African American working-class compatriots in their struggle against the economic injustice that they shared. Indeed, proletarian images of the Scottsboro case and lynching appropriated the suffering of African Americans, transforming these issues into broad indictments of capitalism and thus downplaying the individual experiences of the African American victims themselves. At the same time, the image campaign leftist artists developed around racial violence and legal injustice broke important new ground by drawing unprecedented national and international attention to these issues and in forging a visual politics that put art in service of civil rights activism.

While the strategies of visual activism developed by artists within the orbit of the Communist Party in the early 1930s would survive into the second half of the decade, the sectarian nature of their work did not. Early in 1935, the Communist Party shifted its strategy away from militant revolutionary aims toward cooperation with liberal political

groups in the Popular Front, a joint effort to fight the spread of fascism in Europe and prevent its encroachment in the United States. Virtually overnight, the left changed its rhetoric from an anti-American call for revolution to a far more muted critique of capitalism that participated in the reform orientation of the New Deal, stressing the transformation of existing social and political structures rather than their destruction. As historian Michael Denning has demonstrated, activists on the left expanded upon the use of culture as a political weapon during the Popular Front period, forging a class-based “cultural front” that pressed for the rights of labor while at the same time offering up a deeply populist celebration of America.¹⁹ The Popular Front left adopted Abraham Lincoln as a working-class hero, romanticized the ethnic diversity of the American “folk” in cultural forms such as Paul Robeson’s famous “Ballad for Americans,” and declared, in the words of CPUSA chairman Earl Browder, that “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism.”²⁰ The toned-down rhetoric of the left in the Popular Front thus drew large numbers of “fellow-travelers” into its orbit, including cultural producers who adopted the strategies of cultural activism developed in the proletarian period to new ends.

The Popular Front also drew the left further into the African American freedom struggle as the politics of antifascism brought many to see connections between human rights violations of all kinds. As African American artist Aaron Douglas reminded the American Artists Congress, a Popular Front organization of visual artists, in a 1936 speech, “the lash and iron hoof of Fascism have been a constant menace and threat to the

¹⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

²⁰ For more on shifts in the party line over the course of the 1930s and 40s, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

Negro ever since so-called emancipation. One of the most vital blows the artists of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of nationality, race, or creed.”²¹ The rise of fascism in Europe thus provided activists and cultural producers on the left with an international perspective on African American oppression that would remain with the civil rights movement throughout the twentieth century.²² Because it drew these larger connections between a wide range of human rights violations, the Popular Front cemented the relationship between the political left and the nascent civil rights movement. In ways that scholars are only beginning to uncover, cultural producers affiliated with the Popular Front further developed the strategies of cultural activism that had taken root in the sectarian left in the early Depression and applied them to these wider efforts to secure full citizenship for African Americans.²³

For visual artists, this took place largely within the federally-funded Federal Art Project (FAP). Created in 1935 as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the New Deal, the FAP sought to keep visual artists employed through the Depression. Beyond this basic goal, however, FAP officials strove to create a “cultural democracy” in America, which would provide all Americans with access to art as producers and as consumers. In service of this goal, the FAP opened up community art centers across the nation and sponsored touring exhibitions of art produced by FAP artists. The FAP was a

²¹ Aaron Douglas, “The Negro in American Culture,” reprinted in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

²² See Penny M. von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²³ Remarkably few scholars have explored cultural productions of the Popular Front geared toward race politics. Those that have largely emphasize literature and music; see, for example, Denning, *The Cultural Front*, ch. 9; and Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Stacy I. Morgan includes visual art, see his *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

program that was deeply informed by the politics of the Popular Front, as it adopted the leftist emphasis on the production of art that was socially useful, and also participated in the pervasive celebration of the American “folk.” As I argue in Chapter Two, the FAP was also the crucible for the development of a very particular form of visual politics that emphasized the intertwined nature of race and class oppression, but in ways that were less aggressively sectarian than the proletarian art of the early 1930s.

Indeed, particularly in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, the FAP brought together a generation of young African American artists, for whom acceptance into the mainstream art world was largely a new experience, with many of the white leftist artists who had dedicated a great deal of their work in the first half of the decade to the politics of lynching and the Scottsboro case. By working alongside and learning from leftist artists in the Federal Art Project and the affiliated Artists’ Union, these young black artists gained a political and aesthetic education. Participation in the FAP trained them in the style of social realism, which, like the proletarian art that proceeded it, emphasized the representation of social ills, but, in the spirit of the Popular Front, contained a muted leftist politics that distinguished it from the revolutionary radicalism of leftist art of the early 1930s.²⁴ My treatment of the Federal Art Project in this dissertation is thus a major departure from the majority of scholarship, which tends to downplay the influence of leftist artists on the Project as a whole and offers a bleak view of the FAP’s record on

²⁴ For more on social realism, see the essays in David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973); and Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, eds., *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). Helen Langa prefers to call the style “social viewpoint art,” arguing that this was how artists of the period described their own work; while I take her point, I have chosen to use “social realism” because it remains the name most familiar to and commonly used by art historians. See Langa, *Radical Art*, 4-6.

issues of race.²⁵ By considering the experience of an important group of African American artists as participants in the Federal Art Project and Artists' Union at the ground level in northern urban cities, I emphasize both the quality of their experience in the FAP and the long-term effects of this experience on their art and activism.

To illustrate the long-term influence of this fruitful interracial artistic production in the FAP, I also explore some of the art that left-oriented white and black artists produced in the late 1930s and into the 1940s in Chapter Three. Perhaps the most important theme in this art was the telling of African American history, as artists sought to illuminate the intersections of race and class oppression throughout American history and recast the African American working class as playing a central role in the development of American democracy. In the form of murals placed on the walls of black colleges and universities or other African American institutions, as well as portfolios of prints that could be widely reproduced and circulated, these artworks employed a variety of strategies in pressing for African American inclusion and social and economic justice. These included works that stressed traditions of black resistance, others that pasted black faces within the dominant narrative of the American past and emphasized individual achievement, and still others that retold African American history as a narrative of interracial working-class unity. These images functioned as crucial forums in which a

²⁵ Most scholarship on the FAP portrays it as solely the invention of liberal New Dealers; see, for example, Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Jane deHart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* (Sept. 1975), 316-339; Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009). For works that acknowledge the influence of the left on the Project, see Francine Tyler, "Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and Its Magazine, 'Art Front,'" Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1991; and A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On race and the FAP, see in particular Rena Fraden, "Feels Good, Can't Hurt: Black Representation on the Federal Arts Projects," *Journal of American Culture* 10 (Winter, 1987): 21-29. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, also discusses the FAP's adherence to segregation in the South.

range of ideas about race, class, gender, and civil rights were contested and circulated as the movement gathered steam during and directly after World War II. In this way, they staked a claim in the battle over the master narrative of American history at the same time that they served as allegories for present-day politics.

The liquidation of the Federal Art Project, along with the rest of the WPA, in the early 1940s left a group of African American artists who were poised to take the lessons they learned in activist art and apply them as participants in the left-inflected civil rights activism that was taking shape in northern cities during and after the Second World War. African American artists in New York in particular, together with white colleagues who shared their values, further pursued the Popular Front cultural politics they learned through the FAP in service of a concerted interracial, labor-oriented movement.²⁶ Together, they developed a collective identity as artist-activists by involving themselves directly in leftist civil rights organizations such as the National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress, providing illustrations for those organizations' publications, donating activist art to exhibitions held on their behalf, and participating in rallies, protests, and other events. The political approaches they took in their work largely followed the politics of these organizations, and they infused their art with both attention to the politics of race and class and a focus on larger relationships between human rights on the international scene and the domestic civil rights struggle. Activist artists in New York further pursued their political calling by engaging in utopian experiments in art education through the George Washington Carver School, a school for adult workers in Harlem, and Workers' Children's Camp (Wo-Chi-Ca), a CP-affiliated summer camp in

²⁶ For the wider contours of left-oriented civil rights activism in New York in the 1940s and early 50s, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*.

New Jersey. In their attempt to use art education to make working-class children and adults politically conscious, artists working at these institutions drew on the example of the community art centers of the Federal Art Project, transforming them into engines of civil rights activism. As I argue in Chapter Four, the history of this group of artist-activists demonstrates the vitality of the cultural front long into the early 1950s, at least in New York, as well as the vibrancy of the civil rights movement in northern cities more than a decade before *Brown v. Board*. Moreover, it illuminates the central role visual images, and their creators, played in the early phases of the movement.

The arrival of the Cold War in the late 1940s and the rise of anticommunist persecution during the McCarthy era made this approach to civil rights activism largely untenable by the mid-1950s. I also examine in Chapter Four the ways in which anticommunist agencies such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as anticommunist pressure from local communities, made this form of activism, with its emphasis on class politics, increasingly difficult to pursue. As a result, artist-activists lost their outlets for circulating their work and practicing their politics, as the leftist press was forced to cease publication and the organizations and institutions in which these artists participated were shut down. Several artists were themselves the target of surveillance by the FBI, an experience that left them physically and emotionally exhausted. At the same time, their work became increasingly unwelcome in the mainstream art world as the tides of taste turned toward the concerted apolitical, individualistic style of abstract expressionism. While this pressure hardly defeated leftist artist-activists in their commitment to the production of politically useful images that would fight on behalf of African Americans,

it clearly took a toll on them as they retreated from direct political involvement and largely eliminated the straightforward equation of race and class politics that had previously informed their work.

Among the major arguments of this dissertation, however, is that the Cold War may have limited the civil rights movement's use of images in some ways, but it also opened up opportunities for their use in others.²⁷ In Chapter Five, I explore the careers of two African American photographers, Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks, who came of age as artists in the FAP-social realist milieu and translated the ideas they learned about visual art as a political weapon into a Cold War photographic practice that, to an even greater degree than the work of printmakers, painters, and cartoonists, circulated complex ideas about race and civil rights. DeCarava pursued a career as a fine art photographer, while Parks gained a great deal of fame as a prominent photojournalist for *Life* magazine, yet despite these differences, both men proved able to infuse their work with subtle commentary on the political and economic inequality faced by African Americans and circulate these messages widely. The images they created participated to a large degree in the Cold War civil rights movement's emphasis on psychological approaches to race, casting the movement as a matter of moral suasion, yet in many cases they also maintained a challenge to white economic privilege. The successful careers of DeCarava and Parks thus demonstrate the ways in which the shifting political and aesthetic winds of the Cold War period provided new opportunities for visual activism.

²⁷ Penny Von Eschen has made a similar observation regarding music, as she demonstrates how the Cold War provided African American jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong with an opportunity to shed light on American racial oppression abroad through their state-sponsored tours, yet the state also limited their ability to communicate these ideas as well; see her *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.

Moreover, in the long run the Cold War anticommunist purge largely failed to squelch the political orientation and commitment of leftist artists working in other media, as well. Indeed, many of those who had been persecuted during the 1950s reemerged in the 1960s, particularly as the civil rights movement grew increasingly radical in the second half of the decade. They formed new politicized art communities that collectively considered how visual artists could play a role in the movement, again contributed their work to activist organizations, and worked as art teachers, conveying to a new generation of young African American artists the political possibilities inherent in the visual arts. As I argue in the epilogue, the development of politicized black art in the form of the Black Arts Movement was therefore deeply informed by this older generation's example and direct influence. Yet, visual artists of the Black Arts Movement took a very different approach to that of the Depression generation, focusing their efforts on protesting the exclusion of African American artists from the mainstream art world at the same time that many of them pursued a black nationalist politics that had little room for interracial, labor-oriented activism. A closer look at the links between these two generations of politically active visual artists thus highlights a continuous yet diverse tradition of visual activism in the long civil rights movement that has remained largely unappreciated in the scholarship.²⁸

To return to Alain Locke's metaphor, African American visual artists and their white leftist allies thus made advances on a series of "art fronts" during the middle part of the twentieth century. They experimented with a range of different strategies for using

²⁸ James Smethurst has pointed to the links between the old left and the Black Arts Movement in the literary field; see, for example, James Smethurst, "'Remembering When Indians Were Red': Bob Kaufman, the Popular Front, and the Black Arts Movement," *Callaloo* 25, vol. 1 (2002): 146-164; and James Smethurst, "'Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat': Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement," *Callaloo* 25, vol. 4 (2002): 1225-1236.

visual art as a medium for political messages, attempting to reach audiences ranging from the interracial working-class masses, to the wider African American community, to the white elite. They developed a practice of artistic pedagogy through which they sought to politicize students through arts education. They worked to advance as artists in the mainstream art world, participating in and pursuing the politics of their own profession. Yet they also experienced a series of retreats on these art fronts, as well, as some grew frustrated with what they saw as the inability of art to effect change, others failed to fulfill their goals of wide circulation of their work, and still others lost their ability to maneuver as activist artists with the rise of the Cold War. Their story thus serves as a rich case study for the possibilities, as well as the limitations, inherent in visual activism.

CHAPTER ONE: Visualizing Racial Violence and Injustice, 1931-1935

In an article he published in his newspaper, *The Liberator* in 1933, black Communist leader Cyril Briggs pointed to the importance of the arts in fighting for civil rights for African Americans. Briggs argued that “art is a weapon in the hands of the white ruling class. Art can be, and must be made a weapon in the hands of the toiling masses and the oppressed Negro People in their struggles for bread and freedom.” He decried the “cultural disarming of the oppressed Negro people” in the United States, declaring that “every Negro intellectual and artist should use his genius and talent to reflect and support the struggles of the Negro toilers enslaved in factory and field, the victims of forced labor and peonage in the South.”¹ Briggs published this missive to African American cultural producers at a moment of significant change and unrest in black urban communities in the North. While the influx of migrants from the South ebbed as unemployment rose during the early years of the Great Depression, northern urban African Americans continued to grapple with the task of consolidating social and political structures in their communities. The sobering and disproportionate experience of economic devastation in communities such as Harlem and the South Side of Chicago brought on by the Depression, along with the resurgence of lynching in the South, caused many to lose the faith in progress that characterized the previous decade. Like Briggs, a number of African Americans were drawn to the growing Communist Party (CP), which offered a powerful explanation for black economic oppression and a cadre of dedicated activists interested in advancing African Americans’ interests.

¹ Cyril Briggs, “Art Is A Weapon,” *Harlem Liberator*, September 9, 1933.

Yet Briggs's views on how African American cultural producers might use their art to free the black "toiling masses" from the bonds of economic oppression largely fell on deaf ears in the black cultural community in Harlem in the early 1930s, as the majority of artists continued to follow the strategic model of the New Negro movement, which sought to prove African Americans' worthiness by demonstrating their ability to produce high culture. Instead, Briggs was responding to an alternative strategy of visual activism on behalf of African American civil rights that arose among white artists on the political left, who acted as the cultural arm of a growing radical civil rights movement in the first half of the 1930s. As art historians have well documented, the onset of the Great Depression brought about a profound shift in the art world. Numerous artists were drawn to the politics of the left and committed themselves to the production of works that explored current social and political issues, particularly the plight of the working class and racial and ethnic minorities.² As more and more artists began both to incorporate proletarian themes in their work and involve themselves in protest politics, a community of leftist artists arose especially in New York City - a constellation of politically active, self-described "cultural workers," many of them Jewish children of immigrants or immigrants themselves.³ Some were members of the CP, while others kept their distance, repelled by the discipline and time commitment required by the Party, yet the majority

² Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1999). The early 1930s also witnessed a similar proletarianist literary movement; see, among other works, Janet Galligani Casey, ed., *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004); and William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

³ Milly Heyd has suggested that Jewish artists were interested in African American themes in this period because of a wider commitment to social justice that pervaded Jewish culture, as well as empathy, as Jews themselves sought to enter the social and cultural mainstream in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century; see her *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

held Marxist political convictions.⁴ These artists clustered around organizations such as the newly formed American Contemporary Art (ACA) Gallery and the John Reed Club (JRC). Through such institutions, white leftist artists of the early 1930s worked to dismantle the boundaries between high and low culture as they forged new strategies of visual activism that placed the political cartoon on the walls of the art gallery and the fine art print in the pages of an activist press.

While much of the subject matter of proletarian art focused on labor relations and the ills of capitalism, a major topic of interest to artists on the left was the oppression of African Americans. This interest stemmed from a larger initiative within the Communist Party, which declared the self-determination of African Americans in the southern “Black Belt” as one of its major goals in 1928.⁵ As Robin D. G. Kelley has demonstrated, the majority of American Communists interpreted the idea of self-determination for African Americans less as an attempt to form a separate nation in the South and more as an effort to expose the denial of black citizenship in both the South and the North.⁶ As such, the CP worked hard to address key political issues such as tenant’s rights and, by the early thirties, had made significant inroads into African American communities in both the South and in northern cities such as Chicago and New York.

⁴ Artist William Gropper, for example, recalled his feeling of triumph at having never joined the CP, yet he nevertheless “believed in what [he] drew for them, much more than those who were members,” from Gropper oral history with Bruce Hooton, June 12, 1965, transcript at Smithsonian Archives of American Art (AAA). Like Helen Langa, I have chosen not to attempt to locate artists within the intricacies of internecine battles within the CP during this period, largely because most were deeply influenced by the left without being directly involved in the Party. See Langa, *Radical Art*, 8.

⁵ For more on the politics behind the Black Belt thesis, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008).

⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Among the main political issues that drew the left into civil rights activism were the rise of lynching in the South and the legal injustices faced by the Scottsboro Boys. The lynching of African Americans had steadily declined over the course of the twenties from sixty-four lynchings in 1921 to only ten in 1929, while the number rose to twenty-one in 1930 and as many as twenty-eight in 1933.⁷ Both the NAACP and CP-affiliated organizations such as the International Labor Defense (ILD) and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR) took on the issue of lynching as a primary cause in the early part of the decade, the NAACP focusing its efforts on the passage of antilynching legislation and the leftist organizations devoting considerable energy to large-scale protests on the issue.

Even more than the anti-lynching campaign, however, the Scottsboro Case brought the left into the struggle for African American civil rights. In the spring of 1931, nine African American teenagers – Clarence Norris, Haywood Patterson, Olen Montgomery, Ozie Powell, Willie Roberson, Charlie Weems, Eugene Williams, and brothers Andy and Roy Wright - were arrested after having engaged in a fistfight with a group of white boys who had been on the same freight train traveling through northern Alabama. Beaten and thrown off the train, the white boys had complained to a nearby stationmaster, and the train was stopped in Paint Rock, where a posse rounded up the nine young black men and two white women who had also been on the train. While the nine boys, ranging in age from thirteen to nineteen, were originally charged with assault, they quickly faced charges of rape as the two young women were pressured into making such an accusation. Repeated trials throughout the 1930s resulted in numerous guilty

⁷ Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 7-8.

verdicts, despite an overwhelming lack of evidence against the boys, as well as the admission in 1932 by one of the girls, Ruby Bates, that she had not been raped. A clear example of the denial of justice to African Americans in southern courts, the case quickly became an international cause celebre, resulting in a great deal of public activism around the issue. The Scottsboro case, in particular, cemented the commitment of the left to civil rights activism and softened African Americans to Communism. As Mark Naison writes, “beginning as a struggle led by primarily white radicals, Scottsboro provided the catalyst for passionate protest activity by Harlem’s population, both inside and outside the Party’s ranks.”⁸ The Scottsboro case thus opened up an avenue for interracial political organizing and experimentation with new forms of direct action politics, including a variety of visual strategies.

The Communist-affiliated International Labor Defense (ILD) was the first to recognize the importance of the trial and sent lawyers to Scottsboro to represent the boys, while the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was much slower to respond, garnering criticism within many black communities. Each unwilling to cede control of the case to the other organization, the ILD and the NAACP engaged in a protracted battle over who would provide legal representation to the boys, maligning one another viciously in the press as they sought to convince the young men to sign with them. While the ILD ultimately gained control due to the trust they built with the defendants’ parents, the case continued to serve as a battleground for control over the thrust of civil rights activism in the first half of the 1930s.⁹

⁸ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 57.

⁹ For a more detailed account of the events of the Scottsboro trials and the ensuing struggle for control between the ILD and the NAACP, see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton

Yet the battle over the Scottsboro case was just as much a struggle over cultural representation of the young men. More was at stake in this controversy than simply legal control; as interest in the Scottsboro Boys and outrage against their persecutors grew both in the United States and abroad, both the ILD and the NAACP quickly understood that to gain the upper hand in shaping the public's perception of the case could offer each side a great deal of influence over that public's understanding of race and class politics on a larger scale. Committed to mass protest as a political tactic, the CP and the ILD were particularly aware of this fact. Indeed, by depicting the case in all of their promotional literature as a demonstration of capitalist oppression of the working class, the CP seized on the Scottsboro case to demonstrate the linkages between racial and class oppression in the United States and thus awaken the masses to the possibility and necessity of a proletarian revolution.¹⁰ Their anti-lynching activism also served a similar purpose, as they sought to cast racial violence in the South as a symptom of the economic oppression of the working class.

To an unprecedented degree, the CP and its larger orbit of leftist activists made use of visual images in the battle to represent the Scottsboro Boys and southern racial violence. The campaign offered activist artists, many of whom were looking for ways to put their skills to work as a weapon for the proletariat, a unique opportunity to visualize the intertwined oppressions of race and class in America in the first half of the 1930s and spread that vision widely through cartoons, drawings, pamphlets, and prints. These

Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); and James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

¹⁰ For more on the struggle to control the public's perception of the Scottsboro Case, see James A. Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Miller largely focuses on textual representations of the Scottsboro Boys, rather than considering visual imagery.

efforts to portray racial violence and legal injustice represent the beginning of a new era of visual activism within the long civil rights movement, marked by the harnessing of highly reproducible types of images in an effort to rouse the interracial working-class masses to collectively resist racial and economic inequality in the United States.

Indeed, the ordeal of the Scottsboro Boys and the rise of southern lynching in the early Depression offered activists on the left a perfect opportunity to illuminate the linkages between racial oppression and class conflict in the United States. As Communist writer Mike Gold wrote in 1935, “no proletarian Shakespeare or Tolstoy, wishing to invent an epic fiction that would symbolize the oppression of the Negro workers in America, could have improved on the bitter story of Scottsboro, Alabama.”¹¹ The Scottsboro case presented leftist visual artists with all of the right ingredients for visually illuminating the connections between racial and economic inequalities: poor young black men unable to find work, the hovering possibility of racial violence in threatened extralegal lynchings, and a court system that served the white ruling class to the point of farce. Proletarian artists seized the opportunity the case presented them to create a visual language of race and class that they could use to reach out to the working-class masses. They offered a vision of the nine young men as the ultimate victims of their economic and racial circumstances; stripped of their individuality and presented as working-class casualties of the corrupt capitalist system, the Scottsboro Boys and the victims of lynching appeared in proletarian images as illustrations of the necessity of class conflict and revolution. Yet in shedding light on the plight of the Scottsboro Boys and lynch victims, leftist artists drew unprecedented attention to the injustice and

¹¹ From Gold’s Foreword to Lin Shi Khan and Tony Perez’s book of linoleum prints, reprinted as *Scottsboro, Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 25.

oppression faced by African Americans. In producing and circulating a veritable flurry of images in protest of racial violence, they also developed new strategies of visual activism around civil rights issues.

While African American political leaders like Briggs were increasingly drawn to the Communist Party and its cultural politics in the early 1930s, African American visual artists were largely continuing to follow the aesthetic prescriptions of the previous decade. When Alain Locke and other African American intellectuals declared the emergence of a “New Negro” in 1925, they pressed for the development of an elite class of black intellectuals, or a “talented tenth,” who would lead the way in proving the worthiness of African Americans by demonstrating their ability to produce high culture. Locke therefore fostered race pride by emphasizing the “ancestral arts,” encouraging black writers and artists to rediscover a shared African aesthetic tradition and incorporate it into poems, novels, and paintings that would challenge the Western canon.¹² W. E. B. DuBois argued in 1926 that “all art is propaganda and ever must be,” yet for him, it was propaganda in the sense that it demonstrated African Americans’ humanity and their ability to produce true beauty, rather than serving as a direct communicator of political ideas.¹³ Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and artists thus focused on destroying the American cultural color line by encouraging the development of an essentialized “Negro” art in order to demonstrate the existence of artistic genius among African Americans.

¹² Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1925).

¹³ W. E. B. DuBois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* 32 (Oct., 1926), 290-297.

While visual artists played a largely peripheral role in the Harlem Renaissance, a handful of African American artists, in particular Aaron Douglas, participated in the movement through the production of illustrations for literary works and journals such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*.¹⁴ Douglas's work embraced the New Negro movement's emphasis on primitivism, as he infused his work with a form of art-deco modernism rooted in African aesthetics. A cover he created for the June, 1926, issue of *Opportunity*, for example, presented a stylized black figure seated with the sun rising behind pyramids in the distant background, suggesting the cultural heritage of ancient Egypt for African Americans. As Amy Helene Kirschke has shown, W.E.B. DuBois made use of a great deal of visual art and illustration in editing the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, in the 1920s, and many of the images and cartoons he included in the magazine touched on present-day political issues. Yet his editorial policy was in line with his and the larger New Negro movement's goal of fostering the cultural achievements of the "talented tenth" and developing an essential Negro identity through exploration of African themes.¹⁵

By the late 1920s, aspiring visual artists found opportunities to participate in the production of high culture through the patronage of the Harmon Foundation. Founded in 1922 by real estate professional William E. Harmon to recognize and encourage individual achievement among African Americans, the foundation gave prizes in the fields of literature, music, business and industry, science and innovation, education,

¹⁴ On the art of illustration in the Harlem Renaissance, see Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Caroline Gooser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007); and Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). See also Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

¹⁵ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*.

religious service, race relations, as well as fine arts. From 1928 through 1933, the Harmon Foundation developed annual exhibitions of winning artworks, which they circulated among institutions such as black churches, libraries, public schools, and branches of the YMCA in an attempt to encourage artistic activity among African Americans. In many ways, the Harmon Foundation exhibitions were problematic in that they primarily approached African American art from a sociological angle, viewing it as a means for racial uplift and social reform. As one program among many that sought to encourage African Americans to take the initiative to improve their communities, the Harmon Foundation art awards and exhibitions thus continued the tricky pattern of condescending white patronage that characterized the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁶

At the same time, as the first large-scale exhibitions of African American art, the Harmon Foundation shows represented a significant step forward for black artists aspiring to the recognition of their work as fine art. Largely through the leadership of Alain Locke, who was highly involved in the administration of the competition, the Harmon Foundation exhibition program reinforced the orientation of African American artists toward a New Negro strategy of cultural politics, as it encouraged black artists to explore primitive themes and thus display the high cultural value of African American art. In the 1933 exhibition catalogue, for example, Locke celebrated the “very real and vital racialism that is now stirring in the world of the Negro artist” thanks to the Foundation’s sponsorship, declaring that “it is artistically important as a sign of aesthetic objectivity and independence and thus a double emancipation from apologetic timidity

¹⁶ Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007). See also Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, eds., *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum, 1989).

and academic imitation.”¹⁷ Aspiring to success in the Harmon Foundation competitions, the majority of African American visual artists working in the first half of the 1930s either produced portraits and landscapes that conformed with the expectations of the mainstream world of fine art, or followed Locke’s prescription to explore their “ancestral” African roots. As virtually the only patron of the visual arts within African American communities, the Harmon Foundation thus held a great deal of influence over black artists in the early 1930s as they continued to orient themselves toward a politics of high cultural achievement.¹⁸

While African American artists pursued the cultural strategies of the New Negro movement, a group of white artists drawn toward the political left developed a very different form of visual politics, in which they made use of their art to express direct political commentary, thus challenging the distinctions between fine art and mass culture. As the onset of the Depression radicalized a number of artists and intellectuals in the urban North and drew them into the orbit of the Communist Party, they grew increasingly interested in determining the ways in which cultural workers could participate in revolutionary change. Following the Marxist idea that the heightening of the consciousness of the masses was a necessary precondition for revolution, they rejected the notion of art for art’s sake and worked to develop a cultural practice that placed their work at the center of the process of radicalizing the working class.¹⁹

¹⁷ Alain Locke, “The Negro Takes His Place in American Art,” in *Exhibition of Production of Negro Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1933), 11.

¹⁸ Many African American artists studied art in Paris in this period and were therefore also influenced by the emphasis on primitivism in European modernism; see Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ On the idea of art as a consciousness-raiser within Marxist theory, see Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

The shift toward proletarian activism in art took root in particular in the John Reed Club. Formed in 1929, the organization gathered together artists committed to “developing a cultural movement devoted to advancing the interests of the whole working class.”²⁰ Quickly cropping up in cities across the country, John Reed Clubs served as cultural centers for leftist artists, providing a meeting place for discussions and lectures on art and politics, holding art exhibitions both in their own galleries and in traveling shows, and offering artistic training to young artists through JRC-sponsored schools such as the American Artists’ School in New York City. The school focused its efforts on “the development of revolutionary artists,” and by 1933 was offering classes in painting, sculpture, lithography, poster design, and political cartooning. All students were also required to attend a series of nine illustrated lectures on “A Marxian History of Art” by artist Louis Lozowick.²¹ The JRC thus served as an important space within which artists on the left debated and articulated a philosophy of politically useful art and developed a variety of strategies for transforming workers into artists and aligning artists with the working class.²²

The effort of proletarian artists to transform art into a weapon in service of the working class resulted in an explosion of politically-charged images in leftist newspapers and magazines, pamphlets, portfolios of prints, children’s books and magazines, and art exhibitions. Among the most important of the leftist periodicals were the *Daily Worker*, the Communist organ published in New York City but circulated nationally, and the *New*

²⁰ Application for membership to the John Reed Club, in the Philip Evergood Papers, attached to a letter to Evergood from Lydia Gibson, dated March 1, 1933, AAA.

²¹ “John Reed Club Art School Begins Its Third Year Today,” *Daily Worker*, October 23, 1933, p.5.

²² On the John Reed Club and the rise of proletarian art, in particular literature, see Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980).

Masses, a leftist arts magazine whose office was in the same building as the John Reed Club in New York. While the *New Masses* was filled with visual images (particularly drawings and reproductions of prints) from its inception in 1926, the *Daily Worker* actively increased its visual content over the course of the 1930s.²³ In an effort to reach wider audiences, artists contributing drawings, prints, cartoons, and illustrations to these publications also placed their work in the *Liberator*, a Harlem newspaper published by the Communist-affiliated League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), and the *New Pioneer*, a Communist magazine geared toward working-class children.²⁴ These publications essentially served as widely circulating gallery space for leftist artists committed to infusing race and class politics into their work.

In forging their strategies of visual activism, these artists drew on the example of the bohemian socialist artists that had gathered around the cultural and political magazine *The Masses*, published from 1911 to 1917. *The Masses* broke new ground in its merging of culture and politics, as it included artists' drawings, cartoons, and prints as independent items amongst editorials and literary pieces, all with a decidedly socialist political angle. Artists of the Ashcan School, including John Sloan and George Bellows, contributed images of working-class Americans and street scenes to the magazine, while cartoonists such as Art Young visually lampooned capitalist businessmen and

²³ On the history of the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*; Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "'New Masses' and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 12 (Spring, 1989): 56-75; and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "Art on the Political Front in America: From the *Liberator* to Art Front," *Art Journal* 52, no. 1 (Spring, 1993): 72-81. Victor Margolin argues that the leftist journals of the early twentieth century broke new ground in merging visual art and politics beyond a focus on electoral politics; see his "Rebellion, Reform, and Revolution: American Graphic Design for Social Change," *Design Issues* 5, no. 1 (Autumn, 1988): 59-70.

²⁴ The *Liberator* had three names during its existence: it was the *Liberator* from 1929-1932, the *Harlem Liberator* from 1933-1934, and then changed its name again to the *Negro Liberator* until stopped publishing in 1935. On proletarian literature geared toward children, see Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 2.

politicians.²⁵ Yet, while *The Masses* provided an influential model for the leftist artists of the early 1930s, there were key differences between their approach and that of their predecessors. *The Masses* was conceived as a free space within which artists and intellectuals interested in flouting bourgeois social and aesthetic conventions could do so; as such, it had a spirit of playful irreverence. It also included works of art by Sloan and others that, while urban genre scenes depicting working-class types, were not explicitly political. In contrast, leftist periodicals of the early 1930s carried a far more sober tone, including images that were distinctly sectarian in their politics and didactic in their purpose. They also considered racial issues to a much greater degree than leftist art of the early twentieth century.

The goal for proletarian artists, whether they were producing an illustration for one of these periodicals or creating a print or painting for the walls of the John Reed Club gallery, was to craft images that would pack the punch of an immediate political message. As leftist art critic Meyer Schapiro (using the pen name John Kwait) argued in a review of the 1933 JRC exhibition, *The Social Viewpoint in Art*:

The good revolutionary picture is not necessarily a cartoon, but it should have the legibility and pointedness of a cartoon, and like the cartoon it should reach great masses of workers at little expense. A cooperative program of agitational prints for cheap distribution by the thousands, of agitational pictures for every militant occasion, is within the means of the John Reed Club. In this way the artists can be as effective as the writers and speakers, and develop their own powers in the process.²⁶

²⁵ Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses (1911-1917): A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985).

²⁶ John Kwait (Meyer Shapiro), "John Reed Club Art Exhibition," *New Masses* 8 (Feb. 1933): 23.

Proletarian artists thus sought to apply “modernist techniques to graphic satire and political illustration,” in the words of art historian Andrew Hemingway, producing a potent blend of fine art and the political cartoon.²⁷

In tackling racial issues in their art, proletarian artists largely reached out to a white, working-class audience, seeking to reorient their thinking about African Americans in order to bring about a union between black and white workers in the United States. A cartoon by JRC artist William Siegel that appeared in the May, 1930, issue of the *New Masses* and again in the *Daily Worker* that August is particularly revealing of leftist artists’ attempt to visually educate the white working class on matters of race (fig. 1.1).²⁸ The two frames of the cartoon compare “the white bourgeois version of the Negro,” complete with craps shooters, half-naked Harlem dancers, voodoo priests, and testifying slaves, with the Negro “as the white worker knows him,” reading, working in various capacities, and as the victim of lynching. The cartoon transforms race into an intensely visual experience, as though the viewer is given an opportunity to literally see through the eyes of both social classes. While the image conveys the superiority of white workers over the benighted bourgeois, it also serves a didactic purpose, urging the viewer to adopt the worldview attributed to the white worker in the second frame.

This impulse to retrain the vision of the white working class characterized the vast majority of the visual images created against lynching and in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, as artists sought to paint a vivid picture of interracial working-class unity through their depiction of these political issues. While the written rhetoric the CP and the ILD developed around the Scottsboro case often cast the young men as class-conscious

²⁷ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 11.

²⁸ The cartoon appeared in the *Daily Worker* on August 9, 1930.

revolutionaries, images created in service of their cause rarely did, instead emphasizing their victimhood.²⁹ Indeed, white leftist artists' representations of the Scottsboro Boys and lynchings in many ways conform to what Arthur and Joan Kleinman have described as "cultural appropriations of suffering," instances in which political groups or dominant cultures gain power through representing a minority group's experience of violence, pain, or injustice.³⁰ Whatever their intentions, white artists on the left appropriated the Scottsboro case and southern lynching practices and visually transformed them into a Marxist drama in which the villain was the capitalist system, while the identities and individual experiences of the boys and lynch victims themselves fell by the wayside. The results were therefore mixed; while these images divested the young men of their identities and recast their story in order to re-educate and radicalize white workers, they also encouraged interracial organizing and drew whites on the left into civil rights activism. More importantly, these widely circulated images brought the attention of the American and international public to the legal and extralegal injustices faced by African Americans to an unprecedented degree.

In creating illustrations, drawings, and cartoons in service of the Scottsboro and antilynching campaigns, proletarian artists adopted a range of aesthetic and compositional strategies in order to instruct the masses on how to understand the implications of racial violence and legal persecution. Remarkably few of the images they created of the Scottsboro Boys depicted the young men themselves, as leftist artists most often elected to comment on the case more abstractly. By eliminating the nine

²⁹ Dan Carter discusses the CP's wider ideological approach to the case and their rhetorical equation of the boys with revolutionaries; see his *Scottsboro*, ch. 5.

³⁰ Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience: The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds., *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

individuals on trial from the frame altogether, the majority of images produced for the Scottsboro campaign drew viewers' attention away from the experience of the Scottsboro Boys themselves and characterized their story as indicative of the oppression of the larger working class. Although a handful of some of the most influential Scottsboro images did include the boys within the frame, the majority of these stripped the young men of their identities.

An illustration of the Scottsboro Boys by artist Hugo Gellert provides an example of how white artists on the left divested the nine young men of their individuality in order to stress their working-class status (fig. 1.2). A committed member of the Communist Party and Hungarian immigrant who had come to the United States with his parents as a boy, Gellert was at the center of the proletarian movement in art, acting as one of the founding members of the John Reed Club and working as an editor and active contributor to the *New Masses*.³¹ In this drawing, the boys stand grouped together, uniformly dressed in the overalls and simple jackets and sweaters of workers, their faces indistinguishable from one another. Gellert likely based his drawing roughly on a ubiquitous photograph taken upon their arrest and featured in numerous newspaper reports (fig. 1.3), yet in his illustration he removed the background to draw attention to them as a mass of young men and amplified their muscles in order to emphasize their identity as workers. The metal caps on their heads, attached to curling wires reaching up to the top of the frame, suggest the electric chair; divorced from the chair itself, however, these wires appear as modern lynch ropes. Gellert further makes this connection through the caption, which quotes the local Scottsboro newspaper suggesting that "the shortest way out" (i.e., lynching) might

³¹ James Wechsler, "From World War I to the Popular Front: The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 199-229.

have been preferable to the controversial trial. While their bulging muscles suggest their physical might and thus downplay their victimhood, the blankness of their faces removes human emotion from these young men. The Scottsboro Boys thus lose their identities in Gellert's image, as they are transformed into symbols of a working class that is oppressed by industrial capitalism and its legal system. Typical of leftist representations of the boys, the drawing reached a wide range of audiences in the United States and abroad, as it appeared in the *New Masses*, on ILD leaflets used to raise money for the defense, and even on the cover of *Roode Hulp*, the Amsterdam journal of the Dutch Red Aid.³²

Gellert's depiction of the Scottsboro Boys is also exemplary of the ways in which leftist artists emphasized their masculinity, presenting them as physically powerful in the face of capitalist oppression. The symbol of the worker as a man of brute strength emerged as an icon at the onset of the Depression, assuring male workers of the power of the proletariat even at a moment of high unemployment.³³ By representing the Scottsboro Boys as the symbolic male worker, Gellert signaled to viewers the working-class identity of the young men and thus placed their story within a larger Marxist framework. At the same time, the image extends to the young men a masculine strength and power that was a rarity in American popular culture. Gellert is careful to desexualize

³² The drawing appeared in the *New Masses* 7, no. 1 (June, 1931), p.7; ILD leaflets in ILD Papers, box 3, reel 3. For its use in *Roode Hulp*, see James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhaft, "Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April, 2001): 423. For other cartoons that lump the Scottsboro Boys together in a similar manner, see for example "The Frame-Up System," *Daily Worker*, September 15, 1931, p.4; and "Demonstrate Today!" *Daily Worker*, October 8, 1932.

³³ On the emergence of masculine labor iconography in the 1930s, see Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), ch. 3; and Jonathan Weinberg, "I Want Muscle: Male Desire and the Image of the Worker in American Art of the 1930s," in Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, eds., *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). The symbol entered mainstream culture by the second half of the 1930s; see Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

the young African American men while still emphasizing their masculinity, however, in order to counter the “black beast rapist” stereotype that formed the core of southern rhetoric surrounding the Scottsboro Case and the practice of lynching.³⁴ Drawings such as this one thus actively countered interpretations of the case that cast it as an instance of African American sexual predation.

Perhaps more influential in instructing audiences’ understanding of the case was the LSNR-produced, “They Shall Not Die! The Story of Scottsboro in Pictures,” a pamphlet featuring text by African American Communist leader B.D. Amis and illustrations by proletarian artist Anton Refregier.³⁵ More so than any other medium, illustrated pamphlets formed the core of the left’s visual political strategy, as organizers recognized the power of pictures in garnering the attention of the public and galvanizing the masses around issues such as the Scottsboro case.³⁶ A New York City section of the Communist Party issued a “Workers’ Leaflet Manual” to leftist artists and activists, for example, which outlined the importance of creating eye-catching leaflets that included visual material in order to attract public notice. “Illustrations or cartoons are excellent

³⁴ For example, southern agitators Files Crenshaw and Kenneth A. Miller circulated a photograph of Scottsboro defendant Heywood Patterson that made him appear as a sexual predator, with a hole in the crotch of his pants and a menacing look on his face in their pamphlet, *Scottsboro: The Firebrand of Communism* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1936); see Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro*, 47.

³⁵ B.D. Amis and Anton Refregier, “They Shall Not Die! The Story of Scottsboro in Pictures,” (New York: League of Struggle for Negro Rights, 1932). The pamphlet can be viewed on-line at <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/shallnotdie.pdf>. The release of the pamphlet was announced in the *Daily Worker*, see “New Pamphlet on Scottsboro,” March 21, 1932. This pamphlet was one of a number of attempts by leftist artists to tell the Scottsboro story through visual means; see, for example, Juanita Preval, “The Story of the Scottsboro Frame-Up in Pictures,” *Daily Worker*, June 27, 1931; and “The Story of Scottsboro in Pictures,” *Labor Defender*, April, 1935, available in the Schomburg Clippings File (SCF), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

³⁶ See, for example, Robert Minor, “Organizational Aspects of the Scottsboro Case,” *Daily Worker*, May 14, 1931, p. 4.

means of arousing attention if they are well done,” the manual instructed.³⁷ “They Shall Not Die!” began as a series of illustrations Refregier published in the *Liberator* in January of 1932, narrating the story of the Scottsboro Boys in a simple and visually immediate manner for the newspaper’s Harlem readership.³⁸ Amis, who was general secretary of the LSNR and an editor of the *Liberator*, incorporated the illustrations into a pamphlet that went through at least three printings and circulated widely, establishing “They Shall Not Die!” as the rallying cry for Scottsboro activists in the United States and abroad.³⁹

Much like Gellert’s rendering, Refregier’s illustrations in “They Shall Not Die!” represent the Scottsboro Boys in an undifferentiated mass and thus characterize their story as representative of the corruption inherent in a capitalist economic system. The pamphlet begins with a scene in which one of the boys waves goodbye to his parents in a bare but tidy shack as he leaves the family looking for work. While the drawing ostensibly asks a working-class viewer to identify with the boy, the text immediately places his departure within a larger economic context, declaring that, “like millions of other young and adult workers, these boys were out of work. Dying capitalism can no longer provide jobs for its workers.” Pairing cartoon-like sketches that universalize the figures depicted with text that continually draws the reader’s attention back to a Marxist intellectual framework, “They Shall Not Die!” transforms the Scottsboro Boys into

³⁷ “Workers’ Leaflet Manual,” issued by Agitprop Commission of District 6, Communist Party, in Anton Refregier Papers, Box 1, AAA. Apparently, leftist artists not only helped to create pamphlets, but also used them to inform themselves about politics. A letter from Refregier to Sascha Small of the ILD National Office, for example, requests pamphlets on the Scottsboro Case for information for his work on a ballet on the topic, see Refregier to Sascha Small, July 14, 1936, Anton Refregier Papers, Box 2, AAA.

³⁸ These drawings appeared in the January 16, 1932, issue of the *Liberator*, flanking a short “play for workers” to dramatize the case as well as a poem entitled, “They Burn Children in Alabama.”

³⁹ The origin of the slogan was an article Amis wrote for the *Liberator* in June of 1931, reprinted in Walter T. Howard, ed., *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

generic representatives of the working-class masses, de-emphasizing the peculiarities of their case.⁴⁰ At the same time, however, the text at times highlights the unique experience of African American workers, who are afflicted by the twin oppressions of race and class. The pamphlet declares from the very beginning that “Negro workers are always hardest hit in times of unemployment and mass misery,” for example.

It quickly becomes clear in the remaining nine drawings that the pamphlet was geared toward a white audience, as the illustrations repeatedly place the Scottsboro Boys together in an unidentifiable mass in the distance, while the viewer stands among whites in almost every frame. The second drawing, for example, inserts the viewer directly within the clump of white boys ready to attack the Scottsboro boys in the distance on the opposite end of the train car (fig. 1.4). While the text deplores the “system of Jim Crowism in the South,” in which “niggers” must “keep their place,” the image asks us to raise our fists alongside the defenders of that system. In subsequent pages we find ourselves tucked within the posse of white Alabamians stopping the train and holding up the Scottsboro Boys at gunpoint, standing behind the two young women as a sheriff convinces them to charge rape, and among the raging crowd of locals raising the lynch rope outside of the Scottsboro Court House. Despite the young men’s anonymity in the images, however, the text occasionally draws us into their personal experience, intimating for example that they “were brutally beaten with clubs and blackjacks” while in jail, “until they presented a picture of bruised heads, swollen and discolored eyes, cut lips, and blood streaming from many wounds.”

⁴⁰ Refregier’s sketchy images drew on the example of cartoons and drawings created by John Sloan, Boardman Robinson, and Robert Minor for *The Masses* that experimented with a crayon-like style; as Rebecca writes, for these artists “the crayon line took on political significance as a stylistic rebellion against bourgeois illustration, and as the affirmation of a graphic tradition of social protest;” Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 108.

The text and the images in “They Shall Not Die!” are thus peculiarly at odds with one another. B.D. Amis emphasizes the unique experience of African Americans in his text, placing that experience within a larger Marxist framework, yet Refregier’s drawings effectively divorce the viewer from that experience as the Scottsboro Boys remain distant and unidentifiable in virtually every frame. While Amis asserts in his opening salvo that the case has “ripped the cover off the monstrous system of national oppression of the Negro peoples” and expresses his hope that the pamphlet’s images and text will “spread broadcast the revolutionary working-class ideas of solidarity of black and white, and build a fighting alliance of black and white workers,” the pictures ultimately serve to replicate the power relationships such an alliance would seek to destroy. It remains unclear whether this was indeed Refregier’s intention; one might argue that the artist placed white viewers within the lynch crowd in order to make them feel uncomfortable in that position and compel them to reject an allegiance of race that placed them among the oppressors. At the same time, the images in “They Shall Not Die!” did little to encourage viewer identification with the Scottsboro Boys and instead have the effect of alienating viewers from their individual experience.

Artists on the left used similar aesthetic strategies in representing lynching, producing numerous images that drew attention away from the experience of the victim and instead emphasizing the role of lynching in the construction and maintenance of capitalist power structures. Hyman Warsager’s drawing, *The Law*, for example, presents a generic lynch victim hanging from an enormous tree growing out of a classical structure that is labeled “U.S. Courts.”⁴¹ In order to draw connections between the American legal system and European fascism, the court building is adorned with a swastika. The

⁴¹ The image appeared in the *New Masses*, January 9, 1934, p. 7.

drawing thus characterized lynching as stemming directly from systemic inequalities in the United States. Cartoons in the leftist press, in particular, tended to cast the issue of lynching as a symptom of capitalist oppression and thus draw attention away from the lynch victim. A 1930 cartoon by Walter Quirt, for example, transformed the lynch victim into an almost surrealist abstraction, strung up to a tree behind which lurk capitalist bosses, policemen, and a hooded member of the Ku Klux Klan (fig. 1.5). A factory in the distance, as well as a sign reading, “Reds Get the Same!,” assert the idea that lynching is a crime perpetrated against all workers in order to maintain the capitalist economic system.⁴²

To be sure, not all leftist artists’ representations of racial violence and legal injustice drew attention away from the racial experiences of African Americans in order to highlight economic oppression. Julius Bloch, for example, sought to convey the interior life of the Scottsboro Boys through images such as “The Prisoner,” a lithograph that appeared in the *New Masses* in 1933 (fig. 1.6). A Jewish immigrant who had moved to a poor, predominantly black section of North Philadelphia with his family as a young boy, Bloch devoted his artistic life to producing sympathetic images of African Americans.⁴³ His first contribution to the *New Masses*, “The Prisoner” represented his entry onto the margins of the larger leftist art movement, and he continued to publish his art in the magazine throughout the 1930s. Yet the lithograph sets him apart from the work of artists such as Gellert, Refregier, and others, who were closer to the CP and the

⁴² The abstraction in leftist cartoons such as this one was likely influenced by Communist German artist George Grosz, who emigrated to the United States in 1932 and taught at the Art Students League in New York. Grosz was famous for his caricatures of Berlin society in the 1920s that combined abstraction with cutting political satire. See Hans Hess, *George Grosz* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974).

⁴³ Patricia Likos, “Julius Bloch: Portrait of the Artist,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 79, no. 339 (Summer, 1983): 3-24.

New York John Reed Club in that it presents the viewer with a close-up view of the emotional strain experienced by this prisoner who is an allusion to the Scottsboro Boys. Instead of emphasizing the Marxist macro view of a capitalist economic system beating down the working class, Bloch's image offers the details of the prisoner's furrowed brow and pained eyes turned to the sky to appeal to viewers to identify with him on a personal level. Bloch's Scottsboro Boy is a victim of a legal and economic system that oppresses him, yet it is his individual suffering that is on display here as evidence of this fact.

Other images created in defense of the Scottsboro Boys likewise emphasized their pain and suffering over their working-class identity, the most notable of which are Prentiss Taylor's illustrations for "Scottsboro, Limited," a pamphlet he co-produced with poet Langston Hughes. A young white artist, Taylor was drawn into the orbit of the left through printmaking courses he took at the leftist Art Students League in Manhattan and participated in the John Reed Club. Taylor befriended Hughes through their mutual friend Carl Van Vechten, and the pair quickly came together to form the Golden Stair Press, a small outfit through which they published an illustrated book of Hughes's poems, entitled *The Negro Mother*.⁴⁴ Hughes's short proletarian play, "Scottsboro, Limited," drew Taylor's interest to the Scottsboro Case, and he suggested to the poet that they collaborate on a pamphlet in service of the case. On tour in the South promoting *The Negro Mother*, Hughes wrote to Taylor in February of 1932 that he was highly enthusiastic about the idea, although he wanted to make sure all proceeds from the pamphlet would go to the boys themselves, even if this amounted to "only a few cartons

⁴⁴ For more on Hughes and Taylor's friendship, see Bruce Kellner, "Working Friendship: A Harlem Renaissance Footnote," in Ingrid Rose and Roderick S. Quiroz, *The Lithographs of Prentiss Taylor: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1996).

of Lucky Strikes.”⁴⁵ By April, plans for the pamphlet were underway, and Hughes wrote to Taylor, “I’m more excited about this Scottsboro booklet, I believe, than anything I’ve ever published. I believe it will really mean something...”⁴⁶ Taylor responded, “I’m with you in being very excited about the book.”⁴⁷ While Hughes traveled the country on his book tour in the spring and summer of 1932 and then embarked for Russia, Taylor worked to assemble and print the pamphlet, which included four lithographs by Taylor along with four of Hughes’s poems and his play.

The final product was a collection of images and texts that, not unlike “They Shall Not Die!,” offered conflicting messages. Hughes’s poems are laced with provocative sarcasm regarding the American justice system and the town of Scottsboro (“just a little place”), while Taylor’s lithographs stress the boys’ suffering and victimhood. In the poem “Scottsboro,” Hughes places the Scottsboro Boys in a long line of “fighters for the free,” a list that includes revolutionaries such as John Brown, Nat Turner, Jeanne d’Arc, Lenin, and Jesus. The young men pictured in the accompanying illustration, however, seem far from revolutionary; tied together to the prison bars as though crucified, they are once again an indistinguishable mass, although in this case their despair is evident in their hung heads and downward gaze (fig. 1.7). By representing the Scottsboro Boys as black Christs, Taylor echoed Hughes’s evocation of Jesus and challenged dominant conceptions in which whiteness denoted holiness and blackness represented evil.⁴⁸ Upon receiving the image from Taylor, Hughes wrote that he liked “the ascendancy of the

⁴⁵ Langston Hughes (LH) to Prentiss Taylor (PT), dated February 23, 1932, in Prentiss Taylor Papers, AAA.

⁴⁶ LH to PT, dated April 12, 1932, Prentiss Taylor Papers, AAA.

⁴⁷ PT to LH, dated April 16, 1932, Box 154, folder 2852, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁴⁸ See Caroline Goeser, “‘On the Cross of the South’: The Scottsboro Boys as Vernacular Christs in Harlem Renaissance Illustration,” *International Review of African American Art* 19, no.1 (2003): 18-27.

picture,” but complained that their faces were “so helplessly resigned, as though all the strength were quite gone from them.”⁴⁹ Hughes recognized that Taylor’s image in some ways served to soften the radical fervor of the poem that accompanied it, yet he was unwilling to press his friend more firmly than this to change the picture to suit the poem. “I feel that quality of despair most strongly,” Taylor responded, “almost more than I feel the aggressive hope.”⁵⁰

Taylor’s lithograph, “Scottsboro Limited,” which graced the cover of the pamphlet and was also reproduced within it, further displayed the Scottsboro boys as victims rather than the aggressive freedom fighters they appeared to be in Hughes’s writings (fig. 1.8). Taylor sent the original version of the image to Hughes, writing that “it is supposed to convey an almost complete passivity – the nullification of action that comes from an overwhelmingly unwarranted and yet immovable sentence.” The viewer looks up at the boys huddled together on an open train car platform, the majority of them kneeling or hanging their head in supplication, while two of them raise a hand to the sky to implore how they reached their present state of sorrow. “And there above their heads are the telephone wires like a gallows,” wrote Taylor.⁵¹ In a manner not dissimilar to Gellert’s drawing, Taylor’s print uses wires to represent the lynch rope of the industrial capitalist system, yet Taylor’s Scottsboro Boys are deflated and anguished, while Gellert’s appear powerful yet devoid of emotion. Taylor’s work thus drew on Christian iconography, stressing their passive martyrdom, which other leftist artists more closely affiliated with the CP avoided.

⁴⁹ LH to PT, dated April 23, 1932, in Prentiss Taylor Papers, AAA.

⁵⁰ PT to LH, dated April 25, 1932, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵¹ PT to LH, postmarked December 1, 1931, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Indeed, while Hughes and Taylor both shared a leftist political orientation, Taylor was far more critical of the CP and less radical in his beliefs than Hughes; this likely explains the tensions between the illustrations and writings in “Scottsboro, Limited.” Taylor wrote extensively on his views of the Communist Party to Hughes, complaining that they lacked integrity when it came to the Scottsboro case. Yet he applauded their “ideal of a coalition of the downtrodden”; “Don’t think I’m utterly damning the Communists in this letter – I am only deploring their tactics rather than their ideals,” he wrote defensively to his friend.⁵² Taylor believed that he and Hughes shared the same political views, writing that “we’re both communist in idea but not in party.”⁵³ Yet their correspondence is riddled with political tensions, as Taylor resisted including Hughes’s more radical writings in the pamphlet. “In a word I am for evolution and not revolution,” he wrote.⁵⁴ The pamphlet proved a financial flop for Hughes and Taylor, in part because Hughes was in the Soviet Union by the time it was ready for release and was therefore unable to promote it. Yet Taylor believed the pamphlet’s confused politics were also partly to blame; he joked to Hughes that he might try to sell it on 14th Street in Manhattan, imagining “one Scottsboro Limited in 2 hammocks suspended from the trees of Communism and Conservatism – swinging with Jesus who carries a hammer & scythe.”⁵⁵ “Well, the Lord knows we meant well,” Hughes wrote to Taylor from Moscow, “but there ain’t no Lord! God help us!”⁵⁶

⁵² PT to LH, dated February 23, 1932, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵³ PT to LH, dated April 16, 1932, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵⁴ PT to LH, dated February 25, 1932, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵⁵ PT to LH, dated April 1, 1933, in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 154, folder 2852, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵⁶ LH to PT, dated March 6, 1933, Prentiss Taylor Papers, AAA.

Perhaps because they drew on religious themes and stressed passivity rather than working-class strength, representations of the Scottsboro Boys such as those created by Bloch and Taylor were relatively rare among the myriad of visual images produced in service of their case. Instead, the majority of proletarian artists, when they included the boys themselves within the frame at all, followed the aesthetic strategies of Gellert and Refregier, representing them as generic stock figures to convey working-class solidarity. Communist children's book illustrator Juanita Preval's cover of the *New Pioneer* for February, 1934, best exemplifies leftist artists' tendency to appropriate them for leftist political purposes (fig. 1.9). Here the nine young men are reduced to a cluster of hairless heads outlined in red on a black background, while circled around them are a group of stick-figure workers' children, dressed in the uniform of the Communist Young Pioneers. Emerging from the left side of the frame are the heads of three young activists, a white girl, and African American boy, and a white boy whose angry face dominates the image. This young man is presumably the speaker of the caption written above the scene: "The Scottsboro Boys are Ours! Save Them!" The drawing provides a strong endorsement of interracial solidarity and activism in its layering of young black and white activists and declaration of inclusiveness. At the same time, it is also indicative of the ways in which activists on the left and the artists who worked alongside them took ownership of the case, representing the nine defendants as literally the property of the Communist movement.

By transforming the Scottsboro Boys and lynch victims into symbols of the working-class struggle, leftist artists drew viewers' attention away from the specifics of the case and thus shaped their understanding of its larger meaning. Artists achieved this

goal even more effectively by leaving the victims themselves out of the frame altogether, instead producing cartoons, prints, and illustrations that commented on the case more abstractly. Following Meyer Schapiro's philosophy that the proletarian image could best communicate its politics if it had the "legibility and pointedness of a cartoon," artists on the left were prolific in their production of single-frame cartoons and illustrations that worked to convey the place of lynching and the Scottsboro Case within the larger working-class struggle in a visually immediate manner. While these images attacked the case from a variety of different angles and used a range of aesthetic strategies, in each case the artist sought to radicalize viewers by grabbing their attention and instructing them on how exactly the case fit within a Marxist intellectual worldview.

Jacob Burck's cartoon, "Equality Before the Law," provides one example of how leftist artists visually equated the Scottsboro case with other working-class struggles (fig. 1.10). Never a member of the CP himself, Burck was prolific in his production of radical cartoons and illustrations for the *Daily Worker*, the *Liberator*, and the *New Masses*. In this cartoon, an enormous sword representing capitalist oppression dominates the frame, acting as a gallows for both the South and the North. Below the gallows are a series of tombstones documenting capitalism's working-class victims in both regions, while a cluster of men marked as the "Scottsboro Nine" stand at the southern edge of the frame and the "Patterson Five" hold a similar position on the northern end. In a simple composition, Burck conveys a complex view of the case, placing it directly within the long history of labor activism and working-class oppression, despite the fact that the Scottsboro Boys were not labor activists themselves. The cartoon also downplays distinctions between and confuses southern lynching and legal injustice faced by African

Americans and northern labor struggles; the 1917 lynching of white IWW leader Frank Little in Butte, Montana, appears on the southern side of the image, example. Burck thus erases the racial implications of the Scottsboro case, instead visually counseling readers of the *Daily Worker* to understand their struggle as no different than that of other workers in the past and the present, North or South.⁵⁷

A large number of the proletarian cartoons commenting on the Scottsboro case similarly drew attention away from the Scottsboro Boys, instead focusing on the utter depravity of the white, southern ruling class. The corpulence of the southern “bosses” and northern industrial titans was a common theme in leftist drawings, suggesting that the rich grew fat off of profits at the expense of the starving poor. A 1933 cartoon by radical artist Phil Bard, for example, presents the “Scottsboro Prosecution” as a frightfully large figure in an industrialist’s three-piece suit, emerging from the dark like a monster with pointy teeth and a crippled, enraged hand coming at the viewer (fig. 1.11). He stands next to the courtroom bench, where his top hat holds a lynch rope in place, and explodes, “WE TREAT NIGGERS RIGHT, I TELL YOU!.” The portrayal of the ruling class as gluttonously overweight was hardly new in political cartoons; cartoonist Thomas Nast, for example, became famous in the late nineteenth century for his drawings of Boss Tweed that emphasized the corrupt politician’s large girth, beady eyes, and bulbous nose.⁵⁸ Cartoonist Art Young adopted this convention in lampooning powerful capitalists in the pages of *The Masses*.⁵⁹ Artists on the left revived this theme of the corpulent boss in the Depression era, at a time when it was especially likely to strike a chord with

⁵⁷ For a similar image by Burck that equates the Scottsboro case with other working-class struggles, see “The Frame-Up System,” *Daily Worker*, September 15, 1931, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Roger A. Fischer, *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1996), 10.

⁵⁹ Rebecca Zurier, *Art for The Masses*, 55.

workers having a hard time feeding their own families. Cartoons such as these thus seek to recruit viewers to the cause by focusing on the gluttony and corruption of capitalists rather than relating the experience of the Scottsboro Boys themselves.⁶⁰

By filling leftist newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets with these caricatures of the capitalist system, proletarian artists made use of the Scottsboro case to heighten the class-consciousness of viewers. Cartoonists further sharpened class conflict by creating a range of images attacking the NAACP's role in the case, effectively condensing the CP's verbal vitriol into a potent visual form. Drawings maligning the NAACP were particularly prevalent in the LSNR's *Liberator*, as the newspaper sought to secure the support of African Americans for the Communist cause. A 1931 *Liberator* cartoon by Juanita Preval, for example, adopts the aesthetic strategy of representing the "bosses" as an overweight man in a tuxedo and top hat, yet in this case it is the NAACP who dons the costume of the oppressor (fig. 1.12). He stands before a raging interracial mob of workers on their way to stop the Ku Klux Klan from stringing the Scottsboro Boys up in the tree branches, exclaiming, "IT'S ALL RIGHT, THEY'RE LYNCHING THEM LEGALLY." The caption accuses the NAACP of trying to "strangle" mass protest against legal injustice. Preval thus skillfully reverses the standard drama of the lynching, casting the NAACP as the lyncher, holding back a benevolent mob that wants to use the power of mass action to *stop* the lynching rather than carry it out. Much like the CP and ILD's rhetoric attacking the NAACP, Preval's image also seeks to unite African

⁶⁰ Fat and often frightening representations of southern bosses, judges, and sheriffs were ubiquitous in the leftist press in this period. For a few examples, see Jacob Burck, "Demonstrate Today!" *Daily Worker*, October 8, 1932; Burck, "Blossom Time in the Sunny South," *Daily Worker*, May 16, 1932; Hugo Gellert, "Halt the Execution!" *New Masses* 7, no. 11 (May, 1932); William Gropper, "Decatur Justice," *Daily Worker*, November 30, 1933; and Gropper, "The Fight Must Go On, They Shall Not Die!" *Negro Liberator*, October 13, 1934.

American and white workers around a common working-class identity, stressing the collusion of the black bourgeoisie with the white ruling class. Cartoons offered activists on the left an opportunity to deliver that message with an immediacy and impact that was missing from lengthy texts.⁶¹

While lynching and the Scottsboro case gave proletarian artists particularly good material for heightening viewers' antipathy toward the capitalist classes, it also offered them an opportunity to stress the importance of interracial unity within the working class. Giant, brawny black and white workers clad in overalls were ubiquitous figures on the pages of the leftist press, typically working together to "Smash the Scottsboro Lynch Verdict," represented as a gallows, with a hammer recalling the symbol of the Soviet Union.⁶² Interracial working-class unity and friendship were particularly prevalent in images geared toward children, as artists sought to use the Scottsboro Case as a lesson on legal and economic injustice for young Communists as well as a rallying point around which they could come together across racial boundaries. William Gropper's October, 1932, cover of the *New Pioneer*, for example, used spare, modernist aesthetics to encourage interracial friendship among children, using the Scottsboro Boys as a uniting issue (fig. 1.13). Against a background of green and white panels, a white boy embraces a black boy from behind as he hitches a ride on the black boy's scooter, which bears a flag demanding that authorities "FREE THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS." By placing black and white working-class children and adults in such close physical proximity to one

⁶¹ For additional examples of cartoons and illustrations attacking the NAACP, see Holloway, "Being Nice About It," *Liberator*, July 25, 1931; Hugo Gellert, "The Scottsboro Legal Lynching," *New Masses* (Feb., 1932); Dan Rico, "Sweep the Misleaders Aside," *Harlem Liberator*, April 29, 1933; and Ingliss, "N.A.A.C.P. 'Leadership,'" *Harlem Liberator*, July 29, 1933.

⁶² See, for example, "SMASH SCOTTSBORO FRAME-UP!" *Liberator*, January 16, 1932; Burck, "SMASH THE SCOTTSBORO LYNCH VERDICT!," *Daily Worker*, May 7, 1932; Burck, "Back Into Their Faces!" *Daily Worker*, April 11, 1933, and C.J. Yeorgans, "Stay the Hands of the Executioner," *Harlem Liberator*, March 17, 1934, for variations on this theme.

another, images such as these offered a relatively radical message of racial equality and thus further cemented the left's commitment to fighting racism within the working class and American society more generally.

If the majority of artists creating images in service of the Scottsboro and antilynching campaigns thus drew attention away from the details of the case itself in order to advance the larger goals and intellectual framework of the CP, they did so largely because they hoped to produce art that could motivate the masses into activism, not only around the Scottsboro case but other issues that were important to the left in the early 1930s. Recasting the Scottsboro story and lynching narrative to include characters such as obese white capitalists, their supposedly corrupt African American counterparts, victimized Scottsboro Boys, and muscular black and white workers coming together to destroy the system allowed proletarian artists an opportunity to narrate the Marxist drama in a simple and visually compelling way, serving an important didactic function in the larger leftist political movement of the period. These images contributed significantly to the CP and ILD's efforts to rally large groups of people in mass action around the Scottsboro case, bringing the protest tactics of the labor movement to civil rights activism in unprecedented and long-lasting ways. The cartoons themselves often speak to this larger goal, pointing to mass protest as the only way to pressure the courts to make a fair ruling on the case. In a 1934 Burck cartoon in the *Harlem Liberator*, for example, the figure of the muscular giant worker represents the entire working class as they engage in mass protest, a phrase emblazoned on the bib of his overalls; he uses his considerable might to guide the hand of a frightened judge representing the Supreme Court as the

judge writes his decision on the Scottsboro case.⁶³ Other cartoons depicted the masses engaged in protest and pressed viewers to join in the movement; these images worked alongside myriad photographs of actual rallies in the leftist press to further the momentum of the protest campaign. Moreover, they extended that campaign's power as they captured it in ink and distributed it beyond the event itself, placing it directly in the living rooms of readers of leftist newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets.

Cartoons appearing the black press in the early 1930s offer a striking contrast to these leftist images, demonstrating the degree to which they were pitched towards a white, working-class audience. Black newspapers also increased their use of photographs, cartoons, and other types of illustrations during the early 1930s, resulting in widely-distributed news media that communicated information through both image and word to an unprecedented degree. In the midst of what Jannette L. Dates calls the "age of the black publisher," a period spanning from 1910-1954 in which black newspapers were at their widest circulation and most influential in the African American community, the black press made significant strides towards providing a political education for its readers through images in the Depression era.⁶⁴ African American cartoonists working for the black press thus forged an alternative visual politics to that of fine artists in the African American community, taking a cue from leftist art in their attempt to create images that conveyed a direct political message and tried to motivate activism on the part of viewers. Yet, while artists on the left experimented with a variety of strategies for putting art in

⁶³ Untitled cartoon, *Harlem Liberator*, April 21, 1934. For other examples of the mass action theme, see "Millions Fight That These Nine May Be Free," *Liberator*, March 18, 1932; "Only Mass Pressure Can Free Them," *Liberator*, July 15, 1932; the cover of the *New Pioneer*, May 1933; Burck, "The Workers' Verdict!" *Daily Worker*, December 7, 1933; Burck, "They Hear!" *Daily Worker*, January 11, 1935; and Burck cartoon in the *Harlem Liberator*, April 15, 1935.

⁶⁴ Jannette L. Dates, "Print News," in Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, eds., *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), 353. As Dates points out, the black press reached its highest circulation during World War II.

service of politics, African American cartoonists working for the black press largely limited their work to the pages of black newspapers. Moreover, their aesthetic choices in representing lynching and the Scottsboro case differed greatly from those of white artists on the left.

Most significantly, African American cartoonists humanized the Scottsboro Boys to a far greater degree in the images they created, effectively asking the predominantly northern black readership to identify with the experience of racial oppression in the South. Jay Jackson's *Chicago Defender* cartoon, "A Vision or Reality?," for example, places the viewer directly among the nine young men in jail as they look together upon a newspaper showing the female figure of justice, blindfolded (fig. 1.14).⁶⁵ One of the young men asks his fellow defendants, "Wonder if she'll ever get down here?" Because it inserts the viewer among the Scottsboro Boys as they consider their fate, Jackson's cartoon has a very different effect than the drawings of Anton Refregier. Cartoonists for the black press further asked viewers to identify with lynch victims and the Scottsboro defendants by emphasizing the effects of legal injustice and racial violence on African American mothers. A cartoon by Henry Brown, for example, depicts the dark silhouette of an old woman representing "the mothers of a race," casting a long shadow on the tall bench of the Supreme Court, upon which sits a scroll representing the Scottsboro Case.⁶⁶ Another cartoon by Jay Jackson depicts a group of portly white Senators considering the

⁶⁵ Jay Jackson, "A Vision or Reality?," *Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1936, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Henry Brown, "Waiting," *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1932, p. 14. The mothers of the Scottsboro Boys played a central role in the campaign to free them, particularly among activists on the left; see Miller, Pennybacker, and Rosenhaft, "Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys." Interestingly, the black press included images of the Scottsboro mothers far more frequently than the leftist press. See, for example, "Fighting for Sons," *Chicago Defender*, June 25, 1932, p. 22; "Pleads for Sons," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 19, 1933, p. 1; "Scottsboro Mothers Honored," *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1934, p. 4; and "Five of Scottsboro Mothers," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 5, 1934, p. 1.

anti-lynch bill and asks them to “consider the mother” of the lynch victim.⁶⁷ Tapping into a wider cultural tendency in the 1930s to draw attention to black mothers, such images worked both to humanize the Scottsboro Boys and lynch victims by presenting them as sons of grieving mothers and to characterize their legal struggle as a universal struggle affecting all African Americans.⁶⁸

As political cartoonists, artists working for the black press also created images that moved beyond the direct experience of the Scottsboro Boys, lynch victims, and their families and instead commented on these issues more abstractly, much like artists on the left. Yet unlike leftist cartoons and drawings in pamphlets, these images focused their attention on the legal injustice faced by African Americans in particular, rather than identifying with the working class. Numerous cartoons in the black press included a classical figure of Justice as a white female figure draped in robes, often carrying a sword and scales, and occasionally blindfolded. A *Chicago Defender* cartoon by Leslie Rogers, for example, shows her trapped “Under the ‘Law’” in the southern courts, trying to clutch her way out of a pile of books with titles like “Race Hatred,” “Lily-White Jury System,” and “Disfranchisement” (fig. 1.15).⁶⁹ Other depictions of Justice offer her the upper hand, as she works to conquer “Southern Hate” and reverse the Scottsboro decision.⁷⁰

African American cartoonists also frequently substituted Uncle Sam for Justice, showing

⁶⁷ Jay Jackson, “Consider the Mother,” *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1937, p. 17.

⁶⁸ See Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Interestingly, Feldstein points mainly to negative images of black mothers, characterized as matriarchs and blamed for racial inequality, yet these images in the black press are largely positive.

⁶⁹ L. Rogers, “Under the ‘Law’ in Dixie!,” *Chicago Defender*, August 18, 1934, p. 14. For a more sexualized vision of southern destruction of Justice, see Henry Brown’s “The Great American Tragedy,” which shows a white man labeled “Hate” strangling a reclining female Justice, *Chicago Defender*, September 17, 1932, p. 14.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Henry Brown, “He Must Not Enter Here,” *Chicago Defender*, April 9, 1932, p. 14; Henry Brown, “Justice Must Come Forth and Truth Must Have a Hearing – Even in Scottsboro,” *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1933, p. 14; and L. Rogers, “That Can’t Be My Work!,” *Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1934, p. 14.

him as a man of noble strength taking southern advocates of Jim Crow and lynching to task for ignoring the tenets of American equality, or physically preventing the execution of the Scottsboro Boys.⁷¹ Such images conveyed a strong faith in the American justice system, particularly the Supreme Court, to ultimately fulfill its promise of providing equal rights to African Americans. While leftist cartoons made use of the political issues of lynching and the Scottsboro trial as illustrations of the fundamental flaws in American capitalism and, by extension, the government that supported it, cartoonists for the black press presented these issues as examples of the ways in which an essentially good legal and economic system had been perverted.⁷² Cartoons in the black press thus occasionally dealt in abstractions much like leftist cartoons, yet their message remained focused on the experience of African Americans as members of a society that promised equal rights in theory but rarely offered them in practice.

Readers of the black and leftist press, attendees of political rallies, and individuals walking the city streets were inundated with images related to lynching and the Scottsboro case in the first half of the 1930s, as artists and activists recruited support for racial and economic equality through illustrated pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines. While these images circulated widely and likely contributed greatly to the ability of the CP to rally the masses behind the Scottsboro case, another more extensive attempt to narrate the Scottsboro story visually for the working-class masses never reached its intended audience. Recently rediscovered in the papers of Joseph North, a Communist

⁷¹ See Henry Brown, "This declaration should ring around the world today, but instead we hear the sound of the mob and smell the stench of burning flesh," *Chicago Defender*, July 5, 1930, p. A2; Henry Brown, "This Would Be a Good Code to Adopt," *Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1933, p. 14; Jay Jackson, "Foiled Again!," *Chicago Defender*, April 6, 1935, p. 14.

⁷² For a powerful cartoon and "sermon" that expressed faith even in the Supreme Court of Alabama to free the Scottsboro Boys, see Henry Brown, "Law Not Men," *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1931, p. 12.

editor of the *New Masses*, “Scottsboro, Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts” is a collection of fifty-three prints with pithy captions that tells the story of the Scottsboro case and placed it within the larger history of capitalism in the United States.⁷³ Nothing is known about the artists aside from their names, Lin Shi Khan and Tony Perez, and the location of the book’s origin, Seattle. The book’s connection with North, however, as well as the fact that the introduction was written by proletarian writer Mike Gold, suggest that Khan and Perez held connections to the New York left. Dating to 1935, the print collection emerged at the end of the proletarian period of leftist art, and it constitutes the most comprehensive attempt to incorporate a wide range of proletarian aesthetic strategies in a visual narration of the case and a call to arms to the working-class masses. Gold understood the collection of prints to be not only an important contribution to the Scottsboro campaign, but also “another rivet in that skyscraper of a new art we are building in our time, an art that has come out of the mephitic bourgeois studio, and into the streets and fields where the masses live and struggle for a new and better world.”⁷⁴ As such, it deserves exploration here despite the fact that few viewers likely ever saw it.

“Scottsboro, Alabama” is a tour de force indictment of capitalism in the United States that illustrates the long history of slavery and racial oppression in order to place the Scottsboro trial in a larger context. More extensively than any other pamphlet, cartoon, or drawing, the set of prints takes the wide view of the case, transforming it into one small chapter in the saga of American capitalist exploitation. As historian Andrew

⁷³ The book was published in 2002, edited by Andrew H. Lee, with an introduction by Robin D.G. Kelley; see Lin Shi Khan and Tony Perez, *Scottsboro, Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts* (New York: New York University Press, 2002). The book is available on-line as an ACLS Humanities e-book at <http://www.humanitiesebook.org>. Image from a draft copy of the book are also accessible on-line at <http://www.wolfsonian.org/collections/c9/scottsboro.html>. For an analysis of the sexual politics of the prints, see Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), ch. 2.

⁷⁴ Mike Gold, “Foreword,” *Scottsboro, Alabama*, 25.

Lee points out, nowhere in the book is there a specific reference to the South, indicating that the artists meant to implicate the entire American economic and legal system.⁷⁵

Beginning with the importation of slaves to the Americas and ending with the mass action of a racially unified working class, the book made use of the panoply of stock characters and aesthetic strategies that characterized proletarian representations of lynching and the Scottsboro case in the first half of the 1930s.

In order to organize the fifty-three prints into a coherent narrative, Khan and Perez divided their story into three parts. The first part, “Negroes Come to America,” offers viewers a Marxist history of the slave trade and racial stratification of the working class post-slavery as an explanation for the Scottsboro case. The artists’ simple black and white block linoleum prints present a stark vision of oppression and exploitation, while short captions guide viewers’ readings of the images. The story begins with a black family lounging naked and happy in an idyllic African Eden while a giant serpent marked by dollar signs looms over them; “American slave traders dragged the Negroes from their native land,” the caption tells us. A later image emphasize slaves’ dejection and make use of familiar visual conventions; here huge, muscular slaves are chained together by their necks and wrists, their heads hung low as they submit to the “plantation boss” behind them, dressed anachronistically in the characteristic suit and tophat of the capitalist. The section draws the viewer through slavery and into freedom, yet throughout, the artists emphasize the ways in which the ruling classes used violence to keep African Americans in their place whether as slaves or as wage laborers, conditions which hold little distinction for Khan and Perez.

⁷⁵ Andrew H. Lee, *Scottsboro, Alabama*, 17n4.

Khan and Perez narrate this economic history largely in order to convince white workers that their lot and that of African American workers was largely the same. A particularly blunt series of prints towards the end of the first section convey this message directly. A caption instructs readers that “the boss uses every means to keep the Negro separated from the white,” while the accompanying print shows a large sign declaring, “NIGGERS! DON’T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU IN THIS TOWN”. An arrow points toward a small village in the distance, complete with an ironic cross-bedecked church tower, behind which the sun is ominously setting. Gathered behind the sign are the instruments used by the “boss” to separate the Negro from the white: a lynch rope and gallows, and a set of rifles and bayonets. To further emphasize the point that racial antagonisms were artificial, Khan and Perez followed this print with two images of working-class families, one black and one white, each struggling to make ends meet. The captions inform us that “the misery and starvation that haunts the home of the Negro...connects him with the hunger stricken home of the white worker.” Through these three prints, the artists summed up the history of African American oppression by suggesting it was an experience black and white workers shared.

Having provided viewers with the economic causes of racial stratification in the United States as context, “Scottsboro, Alabama” then goes on to explore the Scottsboro case as a specific result of this history in a section entitled “The Nine Boys of Scottsboro.” Like Anton Refregier’s rendering of the story in “They Shall Not Die!,” the prints in this section narrate the Scottsboro Boys’ ordeal as a result of their economic station, although Khan and Perez present a far more sympathetic vision of the boys. The section begins with a print that immediately draws the viewer into the experience of the

young men, showing one of them in worker's overalls, crouched down under the weight of a heavy cloud of rejection. The anguish on his face is palpable as he attempts to escape from the words hanging above his head, charging him to "GET OUT" because he's "NOT WANTED." Other prints in the section follow the leftist convention of demonizing the white ruling class, including a depiction of fat, cigar-smoking white men conspiratorially crafting the image of the Scottsboro Boys as rapists in order to divide the working class. Khan and Perez also included more abstract, cartoon-like indictments of the capitalist order, such as a stunning print that shows a member of the Klan with a swastika on his robe taking the place of the Statue of Liberty as she flees the scene; in the place of her torch he holds a lynch rope, while in the other he clutches a smoking factory. In telling the Scottsboro story, Khan and Perez thus incorporated as many visual strategies as they could in order to reach and radicalize viewers, offering them a view inside the personal experience of the Scottsboro Boys and an opportunity to compare that experience with larger economic truths as the artists understood them.

The final section of the book, entitled "Black and White Unite," celebrates the role of the ILD in defending the boys and encourages viewers to join in the international movement to free them. Here Khan and Perez once again incorporated familiar aesthetic strategies, showing crowds of workers rallying for the cause and stressing the importance of mass action. In one print, a giant, muscular worker in overalls representing the ILD breaks a wire to stop the execution, while a much smaller but considerably fatter white boss stands helpless beneath him. Another image shows three male workers, one white, one African American, and one Asian American, walking arm in arm in unified support for the cause. Lest viewers missed the overall message of the book, the final print sums

up what Khan and Perez hoped they would take away; here a crowd of protesters, so dense that they are little more than a series of dots denoting heads, mass together to form the arm on a single raised fist to suggest working-class solidarity. With no caption to guide the viewer's interpretation, this image evidently spoke for itself.

While cartoons in the leftist press packed the punch of a single image, reaching out to viewers from the newspaper page, a collection of images like "Scottsboro, Alabama" had the potential to offer a more extended treatment of the history behind and implications of the case. The narrative it presented moved back and forth between a micro and macro view of the Scottsboro Boys' ordeal, at times giving viewers access into the interior lives of the young men themselves and asking them to recognize their suffering as similar to the viewer's own, while also appealing to viewers' more intellectual sense of injustice when considering the larger historical and economic factors at work. More than any other proletarian images produced for the Scottsboro campaign, "Scottsboro, Alabama" also emphasized the story's racial implications, maintaining a focus throughout the series on the unique ways in which racial and class oppression intertwined for African Americans. For these reasons, the book might have had tremendous impact in shaping public understanding of the case had it been more widely circulated or appeared earlier. As it was, it emerged at the dawn of the Popular Front, a moment during which the left toned down its revolutionary rhetoric, abandoning the goals of class conflict in order to forge antifascist coalitions with the liberals they previously attacked. Khan and Perez also completed the volume just as the Scottsboro campaign began to lose its public momentum, as repeated negative verdicts caused leftist activists to lose faith and turn their attention to other issues. A masterpiece of proletarian

art, “Scottsboro, Alabama” remained uncirculated and unseen as the political winds shifted in the middle of the 1930s.

While the shift to the Popular Front turned the majority of leftist artists away from straightforward revolutionary politics in their art, the proletarian art movement nevertheless firmly established the idea of art as an effective political weapon, deeply influencing progressive political activism in the United States long after the overt class antagonisms of the early 1930s passed. This legacy is especially evident in a set of antilynching art exhibitions held in New York City in 1935, just before the onset of the Popular Front. The idea for a politically focused art exhibition was not new; indeed, exhibitions were a central part of the John Reed Club’s strategy for spreading interest in art within the working class and rallying viewers around a variety of leftist causes. Among these was an “International Scottsboro Exhibition” in 1934, which included artworks and material culture related to the case, such as protest telegrams from as far away as South Africa and articles related to the international speaking tour of one of the Scottsboro Boys’ mothers, Ada Wright.⁷⁶ Most likely drawing on these political exhibitions as inspiration, NAACP executive secretary Walter White planned *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, which opened at the opened at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries at 11 E. 57th Street in New York City on February 15, 1935. Timed to coincide with the

⁷⁶ Frustratingly little evidence of this exhibition remains, apart from a report on it in the *New Masses*; see “Scottsboro Exhibition,” *New Masses* 12 (Sept., 1934): 25. Langston Hughes also organized an art exhibition and sale in San Francisco to raise money for the Scottsboro case through the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, see brochure in Langston Hughes Papers, Box 512, folder 12721, Beinecke Library, Yale University. The date of this event is unknown.

consideration of the Costigan-Wagner Antilynching Bill in Congress, the NAACP exhibition presented a variety of art objects dealing with the subject of lynching in an effort to raise awareness about the issue and persuade viewers to support the passage of the bill. The exhibition aroused the ire of artists on the left, who believed the politics of the NAACP show to be too tepid, causing them to produce their own exhibition sponsored by the John Reed Club, the LSNR, and the ILD. Their competing exhibition, *Struggle for Negro Rights*, opened at the American Contemporary Art (ACA) Gallery just as the NAACP show closed in March. Realizing the close link between the Scottsboro case and lynching, both exhibitions included numerous works related to the trial.⁷⁷

Viewed in the context of visual activism in the early 1930s, the two art shows offer important perspectives on the contribution of artists on the left to the African American freedom struggle by the middle of the 1930s. Indeed, the very fact that the NAACP and the LSNR were able to pull together so many works on the topic of racial violence and inequality in only a matter of a few short months suggests the degree to which American artists of a variety of political persuasions had taken up civil rights politics in their work by 1935. This included works by African American artists, such as Samuel Brown, Hale Woodruff, and others, who were increasingly turning to political themes in their work by the middle of the decade. Moreover, the NAACP's adoption of

⁷⁷ These exhibitions have been well-examined by art historians; see, for example, Marlene Park, "Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," *Prospects* 18 (1993): 311-65; Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Hanging on Their Walls: *An Art Commentary On Lynching*, the Forgotten 1935 Art Exhibition," in Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker, eds., *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13 (Spring 1999): 10-39; and Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), Ch. 3. These works largely consider the exhibitions as isolated events, rather than placing them within the larger context of political art in the 1930s.

leftist tactics of visual activism also suggests the degree to which the use of art as a political weapon had become an integral part of the mainstream civil rights movement.

On the surface, the JRC artists' outcry against the NAACP exhibition might appear to be petty bickering over control of visual activism on behalf of civil rights. Yet a closer look at their stated objections suggests that the controversy was not over whether the NAACP should represent lynching and Scottsboro in an exhibition, but rather how they presented it. In their call for contributions to their competing exhibition, the JRC took issue with the NAACP exhibition's tendency to isolate the "struggle against lynching from struggle for all civil rights of Negro people." They were particularly rankled by the fact that in developing their exhibition, "the N.A.A.C.P. has completely ignored the Scottsboro case, the most outrageous crime against Negroes of our time...The N.A.A.C.P. exhibition is misleading inasmuch as it evades the whole question of the oppression of the Negro people."⁷⁸ Just as the cartoons, prints, pamphlets and drawings created by leftist artists sought to contextualize lynching and the Scottsboro case in a larger history of economic and racial oppression, the JRC exhibition placed the issue of lynching within a total framework of injustice. African American Communist activist Angelo Herndon's essay for the catalogue for the *Struggle for Negro Rights* further emphasized this difference in aesthetic and political philosophies, arguing that unlike the NAACP exhibition, "the pictures in the A.C.A. Gallery – they FIGHT! They fight the Scottsboro frame-up and the Klan and the chain-gang. They fight Negro and white mis-leaders, who say we can make everything come right by going to the Big

⁷⁸ "A Call For a United Anti-Lynching Exhibition," *Daily Worker*, February 16, 1935; "A Call for A United Anti-Lynch Exhibition," *New Masses* 14 (February 26, 1935): 21.

Boss.”⁷⁹ Images featured in the show therefore moved beyond simply the depiction of lynching, ranging in subject matter from interracial labor activism to the Scottsboro case.

Reviewers of the exhibitions in the leftist press further reinforced this idea of the necessity of providing a wider intellectual framework in order for art to be politically effective. The *New Masses* art critic Stephen Alexander, for example, complained that in the NAACP exhibition, “the general impression is one of *pleading* for reform...of polite appeal to the good impulses of our ‘better people.’” While the art chosen by the NAACP attempted to tug at viewers’ heartstrings by showing the suffering of lynch victims, “there is little attempt to explain lynching or attack the forces responsible for it,” as the “fighting pictures” of the JRC/LSNR exhibition did. Alexander admitted that “there is undeniable anti-lynch propaganda value in powerful emotional presentations,” yet he stipulated firmly that “it is not enough merely to arouse indignation or sympathy or horror. We must also *explain* lynching graphically or plastically.”⁸⁰ Alexander’s review thus articulated the key differences between the aesthetic political philosophies of the NAACP and activist artists on the left. By recruiting the sponsorship of wealthy patrons, the NAACP played on the high culture characteristics of an art exhibition, using images to excite the emotions of those in power in order to spur them to political action. In many ways, the NAACP exhibition was a blending of the New Negro movement’s orientation toward carving out a space for African Americans in the realm of fine art with the left’s commitment to employing art for direct political activism. For the JRC, on the other hand, the purpose of politicized art was to provide a visual education to the masses – to appeal to their intellect by helping them understand the place of racial violence and legal

⁷⁹ Angelo Herndon, “Pictures Can Fight!” in catalogue for *Struggle for Negro Rights*, which can be found in the Anton Refregier Papers, box 1, AAA.

⁸⁰ Stephen Alexander, “Art,” *New Masses* 14, no. 12 (March 19, 1935): 29.

injustice in a larger system of economic oppression and exploitation. Despite these aims, their show nevertheless took place in downtown Manhattan and thus competed with the NAACP exhibition in reaching the elite.

For all of the proletarian artists' and activists' protest, in retrospect the NAACP exhibition was far more influenced by the ideologies and political tactics of the left than proletarian artists understood. Contrary to the claims of the JRC and Angelo Herndon, the NAACP exhibition included a range of artworks that depicted not only the practice of lynching, but the Scottsboro case, as well, including Julius Bloch's *Prisoner* and Prentiss Taylor's *Christ in Alabama*. While these images tended toward an emotional appeal, their inclusion in the show demonstrates the degree to which the NAACP understood and wished to point to the larger connections between legal injustice, violence, and racial oppression in their exhibition. To further convey these links, an introductory essay by the author Sherwood Anderson placed the practice of lynching within a larger economic context, in this case explaining it as a result of poverty among poor whites in the South; "to strike only at the lynchers," he argued, "is to strike always at the surface of the evil," he argued.⁸¹ The exhibition catalogue for *An Art Commentary on Lynching* thus contextualized racial violence as a result of larger economic and political forces just as the *Struggle for Negro Rights* did, even if the NAACP's interpretation lacked the Marxist worldview that artists and activists on the left demanded.

Moreover, the NAACP's use of the art exhibition as a political tactic speaks to the ways in which civil rights activists on the left and those in the liberal mainstream were coming together by the middle of the 1930s. Indeed, White invited a number of leftist

⁸¹ Sherwood Anderson, "This Lynching," in catalogue for *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, which can be found in NAACP Papers, Group I, Box C-206.

artists to participate in the NAACP show, including Jacob Burck, William Gropper, Hugo Gellert, Anton Refregier, and others.⁸² Some, such as printmaker Harry Sternberg and sculptor Isamu Noguchi, contributed works to both shows. Despite the attacks he and the NAACP had endured from the CP in struggling over the Scottsboro defense, White sensed the degree to which artists on the left had incorporated civil rights politics into their art, and extended an open hand to them in developing an exhibition that was clearly inspired by their tactics of visual activism. The bitter controversy that emerged over these dueling exhibitions thus represents a final flare-up of proletarian antipathy before the Popular Front brought about a merging of leftist and liberal civil rights politics in the second half of the 1930s. In the words of Angelo Herndon, by 1935 both the NAACP and the JRC “knew very well that politics has a lot to do with pictures.”⁸³ While the Popular Front softened the radical politics of leftist artists, they and their liberal allies nevertheless further developed this idea that pictures could fight far beyond the proletarian moment in American art.

Why did white proletarian artists take on African American civil rights politics in their work in the first half of the 1930s? The question is difficult to answer because few of them left behind direct evidence of their motivations or explanations of their aesthetic strategies; we must therefore infer from the images themselves their reasons for visualizing lynching and Scottsboro to such a remarkable degree. Of course, determining the motivations of these artists also draws us into a much larger scholarly debate over whether or not the Communist Party had African American interests at heart in

⁸² Correspondence with artists and lists of those solicited for work can be found in NAACP Papers, Group I, Box C-206. Hugo Gellert appears to have been the instigator of protest on behalf of the JRC; see letter from Walter White to Gellert, dated January 16, 1935.

⁸³ Angelo Herndon, “Pictures Can Fight!” in catalogue for *Struggle for Negro Rights*.

embracing civil rights politics in this moment.⁸⁴ Clearly, the images of racial violence produced by artists on the left in the early 1930s appropriated that violence in order to instruct the masses in Marxist thinking. Their story became a parable of capitalist oppression of the working class in cartoons, pamphlets, and illustrations that in most cases downplayed the racial particularities of the case in order to convey the shared experience and social station of workers across racial lines. By stripping the Scottsboro Boys and lynch victims of their identities and presenting them as the property of the Communist movement and stock figure victims in an epic battle to overturn world capitalism, these images in many ways reinforced racial inequalities even when they were ostensibly meant to eliminate them.

Yet the visual campaign to end lynching and free the Scottsboro Boys also shed light on racial injustice and oppression in new and important ways, in particular pointing to the ways in which race and class were deeply intertwined. The *Struggle for Negro Rights* exhibition, in particular, demonstrates how important it was to the left to make these connections for a larger public; by placing scenes of legal injustice for African Americans, racial violence, labor activism, and interracial solidarity next to one another on the wall, the exhibition gave the subject of black civil rights a thoughtful and comprehensive treatment. The Scottsboro case may have advanced the larger cause of the CP, yet as the proletarian art created in its service demonstrates, the Party's agenda in many ways encompassed the goals of the larger African American freedom struggle. The visual campaign these artists launched represented the Scottsboro Boys in the court of

⁸⁴ In recent years, scholars have worked to dismantle the conception of the CP as manipulative of African Americans, demonstrating the degree to which black leaders shaped the Party's actions in the United States. See, for example, Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, and Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*.

public opinion just as the ILD represented them in the actual court, offering a vision of interracial harmony and working-class strength. Geared largely toward the white working-class masses, the cartoons, pamphlets, and illustrations illuminated racial oppression for these audiences to an unprecedented degree and encouraged them to adopt African Americans' cause as their own.

While the leftist image campaign against racial violence attempted to reorient the vision of the white working class toward greater understanding of racial inequalities and African American civil rights issues, it also left a lasting legacy to civil rights activism by injecting class considerations into the discussion. Historian Michael Denning has pointed to a “laboring of American culture,” or increased cognizance of class stratification and the politics of labor, that occurred in the late 1930s and early 40s as part of the Popular Front.⁸⁵ Yet the roots of that consciousness can be traced even earlier, to the first half of the decade as artists on the left began to develop the philosophies and strategies of visual activism. With their deep commitment to producing and disseminating images that they hoped would incite the masses to political activism, proletarian artists made particular use of their art to spread a visual critique of racial and economic injustice. Their work thus brought about the “laboring” of civil rights activism at the same time that it firmly entrenched visual culture as a weapon in the mid-twentieth-century African American freedom struggle.

⁸⁵ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

CHAPTER TWO: Forging Strategies of Visual Activism in the WPA Federal Art Project, 1935-1942

While the early 1930s were marked by a range of competing strategies for using art in service of African American civil rights, these various forms of visual activism came together in the second half of the decade with the rise of the Popular Front. As artists on the left toned down the revolutionary fervor in their work and embraced a populist antifascist politics, the mainstream art world became increasingly geared toward social realist styles, which emphasized political commentary and stressed the importance of art being socially useful. The less sectarian politics of the Popular Front left thus allowed the idea of art as a weapon to filter into the mainstream culture of artists and intellectuals.

For visual artists, this process of recasting proletarian strategies of cultural activism took place largely within the auspices of the government-sponsored Federal Art Project (FAP) of the New Deal. New Deal administrators began to experiment with government funding for the visual arts from the early days of Roosevelt's presidency through small programs such as the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP) and the Treasury Fine Arts Section. The administration expanded its funding for the arts through the projects collectively known as "Federal One"—the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Music Project. These programs were developed in 1935 as a tiny subsection of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the largest effort of the New Deal to employ Americans and revive the economy. Open to any artist able to qualify for relief, the FAP provided steady employment to artists from a variety of political and racial backgrounds, including

those who had forged a proletarian politics in their art in the early 1930s, as well as African American artists who found themselves no longer beholden to the patronage of the Harmon Foundation. The FAP served as an important crucible in the further development of art for civil rights activism, as it brought together in one place a group of white leftist artists who were practiced in employing their work toward political ends and black artists who were eager to defend both their rights as artists and as African Americans.

Historians have examined the New Deal arts projects in great detail, despite their relatively small size, offering a range of viewpoints on the Roosevelt administration's motivations in pursuing support for the arts and the effects of these projects on American culture and politics. For some, these projects were the savior of American culture, providing artists with a chance to maintain their skills through a period of economic hardship.¹ For others, they appear as an instrument used by the Roosevelt administration to recruit popular support for the New Deal.² Still others have cast the New Deal arts projects as a site for the reinforcement of conservative gender conventions.³ Included in this scholarship on the New Deal arts projects is a critique of their record on race, as historians have cited the relatively low representation of African Americans within the projects' ranks as well as administrators' adherence to racial segregation in the South as evidence that the Federal One projects were not as "democratic" as they billed

¹ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); and Jane deHart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* (Sept. 1975), 316-339.

² Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³ Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

themselves to be.⁴ Yet such an analysis of the arts projects negates the testimony of the African American artists who participated in them, the vast majority of whom recalled their time “on the project” as “a special time - a time of freedom of expression and freedom of style, without discrimination or censorship.”⁵ “Thank God for the WPA,” Charles White later exclaimed, “because *that* was the thing that welded us together, and...gave substance to our hopes and dreams.”⁶ A closer look at the experience of African American artists employed by the FAP is therefore necessary in order to reconsider the ways in which participation in the FAP opened important new opportunities for black artists and created the foundation for a left-oriented visual arts movement, even if the agency followed policies that maintained racial inequality.⁷

Viewed from the perspective of the project’s national administration, the FAP was in many cases guided by racial stereotypes and unwilling to pursue the goal of a “cultural democracy” to the point of desegregating its galleries and art centers in the South. Yet the Project looks very different when viewed at the ground level, particularly in northern cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, where African American artists had the opportunity to participate fully in a larger art scene for the very first time due to their employment on the FAP. In particular, the Project drew young African American artists into contact with a large group of radical artists affiliated with the left who had spent the

⁴ See, in particular, Rena Fraden, “Feels Good, Can’t Hurt: Black Representation on the Federal Arts Projects,” *Journal of American Culture* 10 (Winter, 1987): 21-29. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, also discusses the FAP’s adherence to segregation in the South.

⁵ Ellen Sragow, “Black Printmakers and the WPA: A Symposium” *Tamarind Papers* 13 (1990): 74.

⁶ Charles White, oral history interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, December 29, 1971, audiotape, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

⁷ I have elected not to discuss the other New Deal visual arts programs – the Public Works of Art Program (PWP) and the Treasury Fine Arts Section (known as the Section) - in this chapter, largely because they were much smaller programs. The PWAP was an experimental precursor to the FAP. I have omitted the Section from this discussion because it was not a relief program but rather a national competition for the creation of art that would decorate public buildings. As such, it did not forge the artistic communities that the FAP created, and in which I am interested here.

first half of the 1930s forging an artistic and political philosophy that viewed art as a weapon in the struggle for justice for African Americans and the working class. These artists played an important role in pressuring the Roosevelt administration to offer relief for artists in the first place, and their understanding of the social function of art deeply informed the larger program of the Federal Art Project to make art socially useful and accessible to the masses. As FAP Director Holger Cahill remarked in 1936, “American artists have discovered that they have work to do in the world,” a belief that artists on the left had cultivated long before the FAP adopted it.⁸ The generation of young African American artists who came of age as participants in the Federal Art Project absorbed this ethos of the artist as an integral part of society and developed a sense of themselves as activists that they would carry with them beyond their participation in the Project. More directly, the FAP also brought these young African American artists into contact with the community of white leftist artists, further enhancing their commitment to infusing the politics of race and class into their work. Thus, while the FAP may not have employed black artists in representative numbers, it provided those who did find employment in the project with a life-changing experience, setting the foundation for a form of visual activism that would play a major role in the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement. As such, the young artists who emerged out of the FAP in Harlem, Philadelphia, and the South Side of Chicago, along with their leftist white colleagues, forged a politics that might be missed if we only view the FAP from the perspective of the national, or even state-level, administration.

Indeed, we might instead think of the Federal Art Project not as a monolithic agency with a singular purpose, but rather an amalgamation of diverse groups and

⁸ Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 29.

individuals with competing agendas and influences within the Project. Victoria Grieve and A. Joan Saab have demonstrated in recent years how groups ranging from liberals concerned with creating accessible “middlebrow” culture, to conservative nativists searching for an agrarian American past, to individuals interested in bolstering American consumerism all had a hand to play in shaping the Federal Art Project.⁹ I would argue that the left formed an additional influential constituency in the FAP, informing the politics of a large number of artists working in northern urban cities and placing consistent pressure on the Project through their outspoken advocacy for the rights of artists through the left-led Artists’ Union.¹⁰ The FAP was a diffuse bureaucratic agency, which left much of the leadership of the project to state and local-level administrators; the character of the FAP therefore depended greatly on the character of the local community. This administrative structure left considerable room for a variety of agendas to flourish, allowing artists and activists on the left to explore the politics of race and class within the context of black northern urban communities.

Participation in the Federal Art Project shaped the art and politics of young black artists in two important and intersecting ways. First, due to constant pressure from artists on the left, the FAP helped to bring about a major intellectual shift in the American art world by casting the artist as a member of the working class who was as deserving of economic relief as a welder or factory worker, in many ways dismantling the long-held understanding of the artist as a creative genius isolated from the rest of society. African

⁹ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009); A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Grieve downplays the influence of the left on the FAP, arguing that their influence was limited to New York, yet there were Artists’ Union chapters in other northern cities. Their influence in New York should also not be understated, as 44.5% of all those employed by the FAP were in New York City, according to McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 93.

American artists employed by the FAP, the majority of whom came out of a working-class background, were deeply influenced by this conception and became increasingly cognizant of their class and racial identity. Through participation in organizations such as the Artists' Union and the Harlem Artists Guild, African American artists forged an identity as activist working-class artists who were outspoken in both their demand for their rights as artists and their understanding of the integral role they sought to play in their own community. Participation in the FAP thus politicized African American artists to the extent that they increasingly advocated for their own employment.

Secondly, the idea of the artist as a worker coincided with and deeply influenced the rise of social realism in American art, an aesthetic movement to create and circulate art that visually illuminated social ills and injustices in order to engender political change.¹¹ Of course, social realism found its roots in the proletarian art of the sectarian left in the early part of the 1930s, as they sought to make art into a weapon that would aid in the struggle to foment a Marxist revolution. While the shift to the Popular Front in 1935 served to water down the overt radical politics of leftist art, the idea of art as a political tool remained, emerging as an important current in American art during the Popular Front period. Social realist art abandoned the direct call for revolution and instead pressed for a less well-defined program of working class rights, yet the style's philosophical roots in the proletarian art movement are clear. While artists employed by the FAP produced works in a variety of styles, including more traditional landscapes, portraits, and still lifes, the relatively loose aesthetic requirements of the Project allowed

¹¹ See David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973); Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); and Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999).

a large number of left-oriented artists to produce social realist images that were highly critical of economic and racial injustice. Many African American artists came in contact with these ideas through the FAP, and it subsequently infused their work and their understanding of their own larger purpose long after the New Deal arts projects were dismantled. Black artists in the FAP thus worked alongside leftist white colleagues to produce artworks that commented directly on the economic and racial oppression faced by African Americans.

While this left-influenced work exposed the negative aspects of American society during the Depression, African American artists also participated in the larger FAP goal of producing a positive vision of the “American Scene” through their art, creating work that demonstrated the integral role African Americans played in American history and culture. The FAP’s efforts to define the national identity through the production of a distinctly American art built upon a longer tradition of cultural nationalism in the United States in the early twentieth century, as American artists and intellectuals attempted to separate the United States from European cultural influences.¹² The impetus to determine the unique contours of American culture was doubly strong in a moment of economic insecurity such as the Depression, and the FAP attempted to unite the country around a common celebration of the American “folk.” Accepted for the first time within the mainstream art world through the FAP, African American artists worked diligently to insert African Americans within that larger conception of American cultural identity,

¹² For a discussion of American cultural nationalism in the interwar decades, see Matthew Baigell, “American Art and National Identity,” *Arts* 6 (Feb., 1987): 48-55. For the role of African Americans in American cultural nationalism in the 20s and 30s, see George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); and Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

producing works that declared the utter American-ness of African Americans, particularly those who were members of the working class. In celebrating black contributions to American life, this art constituted a celebratory complement to the indictment of American society that their social realist art advanced. Produced and circulated through the auspices of a federal agency, these works put an official stamp on a pluralist vision of American national identity that formed a powerful cultural current during the Popular Front period. A closer look at the experience of African American artists working “on the Project,” as well as at the art they produced and the ways in which it circulated, thus demonstrates the significant impact the Federal Art Project had on the politics of race in the United States in the middle part of the twentieth century.

For the vast majority of African American artists who were employed by the Federal Art Project, the experience of being accepted as equal participants within the mainstream art world was fundamentally new. Up through the 1920s, any African American individual aspiring to a career in the visual arts faced vehement discrimination and systematic exclusion from the art establishment. Virtually none of the major art galleries and museums exhibited black artists’ work, and few opportunities for training existed. Indeed, a good many black artists’ biographies include humiliating rejections due to race, occurring well into the early 1930s. Sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, for example, won a competitive exam for a scholarship to study art at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, only

to be rejected ultimately because she was black. Painter Charles White likewise lost two scholarships for art training – at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the Frederic Mizen Academy of Art – as a result of racial discrimination. Such rejections were commonplace, and affected young black artists deeply. Even at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, black visual artists also found it much more difficult to make ends meet than their literary counterparts. Sculptor Augusta Savage, one of the few visual artists deeply involved in the Harlem Renaissance, had to work as a laundress in order to support herself in the 1920s. Printmaker Hale Woodruff remembered that the decade was particularly difficult for visual artists, who did not share the same sense of community that writers did due to grueling work schedules.¹³ In addition, the only viable opportunity for black artists to have their work noticed in the late 1920s and early 30s existed in the form of traveling exhibitions sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, which marginalized black artists through their sociological focus. Although a number of African American artists found their earliest recognition and exhibition opportunities through the Harmon Foundation, the limitations these shows imposed on black art also served to exclude those who failed to fit the foundation's model for "Negro" art.¹⁴

Built on egalitarian principles, the Federal Art Project offered a number of African American artists their first chance to become full-time professional artists. Holger Cahill, the energetic director of the FAP, envisioned the project as potentially bringing about a "cultural democracy" in the United States, in which all American

¹³ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 116-118. One major exception was artist Aaron Douglas, who was able to maintain a career as a painter and book illustrator during the Harlem Renaissance.

¹⁴ For more on the complexities of the historical legacy of the Harmon Foundation for African American artists, see Mary Ann Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars," *American Quarterly* 51 (1999): 580-621; and Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, 1989).

citizens would have access to both the production and consumption of art.¹⁵ The program achieved this not only by employing artists to produce works of art for use in public spaces, but also by opening community art centers and arts workshops in cities and small towns across the country and offering access to traveling art exhibits and free art education to thousands of Americans who had never seen or made a work of art before. In developing the program of the FAP, Cahill was deeply influenced by the progressive philosophy of John Dewey, following in particular Dewey's idea, set forward in his 1934 work, *Art as Experience*, that widespread access to art production had the potential to democratize American society.¹⁶ The goals of the FAP thus exceeded simply employing out-of-work artists during a time of economic hardship; indeed, Cahill hoped to transform American society by giving a wide range of Americans the opportunity to participate in creating national culture. By desacralizing art, divorcing it from its previous connections with the elite and giving it a social function in order to destroy the idea of art for art's sake, the FAP sought to establish a cultural foundation for democracy in the United States. This ethos of cultural egalitarianism opened a space for African Americans within the Project, making the FAP the first major sponsor of black art that offered full-time employment and few stipulations as to subject matter.

In advancing their program of creating a cultural democracy, FAP officials held complicated and often contradictory ideas about how to approach racial and ethnic diversity within the Project. Cahill, in particular, was highly conscious of how the FAP could serve to foster unity despite racial and ethnic differences. In a publicity release, for

¹⁵ Mathews, "Arts and the People"; see also Saab, *For the Millions*.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, and Co., 1934). For more on Dewey's influence on Cahill and the FAP, see Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, Ch. 1.

example, he wrote that through the FAP, “hundreds of thousands of Americans of diverse racial and national ancestry are being made conscious...of a traditional culture which can serve to unify them as a single people on the basis of specific interests. Furthermore, they and others will come to realize the multitudinous national and racial influences that have gone into the formation of this tradition.”¹⁷ Cahill’s conception of the Project is a classic articulation of cultural pluralism, as it touts the contributions of various ethnic groups to a common American “tradition.” The official line from the FAP often took on a less progressive tone, however, as officials essentialized the groups it sought to “integrate” into the “fabric of our national cultural pattern,” in the words of FAP Assistant Director Thomas C. Parker. Speaking before a group of African American teachers gathered at Tuskegee Institute in July of 1938, for example, Parker declared that FAP art instruction had the potential to “revive the Negro’s racial instinct for abstract pattern and simple forms.”¹⁸ In another essay, Parker suggested that the main value of segregated art classes among African American children in the South was in teaching them the value of clean hands, as dirty fingers smudged their artwork; “this pride of cleanliness in the art class has carried over naturally into the home and has also had favorable results in the communities served by the classes,” Parker added.¹⁹ The FAP thus in many cases perpetuated racial stereotypes in their efforts to open up culture to a wide range of Americans and foster cultural democracy.

Yet the FAP could also be remarkably racially progressive in places such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, especially due to pressure from artists on the left who

¹⁷ Holger Cahill Papers, Reel 1108, Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Parker, speech delivered to the 35th Annual Meeting of the American Teachers’ Association, Tuskegee Institute, July 28, 1938, in Holger Cahill Papers, Reel 1105, AAA.

¹⁹ Thomas C. Parker, “The Artist Teaches,” in Holger Cahill Papers, Reel 1107, AAA.

came together in the Artists' Union in these northern cities in the second half of the 1930s. Formed in 1933 as the Unemployed Artists' Group (UAG) by a group of leftist artists who had been active in the New York John Reed Club, the Artists' Union advocated from the beginning for a federal relief program for artists, pressure that was instrumental in the creation of early arts programs such as the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), and its successor, the FAP.²⁰ Led by politically active artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, and Louis Lozowick, the group changed its name to the Artists' Union in 1934 after gathering a membership of 400 people. Membership more than doubled with the founding of the FAP the following year, as the union expanded to other cities that had a large FAP presence.²¹ Besides acting as the organized advocate of FAP-employed artists' interests, the Artists' Union also set the tone in northern urban art circles by serving as an important social network, as well; as art historian Andrew Hemingway writes, the Artists' Union not only "did important work in building a leftist subculture among artists that was the basis for collective mobilization," but was also "a meeting place for those living on the edge of destitution to share their experience, an organizer of dances and parties, and an important exhibition center."²² The Artists' Union thus took on many of the social and political functions that the John Reed Club had served in the first half of the 1930s.

Because its leadership had been particularly active in the early 1930s in creating and circulating art related to lynching and the Scottsboro case that drew attention to racial

²⁰ Francine Tyler, "Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and Its Magazine, 'Art Front,'" Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1991. Joan Saab also credits the Artists' Union for influencing the creation of these programs; see *For the Millions*, 39.

²¹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 86. On the Artists' Union in Chicago, see Robert Jay Wolff, "Chicago and the Artists' Union," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 239-242.

²² Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 87.

and economic inequality, the Artists' Union actively recruited African American artists into its fold and paid close attention to racial issues both in the pages of its magazine, *Art Front*, and in its relations with the Federal Art Project. Artists and critics peppered the pages of *Art Front* with antilynching images, discussions of the role of racial and ethnic identity in the creation of art, and declarations of support for emerging civil rights efforts such as the National Negro Congress.²³ A letter from Artists' Union leader Chet La More to Emanuel Benson of the FAP provides further insight into the group's consciousness of racial issues and interest in advancing the rights of African American artists. La More wrote to Benson in April of 1937 on behalf of the union's National Steering Committee, asking for statistics on the number of Negroes employed by the FAP, broken down by Project divisions (easel, mural, teachers in community art centers, etc.). It remains unclear what the union hoped to do with this information, although La More informed Benson that he needed the data "in connection with a national survey we are undertaking."²⁴ While the FAP was unable to provide the statistics La More requested, the union leader's letter illuminates the degree to which the Artists' Union kept a close watch on the experience of African Americans within the FAP, pressuring the agency to attend to racial inequalities within their organization.²⁵

The strong presence of the Artists' Union, combined with grassroots efforts within the Harlem community, made New York City a site of particularly vibrant African American participation in the FAP. Even before the advent of the FAP, African

²³ See, for example, Judson Briggs, "Georgia," *Art Front* 2, no. 11 (Dec., 1936): 9; Boris Gorelick, "Lynching," *Art Front* 3, no. 2 (March, 1937): 15; Meyer Schapiro, "Race, Nationality and Art," *Art Front* 2, no. 4 (March, 1936): 10-12; "The National Negro Congress," *Art Front* 2, no. 4 (March, 1936): 3.

²⁴ Chet La More to Emanuel Benson, dated April 16, 1937, Federal Art Project Files, Reel DC46, AAA.

²⁵ Holger Cahill responded to La More in a letter dated April 27, 1937, claiming the FAP did not keep statistics with a breakdown along racial lines, but offering materials he had collected on the Negro in the FAP, especially related to art teaching in the South, in FAP files, Reel DC46, AAA.

American visual artists were beginning to cohere as a community in Harlem in the early 1930s. Around the time the Artists' Union was forming downtown, visual artists in Harlem began to develop training opportunities in the neighborhood in the form of the Harlem Art Workshop, opened in the summer of 1933 at 270 West 136th Street. Offering free art classes to Harlem residents, the Workshop was sponsored by the Harlem Adult Education Committee and the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, and funded through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation as part of a wider initiative for adult education in the neighborhood. In addition, the Workshop received modest funding from the Harmon Foundation to subsidize a portion of the cost of rent and materials. James Lesesne Wells, a printmaker and painter trained at Columbia Teachers' College and a faculty member at Howard University, led the workshop during its first year, while painter Charles Alston took over in 1934 and subsequently moved it to his studio at 306 West 143rd Street. Although the Carnegie Foundation stopped funding the Workshop by the end of 1935, it continued as a site of art education for another year. Funding from the Carnegie Corporation for art education in Harlem did not disappear, however; instead it was transferred in 1935 to another art school led by Augusta Savage called the Uptown Art Laboratory, located in a basement apartment at 321 West 136th Street.²⁶ Here Savage and a small, interracial teaching staff offered classes in fine arts, weaving, pottery, photography, sewing, and quilting. Picking up where the Harlem Art Workshop left off, the Uptown Art Laboratory served as an important incubator for the visual arts in Harlem in the early 30s and a precursor to the FAP Harlem Community Art Center, opened towards the end of the decade.

²⁶ For more on the politics behind this shift in funding and the development of various art education efforts in Harlem in this period, see Calo, *Distinction and Denial*, ch. 2.

As young artists in Harlem learned art techniques at local institutions such as the Uptown Art Laboratory and gained employment on the Federal Art Project after 1935, they began to form a small community. While it no longer housed the Harlem Art Workshop after 1936, Charles Alston's studio in an old brick stable at 306 West 143rd Street quickly emerged as a gathering site for visual artists and other cultural workers in the neighborhood. Known simply as "306," this space developed as a sort of salon in which visual artists in particular, but also writers, musicians, and actors gathered to discuss aesthetics and politics. Alston later described the impromptu gatherings at 306 as "bull sessions, knockdown, drag out. Some of them were pretty rough. But it was sort of a forum."²⁷ He estimated that about ninety percent of those who gathered at 306 were employed by one of the WPA arts projects. By 1937, nearly 120 African American artists worked for the FAP in New York City.²⁸ Norman Lewis remembered that something was going on at 306 almost every weekend. "You know, we sat and drank booze and talked."²⁹ No topic was off limits, as Romare Bearden describes:

One could also hear new poems, new stories, and new ideas about art for the people, a Marxist analysis of Italian Renaissance art, arguments over [Thomas Hart] Benton's demands for "American art," advocacy of the concepts of the Mexican muralists, hilarious accounts of how artists arrested in a WPA sit-down strike gave police names like "Pablo Picasso" and "Vincent VanGogh," endless pros and cons about socially conscious art or abstract art, as well as assertions that easel painting was going the way of the "tin lizzie."³⁰

By the latter half of the 30s, 306 had emerged as a vibrant space within which black artists could articulate and debate aesthetic and political philosophies at the same time

²⁷ Charles Alston, oral history interview with Dr. Harlan Phillips, September 28, 1965, AAA.

²⁸ Kimn Carlton-Smith, "A New Deal for Women: Women Artists and the Federal Art Project, 1935-1939," Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1990, 188.

²⁹ Norman Lewis, oral history interview with Henri Ghent, date unknown, AAA.

³⁰ Bearden and Henderson, 234.

that it fostered personal connections among artists in Harlem who shared the experience of working for the FAP.

While the FAP helped to bring together an arts community in Harlem, it also put black and white artists side by side as colleagues for the first time in a professional setting, a fact that many black artists later remembered as an exciting achievement. Norman Lewis got to know white leftist artists such as Philip Evergood, Jack Levine, Ad Reinhardt, and Ben Shahn through his work on the FAP and active participation in the Artists' Union. While many of the artists employed by the FAP worked in their own studios, they met one another both at union meetings and waiting in line outside of FAP headquarters to punch in their hours or collect paychecks, and it was here that ideas, both aesthetic and political, were exchanged and friendships were formed. Alston remembered waiting in line: "You got to talking; you got to know people. As I say, I got to know [Arshile] Gorky. As you look back on it, these were valuable experiences. I think the fact that it provided a forum...It provided a situation where artists got to know each other. It provided artists with a consciousness of being an artist and having problems."³¹ The union, in particular, brought both interracial collegiality and a political sensibility to black artists on the FAP. Romare Bearden later remembered his participation in demonstrations, recalling that through the Project, "artists learned not only the proper way to stretch a canvas, but also how to make effective posters for the endless picket lines. For most Black artists this was the first time they struggled in common cause with their white compatriots."³² Acceptance into an interracial art

³¹ Charles Alston, oral history interview, AAA.

³² Romare Bearden, "The 1930's – An Art Reminiscence," *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 18, 1971.

community in the FAP and Artists' Union thus brought African American artists in New York to a new level of consciousness of their potential role as political activists.

African American artists were welcomed into the leftist art world of New York through other organizations, as well. The American Artists' Congress (AAC), called together in 1936 and organized by many of the same individuals who had been involved in the John Reed Club, took its place as the central leftist artists' organization. Truly a Popular Front organization, the AAC focused its political efforts on the use of art to fight against fascism, and worked closely with the Artists' Union to press for the expansion of federal funding for the arts.³³ The AAC actively recruited black artists, inviting both Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett to speak on racial discrimination in the arts. In his speech, Douglas reminded his fellow artists that black people, more than most, understood fascism. "The lash and iron hoof of Fascism have been a constant menace and threat to the Negro ever since so-called emancipation," he passionately told the crowd. "One of the most vital blows the artists of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of nationality, race, or creed."³⁴ Douglas thus further strengthened the link between the world of social realist art and the African American freedom struggle before a crowd of hundreds of artists.

As black artists were drawn into the interracial camaraderie and activism of the Artists' Union, the American Artists' Congress, and the Art Students League, they also became increasingly cognizant of their own particular experience in the FAP due to their racial background. As early as the spring of 1935, a number of artists active in 306 and the Artists' Union formed the Harlem Artists Guild as an informal auxiliary of the

³³ For more on the AAC, see Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

³⁴ Aaron Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture," reprinted in Baigell and Williams, 84.

Union.³⁵ The Guild began with less than a dozen members, including Alston, Bearden, Lewis, Savage, Jacob Lawrence, James Yeargans, Ernest Crichlow, Gwendolyn Bennett, and the President, Aaron Douglas; two years later membership was as high as ninety artists.³⁶ Originally formed for the purpose of representing the interests of black artists in the Project, the group successfully pressured the FAP to hire African Americans in the position of supervisor, a job taken on by both Alston and Savage, as well as lobbying successfully for a community art center in the neighborhood. The Guild also organized group exhibitions, lecture series, and other cultural programs in Harlem, serving as an engine of local cultural production. The close relationship between the Harlem Artists Guild and the leftist leadership of the Artists' Union was clear; Guild leader James Yeargans served as an editor of *Art Front*, for example, while Artists' Union leader Hugo Gellert's brother, Lawrence Gellert, studied and profiled the Guild as part of his work for the Federal Writers' Project.³⁷

In *Art Front*, the Harlem Artists Guild clearly articulated the growing sense among African American artists involved in the FAP of their identity as artists, workers, and activists. In a statement probably written by Gwendolyn Bennett and published in the summer of 1936, the Guild set forth the group's philosophy by rejecting the exhibition program of the Harmon Foundation in no uncertain terms. The statement disparaged the philanthropic organization's "coddling rather than professional attitude

³⁵ See Gwendolyn Bennett's report on the exhibition, "Toward An Art Center?" *New York Amsterdam News*, March 23, 1935, p. 9.

³⁶ Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Harlem Artists Guild," *Art Front* 3 (May, 1937): 20.

³⁷ Lawrence Gellert, "Negro in Art," WPA Writers' Project Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Like his brother, Lawrence Gellert was both oriented toward the political left and interested in African American culture, forging a career as a musicologist who documented black southern protest music in the 1920s and 30s.

toward the Negro as an artist.”³⁸ In particular, the Guild took issue with the foundation’s policy of judging art on a “racial basis”; member artists instead wanted their work judged alongside the work of other American artists, regardless of race. While the Guild chafed at being judged on standards guided by racial prejudice, the statement nevertheless articulated a mission for the group that acknowledged racial difference: “Still it is our intention to do everything within our power to advance the Negro’s position as a potent factor in the art of America, and such a position, we believe, must be held because of the intrinsic value of our contribution to art rather than because of matters of race.”³⁹ The Guild asked only that their work be accepted as American art, alongside that of their white colleagues in the Project, and yet did not seek to lose perspective on their unique experience as black artists. Elsewhere the Guild described themselves as “concerned primarily with problems peculiar to Negro artists by virtue of their bond of color and persecution.”⁴⁰ Member artists asked that they be accepted as American artists without the erasure of their racial identity, just as the art they created insisted that the black experience enter into a wider understanding of the American experience.

The Harlem Artists Guild’s outspoken attack on the Harmon Foundation was not only a rejection of the Harlem Renaissance model of white patronage that placed aesthetic demands on black art and segregated it from the mainstream art world, but also a declaration by Harlem’s African American artists of their alliance with the political left, as evidenced by their choice to place the statement in the pages of *Art Front* magazine. The Guild’s statement echoed the cultural pluralism of the Popular Front and the FAP,

³⁸ “Harlem Artists’ Guild: A Statement,” *Art Front* 2 (July-Aug., 1936): 4. Romare Bearden issued a similar statement against the Harmon Foundation two years earlier in an article in *Opportunity*: see Romare Bearden, “The Negro Artist and Modern Art,” *Opportunity* 12 (Dec., 1934): 371-372.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁰ Bennett, “The Harlem Artists Guild.”

demanding the integration of black artists into American culture while maintaining a distinct racial identity. Yet the Guild's position also evinces the degree to which African American artists had absorbed the leftist understanding of the artist as a worker with the right to make demands for both economic security and freedom of expression.

Influenced by the Artists' Union's advocacy for artists as workers, the Guild was also highly aggressive in its demands to FAP leadership, articulating very clearly what they saw as the special needs and rights of African American artists. Working together with the Artists' Union, for example, the Guild successfully pressured the FAP to publicly defend the African American artists working on a set of murals at Harlem Hospital in a controversy in which the hospital's leadership protested the murals' African American subject matter.⁴¹ Holger Cahill agreed with the Guild, arguing that the contention of the hospital that African American figures were not appropriate for the hospital's walls was "far-fetched," given the predominantly African American population in Harlem.⁴² In other cases, the Guild's demands for special treatment outstripped the FAP leadership's patience. New York FAP administrator Audrey McMahon sent an exasperated memo to Cahill in July of 1937 informing him of a protest from the Guild "to the effect that we have discriminated against the Negroes on our project in view of the fact that we have not given them special consideration, and that the general conditions surrounding the Negroes are such as to entitle them to this consideration. Their contention definitely is that failure to act particularly in their favor constitutes

⁴¹ See Diana L. Linden and Larry A. Greene, "Charles Alston's Harlem Hospital Murals: Cultural Politics in Depression Era Harlem," *Prospects* 26 (2001): 391-421.

⁴² Holger Cahill to Audrey McMahon, dated February 4, 1936, in RG69, 530/67/20/4-5/box 2114, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

discrimination against them.”⁴³ McMahon argued that special treatment based on race went against the FAP’s supposedly race-blind employment policies.

The Harlem Artists’ Guild and the Artists’ Union disagreed, and even went so far as to blame the FAP for the suicide of African American artist Louis Vaughn after he had been laid off by the Project, declaring that “this is what happens to Negro artists when they are kicked off the WPA. There is no reabsorption of Negro artists by private industry. We tried to make this clear to the WPA administration. The administration is therefore responsible for Vaughn’s death.”⁴⁴ At the same time that they trumpeted the importance of having their art judged apart from considerations of race, the Guild proposed a form of affirmative action within the FAP in recognition of the special circumstances they faced due to their racial identity. These demands point to the degree to which their connections with leftist artists in the Artists’ Union and FAP radicalized black artists in Harlem in the late 1930s, as they organized themselves as a group of workers with very particular needs. This attention to their rights as African American artists would remain with them beyond their participation in the FAP.

Also among the central goals of the left-oriented artists of the Harlem Artists Guild, and indeed of the larger Harlem community, was the establishment of an FAP-sponsored community art center in the neighborhood to provide greater local opportunities for art education. The community art center program was at the core of the FAP’s goal of achieving a cultural democracy. Numbering over one hundred by the

⁴³ Audrey McMahon to Holger Cahill, dated July 21, 1937, in RG 69, 530/69/17/7/box 35, NARA, College Park.

⁴⁴ “Harlem Guild Blames WPA for Suicide of Negro Artist,” undated clipping from the *New York Evening Post*, in Holger Cahill Papers, Reel 1108, AAA. The Artists’ Union leadership also used Vaughn’s suicide to argue against FAP layoffs; see telegram from union President Harry Gottlieb to Ellen S. Woodward, dated July 8, 1937, in RG 69, 530/67/20/4-5/box 2116, NARA, College Park.

Project's end in 1942, community art centers were created in small towns across America in hope of reversing the geographical patterns of culture in the United States, which FAP administrators understood as undemocratically concentrated in the urban Northeast.⁴⁵ Art centers offered free art instruction to the local community as well as exhibition space in which local art and national traveling exhibitions of FAP art were shown. The FAP insisted that the centers develop organically out of their communities, requiring the formation of a local sponsoring board that would pay for the space, supplies, and operating costs and serve as a governing body, while the FAP paid employees' salaries. By providing hands-on experience with both the production and appreciation of art, the FAP community art centers quickly became the cornerstone of the FAP's mission of "art for the millions."

While New York City is hardly a small town, artists in Harlem were nevertheless able to organize successfully for the first art center in an African American community in 1937. As early as 1935, the Harlem Artists' Guild came together around the idea of transforming the smaller local art schools such as the Uptown Art Laboratory into a larger program within the purview of the FAP community art center program.⁴⁶ The Guild gathered a sponsoring committee of what Gwendolyn Bennett described as an assembly of "distinguished citizens from all walks of our national life to which the Negro has made a significant contribution," including committee chairman A. Philip Randolph, political activist and head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union.⁴⁷ Cahill

⁴⁵ John Franklin White, ed. *Art in Action: American Art Centers and the New Deal* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987).

⁴⁶ Gwendolyn Bennett, "Toward An Art Center." See also letter from Ruth Logan Roberts to Holger Cahill requesting FAP financial assistance for the creation of an art center in Harlem, dated December 10, 1935, in RG69, 530/67/20/4-5/box 2114, NARA, College Park.

⁴⁷ Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Harlem Community Art Center," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions*, 214.

was supportive of the idea, and the FAP began funding a consolidated “Music-Art Center” in 1937, which soon after became the Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC).⁴⁸ The HCAC opened for classes under the directorship of Augusta Savage in a large loft on the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in December of 1937. Gwendolyn Bennett took over as director the following month.

In the eyes of the artists and community activists who spearheaded the development of the HCAC, a federally-sponsored art center in their community would not only provide employment for out of work artists and arts education for local adults and children, but also constitute a much-needed space for the exhibition of black art, making visible the African American experience. From the beginning, advocates of the creation of an art center in Harlem linked access to cultural production to larger efforts for social and economic justice for African Americans, asserting in a promotional brochure, for example, that “professional workers, artists, artisans and laborers, united against Harlem’s poverty, have recognized the relationship of the cultural and economic problem, which are a part of its everyday life.”⁴⁹ The center’s leaders thus imagined its staff as labor activists working to ameliorate economic hardships and racial discrimination through art education. In their eyes, art education had the potential to bring about sweeping social change by making good on the FAP’s promise of cultural democracy.

While such rhetoric suggests the degree to which the left influenced the creation and administration of the HCAC, individuals and activists from a variety of political

⁴⁸ For Cahill’s support, see Holger Cahill to Frances Pollack, dated March 5, 1936, in Holger Cahill Papers, Reel 5285, AAA.

⁴⁹ “A Community Art Center for Harlem,” undated brochure, available in the Schomburg Clippings File (SCF), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

backgrounds embraced the center as an important site of political advancement. A. Philip Randolph's comments at the opening ceremony for the center were particularly revelatory of the sense of those present that art held political potential for African Americans. "The Negro people of Harlem look at art," the union leader pointed out in his address to over two hundred artists and other Harlemites gathered at the dedication. "They turn to culture. It is not the superficial striving for the unreal nor an unpurposeful effort for exotic creativity. But it is an attempt to express the inner spirit of the people in varied tangible art forms." Art was not simply a useless endeavor, but rather held an important purpose: it could make black life and the African American experience "tangible" to all. The HCAC held the potential to "bring enrichment and dignity to the community by making it art conscious."⁵⁰ Randolph's speech thus distinguished the sense of political purpose held by artists at the HCAC from the "exotic creativity" of the Harlem Renaissance, suggesting that the new art had the potential to make the Harlem community – indeed the larger African American population - cohere around common goals in new and important ways. As Bennett later declared, the center, which came about through "the collective will of the many," served as "not only a cultural force in its particular locale, but a symbol in the culture of a race."⁵¹

From the beginning, the HCAC was an enormously popular neighborhood institution. Attendance figures attest to the HCAC's success: by March of 1939, as many as 70,592 people had attended the Center's activities, coming to an average of about four thousand people per month.⁵² Along with exhibition space that presented local and national FAP art, the Center offered free classes to adults and children in painting,

⁵⁰ "Mrs. Roosevelt Feature Guest at Art Center," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 25, 1937, p. 2.

⁵¹ Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Harlem Community Art Center," 213.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 214.

drawing, ceramics, printmaking, photography, costume design, metal craft, and weaving and hook rug making. In addition, the Center featured regular lectures and round table discussions on aesthetics and art history, which were open to the public. Poet Langston Hughes marveled at the “new art consciousness and a new pride in art springing up in our great colored community of Harlem” due to the activities of the HCAC.⁵³

The Harlem Community Art Center also extended opportunities for interracial artistic work that were afforded by the Federal Art Project in other divisions.⁵⁴ In a glowing report on the HCAC in the national organ of the NAACP, the *Crisis*, James H. Baker, Jr., highlighted this fact. “The Center is inter-racial in its every aspect,” he wrote, “in its students, its teachers, the group of community sponsors, the administrative personnel. It stands, therefore, as an example of that joint activity in the pursuit of high purposes, untrammelled by irrelevant biases, that is as yet one of the not completely fulfilled ideals of American democracy.”⁵⁵ Through its inclusive policies that placed black and white artists and community members side by side in the common pursuit of generating art, the FAP community art center held powerful potential to break down racial barriers in the eyes of many of its supporters.⁵⁶

By fostering the development of an interracial community of left-oriented artists in New York, the FAP allowed for the production of a large amount of artwork by white

⁵³ Langston Hughes, quoted in James H. Baker, Jr., “Art Comes to the People of Harlem,” *Crisis* 46 (March, 1939): 80. See also “New Music-Art Center Harlemites’ Reward for Going to WPA Classes,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 13, 1937, p. 6; and Sophia Steinbach, “Harlem Goes In for Art,” *Opportunity* 14 (April, 1936): 114-116.

⁵⁴ Teachers at the HCAC included African Americans such as Louise E. Jefferson, Sarah West, Octavia Clark, Selma Burke, Ernest Crichlow, Robert Pious, Norman Lewis, and Elton Fax, as well as white artists such as Riva Helfond, Anna Gold, Fred Norden, David Epstein, and Mark Nadir; see Kimm Carlton-Smith, “A New Deal for Women,” 196, 230-31n.24-25.

⁵⁵ James H. Baker, Jr., “Art Comes to the People of Harlem,” 80.

⁵⁶ The FAP was not “untrammelled by irrelevant biases” when it came to gender, however, as Kimm Carlton-Smith has documented, pointing to the fact that African American women were more likely to be given teaching positions rather than being employed simply as independent artists; see her “A New Deal for Women,” 49.

and black artists on the left that directly commented on racial and class oppression in the United States. Much of this political art took the form of prints, which reached a new level of popularity within the Federal Art Project as an inherently “democratic” medium because a print could be produced in thousands of copies, and thus the same image could reach multiple viewers simultaneously.⁵⁷ “Whatever its social, political, or religious significance may have been,” wrote leftist printmaker Fritz Eichenberg, the print “has always been the carrier of a message.”⁵⁸ Artists on the left were thus particularly drawn to printmaking as a means of social transformation, producing multiple prints for the FAP that addressed themes of class struggle and racial injustice.⁵⁹ By circulating and exhibiting multiple copies of these prints, the FAP actively inserted the politics of race and class into larger cultural debates over the American national identity. Given the stamp of official culture, these images went a long way towards challenging conceptions of the United States as an egalitarian society.

Prints produced by black artists working for the FAP in New York both highlighted racial injustices and pointed to the difficulties faced particularly by African Americans during the Depression. These prints represent African American artists’ first major foray into printmaking as an art form, as few had access to the training and materials necessary for the medium before joining the FAP. While relatively few of the prints they created through the Project remain, those that do demonstrate how seriously

⁵⁷ On the democratic nature of printmaking, see Dorothy Grafly, “The Print - America’s Folk Art,” *Magazine of Art* 31 (Jan., 1938): 32-35, 60. Elizabeth Gaede Seaton has shown the degree to which the FAP actively cultivated the idea of the print as “democratic”; see her “Federal Prints and Democratic Culture: The Graphic Arts Division of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project, 1935-1943,” Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2000.

⁵⁸ Fritz Eichenberg, “Eulogy on the Woodblock,” in Francis V. O’Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 148.

⁵⁹ Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

many black artists took the opportunity to make use of the medium's potential for conveying political messages.⁶⁰ Ernest Crichlow for example, created a powerful lithograph that forcefully critiqued southern racial and sexual violence during his tenure as an instructor at the HCAC.⁶¹ Ironically entitled *Lovers*, the provocative scene shows an African American woman struggling to free herself from the grip of a man dressed in the hood and robe of the Ku Klux Klan, commenting directly on the sexual abuse of black women by white men in the South that was so prevalent yet rarely spoken of at the time. Crichlow's colleague Charles Alston also created prints that provided direct indictments of racial oppression in the United States, borrowing aesthetic strategies from proletarian art. An untitled print he created for the FAP, for example, took a cue from leftist political cartoons that depicted justice as a corrupted figure (fig. 2.1); here she grins maliciously as she balances scales loaded with weapons and ammunition and clutches what appears to be a cannon ball in her skeletal hands.

White printmakers in New York, particularly those associated with the political left and active in the Artists' Union, also used their time in the FAP creating images to combat racial violence and inequality. New York Jewish artist Philip Reisman, who was an active member of the John Reed Club and the American Artists Congress, created a lithograph for the FAP, entitled *South*, which indicts southern justice at large by combining scenes of African Americans laboring at gunpoint in a chain gang with a lynching scene (fig. 2.2). The composition draws the viewer's eye to the central pair of the lynch victim strung up to a tree and his grieving mother, adding drama to the piece.

⁶⁰ See *Black Printmakers and the WPA* (New York: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1989); and *Alone in a Crowd: Prints of the 1930s-40s by African-American Artists* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1993). Because the FAP was liquidated quickly and haphazardly in 1943, many of the Project's artworks were either warehoused, destroyed, or lost.

⁶¹ This print can be viewed online at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/blackburn/images/bla03-02415r.jpg>.

While works such as Reisman's followed the tenets of social realism in exposing the dark underbelly of American society, other prints produced by left-oriented white and black artists working for the FAP took a more positive view, instead emphasizing the richness of black life and the contributions of African Americans to the larger American culture. White FAP artists affiliated with the left were particularly fascinated with black culture, producing countless studies of African American social life, such as Elizabeth Olds' *Harlem WPA Street Scene* (fig. 2.3). Prints such as these suggest the degree to which white artists in New York relished their newfound opportunities to interact with African American colleagues through the FAP.

Much like those in New York, a small group of African American artists in Philadelphia also had an opportunity to experiment with social realist art practice in the FAP through their participation in the Fine Print Workshop that the Project opened there in 1937 as one of five FAP workshops devoted exclusively to printmaking.⁶² The Philadelphia Print Workshop quickly became an interracial artistic space with the employment of Dox Thrash in 1937 and, later, the addition of at least four other African American printmakers: Sam Brown, Claude Clark, Raymond Steth, and Bryant Pringle. Philadelphia thus emerged as an important center for African American printmaking in the 30s, second only to New York City in the number of black printmakers employed by the FAP.⁶³ Supervisor Richard Hood suggested that the group consistently worked on the cutting edge of printmaking as an artistic technique. According to Hood, the workshop subsequently became, I believe, one of the finest graphic art workshops in the project period. It became a kind of example of the way to solve this problem,

⁶² The others were in New York, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

⁶³ Cindy Medley-Buckner, "The Fine Print Workshop of the Philadelphia Federal Art Project," in John Ittman, ed., *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* (Seattle: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2001).

and many people from other projects in other states came in to see just what we were doing... This became a place where there was a great exchange of ideas. Not just the printmakers working, the ones who had already studied and knew something about the medium, but painters came in, sculptors came in, and they began to work in this way, too.⁶⁴

As Hood relates, the Philadelphia Print Workshop became a model for other artists and administrators on the FAP, demonstrating both the possibilities inherent in the medium and the potential for fruitful interracial creative activity. Indeed, Hood included the “breaking down of racial and national barriers” as a key selling point of the workshop and the larger Federal Art Project.⁶⁵

Numerous participants remarked later on the sense of camaraderie they experienced in the workshop, a memory surely enhanced through the rosy glow of nostalgia, but nonetheless common to all who reflected back on their time on the FAP. Hood recalled “an esprit de corp, there was a great enthusiasm going on from all of this. The artists -- some of them were overwhelmed by the idea that somebody was interested in them; and the idea that their government was interested in them was a real challenge. And it seems to me that they went at this in a state of excitement, and they really contributed the most they could contribute.”⁶⁶ Jewish printmaker Hugh Mesibov also portrayed the workshop as collective in nature:

There was a sense of camaraderie. There was a sense of sharing. There was a sense of experimentation - ‘Oh, I did this this way - why don’t you try it.’ ‘Oh, I think I like that idea. I’m gonna try it.’ I don’t think there was any sense of jealousy... We were all individuals and we all worked out of our own experience.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Richard Hood, oral history interview, December 15, 1964, AAA, transcript available at <http://www.archivesofamericanart.si.edu/oralhist/hood64.htm>.

⁶⁵ Richard Hood, “Interpreting the Art Projects,” memorandum, Richard Hood Papers, box 2, AAA.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hugh Mesibov, oral history interview, June 23, 1990, audio tapes, AAA.

The Philadelphia Fine Print Workshop thus further demonstrates the degree to which the FAP opened space for the development of creative communities that allowed for meaningful communication between white and black artists.

Yet the limits of racial unity in the Workshop also creep through the historical record, belying to a degree these doubtlessly heartfelt memories of art tearing down the walls of race. Dox Thrash, in particular, kept to himself in the workshop. Hugh Mesibov, a young Jewish printmaker who worked closely with Thrash, described himself as “outgoing” in his FAP days; “Dox Thrash, on the other hand - it was always hard to find out what he was thinking, because of maybe his background, you know, maybe you shouldn’t talk too much, or keep it to yourself, etc. etc.”⁶⁸ Roswell Weidner had a similar experience with Thrash: “He was a very private person. He never said anything about himself. Nothing.... I was giving a party, and I asked him if he’d like to come. He said, ‘No, I don’t go to white folks parties.’ So, he must have been hurt along the way, sometime.”⁶⁹ Whether or not this was indeed the reason why Thrash did not attend Weidner’s party, it is clear that Thrash maintained some social distance from the white printmakers in the workshop. Yet Thrash was apparently willing to sit for a lithograph portrait Weidner did of him. Thrash was, in fact, the first African American person with whom Weidner had ever had close contact.⁷⁰ What emerges, then, is a picture of an artistic space in which black and white printmakers forged new ties as fellow artists, yet also to some degree held themselves apart from one another. While the FAP made important steps toward fostering an interracial artistic community, participants in the

⁶⁸ Hugh Mesibov, oral history interview, AAA.

⁶⁹ Roswell Weidner, oral history interview, AAA.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

workshop remained unable to erase entirely the long history of the American racial divide in their day-to-day interaction.

At the same time, the prints these artists created also speak to the ways in which close proximity among black and white artists resulted in the exchange of aesthetic ideas and possibilities for subject matter. Raymond Steth used his art to offer a direct protest of both the poverty experienced by African Americans during the Depression and their exclusion from larger cultural conceptions of America. His lithograph, *I Am An American*, for example, depicts an elderly black man pushing a ramshackle wooden cart down a cobblestone alley (fig. 2.4). Behind him on the sidewalk sits a poor old black woman, huddled in a shawl and winter hat, selling firewood to make a meager living. Both she and the man look directly at the viewer with a plaintive look; together, they seem to implicate the viewer for their condition. Perhaps most powerful, however, are the two American flags attached to the man's cart - a declaration of inclusion as an American (a sentiment echoed in the title). The man appears as a sort of black Uncle Sam. The print thus defiantly asserts a black claim on American heritage and citizenship at the same time that it reminds viewers of the Depression's devastating effects on African Americans.

White printmaker Michael Gallagher likewise explored themes of racial injustice and violence in his work. He took up the antilynching theme a woodcut he produced at the Fine Print Workshop, which compares lynching to the crucifixion of Christ in an image that gestures to medieval art both in its panel-like shape and its iconography (fig. 2.5). The lynching tree fills the frame in a distinct cross shape, around which are arrayed the *arma Christi*, or instruments of the passion. The rooster, ladder, reed, lantern, sun

and stars all refer to events and objects associated with the crucifixion, resulting in a powerfully political image that makes a strong connection between African American lynch victims and the crucified Christ.⁷¹ Included in the FAP-sponsored exhibition, “Prints for the People,” which traveled around the country as evidence of the FAP’s ability to foster a true American folk culture, Gallagher’s antilynching scene became part of the officially sanctioned vision of American life that the exhibition represented.

While emphasizing racial injustice in their work, printmakers in Philadelphia also highlighted the positive contributions of African Americans to the larger American culture in their effort to participate in the FAP’s visual delineation of the “American Scene.” African American FAP artists in particular explored the contributions of black communities to American culture in the form of jazz music and dance. Raymond Steth’s *Evolution of Swing* offered a particularly strong statement of African American cultural contributions (fig. 2.6). The print guides the viewer through the history of African American migration, beginning at the lower right-hand corner with an African scene, showing a circle of men in loincloths and headdresses playing drums and dancing before a thatched-roof hut surrounded by palm trees. The story then moves to the left, as the eye is drawn into a scene of slaves unloading single-file out of a riverboat under the watch of a white slave trader perched on a barrel. The story then follows clockwise up to the upper left-hand region of the print, which is packed with skyscrapers to represent African American migration north in the early part of the twentieth century. Among the buildings is a radio tower, which emits bolts of lightning (presumably representing swing music)

⁷¹ For more on the symbolism of the arma Christi in European prints and art, see Peter W. Parshall and Rainer Schoch, *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and their Public* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2005). Many thanks to Alexa Greist for bringing this point to my attention.

that cut across the entire print, reaching back to the slave and African village scenes. The lightning especially draws attention to the final scene filling the upper areas of the print, which shows a pair of dancers jitterbugging, the man sporting an early version of the zoot suit, in front of a jazz band with an African American singer. Taken as a whole narrative, this print offers a powerful revision of American cultural history in that it points directly to the African and southern slave roots of American popular music and dance.

While social realist prints drew attention to the racial and economic inequalities inherent in American society during the Depression, positive images of black life and culture served a different yet related purpose: to insert black faces and life experiences into larger definitions of American national and cultural identity and demonstrate the ways in which African Americans had helped shape that culture despite their unequal treatment. Artists seized on the FAP program of cultural nationalism, striving through the art they produced to include African Americans within the larger vision of America the Project actively worked to create. While at first glance, these celebratory images might appear to be antithetical to the muckraking goals of social realist artists, they represent the other side of the negative picture presented in social realist scenes. In many ways, these scenes were equally radical in their assertion that African Americans deserved a place within the nation's larger understanding of its identity; indeed, the idea of cultural pluralism attempted to negate centuries of systematic exclusion of African Americans from the stories America told itself about itself. Deeply ensconced in the Popular Front, leftist artists working for the FAP thus took advantage of the agency's commitment to fostering a cultural democracy in order to illuminate the flaws in

American society as well as express their hope for the possibility of greater economic and racial equality in the future.

As was clearly the case in Harlem and Philadelphia, the arrival of the FAP on the South Side of Chicago also drew African American artists into a larger world of interracial leftist art and activism to an unprecedented degree. Young black artists in Chicago began to cohere into a small community before the advent of the FAP, gathering around artist George Neal, who formed a group called the Arts Crafts Guild in the early 1930s. A young man in his early twenties who had had some training at the Art Institute of Chicago, Neal taught art classes at the South Side Settlement House and recruited a number of his pupils to form the Guild. Members included Charles White, Eldzier Cortor, Charles Sebree, Bernard Goss, and Margaret Goss Burroughs. White remembered that the Guild was a very mixed group of people: “The thing was interesting because they were all working people, young people. And it was also interesting because nobody in this group really had any normal art education. They were all amateurs except [Neal] who was sort of the president of the group.”⁷² The Guild was truly a community institution, holding meetings in members’ living rooms and throwing “rent parties” to raise funds to send members to art classes at the Institute. Individuals attending these classes would then bring what they learned back to the group so that everyone could benefit.

Like the artists gathering at 306, participants in the Arts Crafts Guild placed high value on creating art that carried a social message. Many credited Neal for this focus. Neal was particularly influential on Charles White in this regard:

⁷² Charles White oral history interview with Betty Hoag, March 9, 1965, AAA.

He got us out of the studio and into the street. He made us conscious of the beauty of those beat-up old shacks. He also taught us the craft aspects of painting technique, but the main thing was that he opened up areas that we had never considered. He made us conscious of the beauty of black people. He got us away from the old-time movie magazines that some of us, wanting to do illustrations, copied and were influenced by. George really turned us in the direction of life around us.⁷³

Neal's work with the Arts Crafts Guild drew his pupils' and colleagues' attention to their local community and developed among them an artistic philosophy that valued the political efficacy of art. As Eldzier Cortor recalled, "I felt on the face of it, as a black, to be doing abstract – I just felt I couldn't afford it, that it wouldn't serve my purpose, to get over my message."⁷⁴ While Neal's life was cut short in 1938, his influence would remain with many of his fellow Arts Crafts Guild members throughout their careers.

The young artists of the Arts Crafts Guild further cultivated this attraction towards political art through their employment in the Federal Art Project and participation in the Chicago Artists' Union. Chicago Union leader Robert Jay Wolff recalled the union's conviction of the importance of interracial organizing, declaring that "the original constitution of the Union was as uncompromisingly democratic as the Bill of Rights. It guaranteed the right of any artist to membership in the Union." This proved controversial for some of Chicago's more conservative artists and arts administrators, yet the ranks of the Union filled quickly with artists who, in Wolff's words, "had not closed their eyes to history and were consequently known as reds and radicals."⁷⁵ As they gained employment in the FAP, African American artists entered into this milieu of "reds and radicals" and learned a great deal more about leftist ideas of how art could serve as a political weapon. Charles White, for example, joined the easel division of the FAP in

⁷³ Charles White, quoted in Bearden and Henderson, 407.

⁷⁴ Eldzier Cortor, quoted in Bearden and Henderson, 274.

⁷⁵ Robert Jay Wolff, "Chicago and the Artists' Union," 241.

Chicago in 1938 and worked closely with white muralists such as Morris Topchevsky, Mitchell Siporin, and Si Gordon, who were active in the Union and who educated White on the political possibilities inherent in mural art. Topchevsky had spent the late 1920s in Mexico learning from the famous leftist Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, and he passed the knowledge of their political aesthetic strategies, as well as his own, on to White. Topchevsky was deeply immersed in the proletarian and social realist art movements, serving as President of the Chicago Artists' Union and writing in 1933, for example, that "at the present time of class struggle, danger of war and mass starvation, the artist cannot isolate himself from the problems of the world, and the most valuable contribution to society will come from the artists who are social revolutionists."⁷⁶ The FAP and Artists' Union thus brought together white and black artists in Chicago around the mutual goal of creating politically useful art.

These connections were forged particularly firmly through the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), which was created in 1940. Encouraged by the model of the HCAC, activists on the South Side of Chicago also came together to lobby for their own community art center towards the end of the decade.⁷⁷ Much like in Harlem, the idea for a center came out of the community, although in Chicago the impetus arose from a group of five female social activists and society matrons rather than from local artists. Lobbying for the center began in 1938 when Pauline Kligh Reed, Frankie Singleton, Susan Morris, Marie Moore, and Grace Carter Cole brought the idea to Peter Pollack,

⁷⁶ Morris Topchevsky, artist's statement, in J.Z. Jacobson, ed., *Art of Today: Chicago, 1933* (Chicago: L.M. Stein, 1932), 129.

⁷⁷ Activists and Illinois FAP administrators used the HCAC as an example in their fundraising efforts for a community art center on the South Side of Chicago; see, for example, correspondence between IL FAP administrator George G. Thorp and national FAP administrator Mildred Holzhauer on the provision of materials on the HCAC from the national offices for these purposes, April-May, 1938, in FAP records, Reel DC47, AAA.

then director of the Federal Art Project in Illinois and owner of a downtown gallery that was friendly to black artists.⁷⁸ Artists such as Margaret Goss Burroughs and Charles White quickly joined the effort, however, serving as active members of the sponsoring committee.

Holding regular meetings at the offices of the Urban League as well as at a local funeral parlor, the committee quickly sprang into action to raise funds for a building for the proposed center. Burroughs remembered participating in the group's "Mile of Dimes" campaign: "I was 21 years old and I stood on the corner of 39th and South Parkway...collecting dimes in a can. I believe I collected almost \$100 in dimes," she recalled.⁷⁹ The committee also held social events, luncheons, and exhibitions of the work of South Side artists to raise funds for the center.⁸⁰ Geared toward the members of the South Side's high society, these events were well attended and generated revenue for the committee, as advocates for the center pitched the project as an important measure for racial justice. "Was highly encouraged last Tues. when \$288.00 was raised for the art center at a luncheon," wrote Peter Pollack to his friend Alain Locke.

The one point which seemed to click best was that art alone breaks down all racial barriers. No art lover questions the artists' race, supposedly. Elaboration of this point by the following speaker unloosed the purse strings. Art as a cultural expression was seemingly unimportant but art as a weapon with which to fight race discrimination, that must be supported. What do you make of it?⁸¹

⁷⁸ Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 67.

⁷⁹ Margaret Goss Burroughs, "Chicago's South Side Community Art Center: A Personal Recollection," in John Franklin White, ed., *Art in Action*, 133.

⁸⁰ "Artists Display Work at Exhibition," *Chicago Defender*, December 17, 1938, p. 15; Consuelo C. Young, "Preface," *Chicago Defender*, February 4, 1939, p. 14; "Artists and Models Ball Draws Capacity Crowd," *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1939, p. 16; "Art Center Reports on Artists, Models Ball," *Chicago Defender*, December 9, 1939, p. 2.

⁸¹ Peter Pollack to Alain Locke, dated May 28, 1939, Box 164-78, folder 5, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Pollack's comments suggest that upper-class members of the South Side community were deeply influenced by Depression-era ideas about the political potential inherent in the arts, and the committee capitalized on this attitude in order to raise enough money to fund the center.

Others within the community understood the coming of a federally-funded community art center as a potential class-leveler, an attitude that was particularly articulated in the pages of the local newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.⁸² Throughout the SSCAC's existence, articles and editorials in the paper closely covered the activities of the center and urged the community to support it both financially and through attendance to its programs. In particular, the paper stressed the importance of the cultural democracy the FAP art center afforded to the people of the South Side. From the beginning, editorial writers for the *Defender* highlighted how the center would make art accessible to the neighborhood: "The object of all this art activity is to make art available to all in a personal and interesting way and without the high hat and spats that the average man is accustomed to associate with art. The layman, his wife and children, work with materials and learn the techniques of art. They learn to apply its principles to their daily life."⁸³ When the sponsoring committee finally gathered enough funds in 1940 to purchase a mansion on the South Side that had once belonged to the Comiskey family, the paper struck a similar chord, celebrating the fact that "No longer does [the mansion] belong to one man or one family. Instead, a whole community, the South side, owns it. Now, poor

⁸² Literary scholar Bill V. Mullen points to the *Defender* as a key organ of the African American "cultural renaissance" of the 1930s in Chicago; see Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), ch. 2.

⁸³ "Chicago Active in Effort to Establish Community Art Center," *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1939, p. 24.

folks and good-livers, kids and octogenarians, the lame, halt and blind are trekking to 3831 South Michigan Avenue.”⁸⁴

Such sentiments lauding the potential of the art center to do away with the class boundaries that made art inaccessible to the people might have been issued directly from the Federal Art Project. Yet the possibility of opening up participation in the production and consumption of art to “the people” held double significance for many African Americans, as it was not only class boundaries that shut them out from the art world but racial boundaries, as well. The newspaper’s commentary about the transformation of the Comiskey mansion is especially revealing in this light; much like many of the buildings on South Michigan Avenue that were once home to Chicago’s white social elite, the house had been divided into kitchenette apartments and left to rot in disrepair after whites fled the neighborhood during the Great Migration at the turn of the century. The rejuvenation of the mansion into a space owned by “the whole community,” one where black southsiders from all walks of life could become artists, was therefore an enormous point of pride both for the newspaper and for many of those involved in the art center’s creation. Funding for the center from the federal government further legitimized these efforts.

Modeled on the Harlem Community Art Center, the South Side Community Art Center proved just as popular in its community (fig. 2.7). The center opened for its first classes in mid-December of 1940 and featured an exhibition of paintings by local black artists including Charles Davis, Charles White, Bernard Goss, William Carter, Eldzier Cortor, Charles Sebree, Archibald Motley, Jr., and others. Free art classes were available in oil painting, drawing, composition, water color, sculpture, lithography, poster design,

⁸⁴ Robert Davis, “A Community Adventure,” *Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1941, p. 13.

fashion illustration and interior decoration, silk screen, weaving, and hooked rug-making, taught by an interracial faculty of art instructors including White, Goss, Carter, Davis, and white instructors Morris Topchevsky, Si Gordon, Max Kahn, and Todros Geller. By March of 1941, only four months after the unofficial opening and before the dedication ceremony featuring Eleanor Roosevelt, as many as 13,500 people had attended classes, exhibitions, and events at the center.⁸⁵ An SSCAC press release on art center attendance from February of 1941 communicated the delight of the staff at the popularity of the new community institution, quoting Charles White declaring, “Man, this thing is big!” For those running the center, such local enthusiasm suggested that the SSCAC could easily emerge as the nexus of an African American art movement: “The idea has been voiced many times in the past two weeks that the South Side Community Art Center can and should become a national center of Negro art,” the press release declared. “Such an idea envisioning national exhibitions, a top-flight teaching and lecture program, [and] sales of Negro artists’ works is by no means untenable and in fact represents the goal of the Art Center Sponsors’ Committee.”⁸⁶

Tensions between social classes characterized the operation of the SSCAC from its earliest days, as the elite Board of Directors repeatedly clashed with artists who largely stemmed from and sympathized with the working class. Margaret Goss Burroughs recalled how the artists who worked for the Center were often shut out of important meetings by the “bourgeois” directors who were working to develop an “affluent, cultural center” and believed that poor artists with “no prestige” had no place in

⁸⁵ Attendance statistics from the Program for the SSCAC dedication ceremony, William McBride Papers (WMP), box 25, Vivian Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago.

⁸⁶ “Art Center Attendance Skyrockets,” SSCAC press release, dated February, 1941, WMP, Box 24, folder 13.

decision-making for the Center.⁸⁷ While Burroughs' bitterness at her treatment by the Board reflects the basic class antagonisms that governed SSCAC operations, her comments also further suggest differences in how members of the South Side elite and working-class artists understood the purpose of the Center. For the Board, it held the potential to demonstrate the ability of African Americans to produce and participate in high culture. For the artists, however, the SSCAC was a site through which they could dedicate themselves and their art to the larger African American working-class community on the South Side. "The art center was our life," Burroughs remembered.⁸⁸

Even more so than the organizers and directors of the Harlem Community Art Center, the artists involved in running the SSCAC understood the center's larger purpose in political terms, hoping that art education in the community and black participation in the FAP would not only generate a national African American visual arts movement, but also result in the application of that art to the larger struggle of African Americans and the working class. These convictions were particularly enhanced through the interaction of white and black artists with leftist politics that the SSCAC fostered. Margaret Goss Burroughs later remembered the friendships she forged with artists such as Morris Topchevsky and Si Gordon at the Center, recalling with fondness afternoons when she and Charles White would visit them in their studios to share ideas and drink coffee. Gordon lent Burroughs books on Harriet Tubman and black history, which opened her mind to the long story of African American political struggle; "I guess he knew what he was doing," she later remarked. "He was planting seeds."⁸⁹ These relationships deeply

⁸⁷ Margaret Goss Burroughs, "Chicago's South Side Community Art Center," 141.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Margaret Goss Burroughs oral history interview with Anna M. Tyler, November 11 and December 5, 1988, AAA.

influenced both the young African American artists who worked at the center and their older white colleagues, as both groups worked together to link the activities of the Center to larger efforts for social justice for African Americans.

One arena in which these commitments emerged was in the center's art exhibitions. Along with art classes, the center's staff sought to educate the public about the creation of art through their exhibition program: SSCAC art exhibits routinely included information and demonstration of the techniques behind the art occupying the gallery in order to show the objects' "relation and use in our social structure" and illustrate "the relationship of art to the community experience."⁹⁰ An event at the SSCAC in the spring of 1941 provides a clear illustration of how the art center used its space and its central role in the community to bring about a union of art and politics. A news release from the Center dated April 2, 1941, reported on a lecture given to a group of more than one hundred college students at the SSCAC by National Negro Congress (NNC) field organizer and Communist activist Ishmael P. Flory on "the problems of the Negro community."⁹¹ In his lecture, Flory discussed systematic socioeconomic discrimination against African Americans, outlining in detail "the situations in housing, employment, in general and the exclusion of Negroes from defense jobs." He then broached the role of the NNC in combating these injustices, ending by finally linking the organization's work to that of the SSCAC. After hearing the lecture, students then "found graphic illustration of many of Mr. Florey's [sic.] points" in an exhibition of prints by Belgian native and SSCAC instructor Adrian Troy. Entitled "Freedmen's

⁹⁰ Program for the SSCAC dedication ceremony, WMP, Box 25.

⁹¹ The National Negro Congress was founded in 1935 as an effort to generate a national constituency to press for civil rights for African Americans and inclusion in the programs of the New Deal. The Chicago chapter was among the most active and, under Flory's leadership, also among the most politically radical.

Holdings,” the exhibition depicted “several phases of life in Chicago’s south side Negro community” and were illustrations for a series of “vignettes” Troy had recently published in *New Horizons* magazine. According to the release, his prints presented “a sympathetic approach to the problem of the Negro in America” and attempted “to point out the limitations under which he lives.” Accompanying each print were the original drawings for the print, the block from which it was made, the tools for making it, and the vignette it illustrated.⁹²

An event such as this provides rich evidence of how artists employed at the SSCAC actively embedded their work within the political milieu of the Popular Front. The fact that the art center was the chosen site for a lecture by an activist for the NNC is itself significant, suggesting that activists did not separate art education from political organizing. More than this, however, the pairing of Flory’s lecture with Troy’s prints illuminates the role SSCAC staff believed art could play in the larger struggle to combat racial injustice. Hearing the words of Flory was apparently not enough; lecture attendees needed to see his ideas visualized in Troy’s work. The images would drive Flory’s message home for the viewers. Beyond this, the students were also taught how the images were made in the first place, offering the suggestion that they, too, could make art that would fight for the rights of African Americans. Through these sorts of events, artists and activists associated with the SSCAC seized on the FAP’s credo of art for the masses and applied it to the labor-oriented civil rights movement in the early 1940s.

Exhibitions such as this one that highlighted art’s potential role in opening up the consciousness of the black working-class masses shared gallery space with less radical

⁹² News release, WMP, Box 24, folder 12. It is unclear from the release which college(s) these students were from, and their racial background is unspecified.

shows that sought to insert African Americans into the larger efforts of the FAP to define and celebrate the “American Scene.” This goal was summed up by Peter Pollack in the Foreword to the catalogue accompanying the Center’s very first exhibition of paintings by local black artists. “As a symbol, this exhibition holds double significance,” he mused, “typifying the contributions of the Negro in this phase of American culture and demonstrating the essential harmony of the Negro artist with his white fellow artists by virtue of a common heritage and, in no smaller measure, common aspirations.” By asserting “a common heritage” and “common aspirations” for all American artists, Pollack effectively included black artists in the larger FAP project of cultural nationalism. As community leaders, Chicago’s black artists could play a central role in the fight for social and political advancement by inserting images of black life into the category of American art.⁹³

The exhibition accompanying the SSCAC’s dedication, “We, Too, Look At America,” further asserted black inclusion in American cultural identity. The exhibition of black artists included work by locals such as Cortor, Sebree, Motley, Davis, White, Margaret Goss Burroughs, Bernard Goss, and others, but also included the art of African Americans from other parts of the United States, many of whom were employed by the FAP, including Samuel Brown, Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, and Richmond Barthé. The title of the exhibition alone indicates the Center’s understanding of itself as a space within which African Americans could offer up an alternative view of the nation; the assertive tone it takes points to the power exhibition organizers saw inherent in the visual and stakes a claim in the national pursuit of “looking at America.”

⁹³ Peter Pollack, “Foreword,” catalogue for “Paintings” exhibition, WMP.

Few of the art objects produced by Chicago's FAP artists have survived, yet those that remain demonstrate that much of their work fell in line with the aesthetic choices of their colleagues in New York and Philadelphia. Charles White's drawing, *There Were No Crops This Year*, for example, expressed the emotional toll of the Depression on black sharecroppers in the South (fig. 2.8). The monumental figures of a sharecropping couple fill the frame, the man's pained face looking off into the distance while the woman turns her defeated gaze toward the viewer as she reveals the fruitlessness of their harvest by opening an empty sack. As art historian Andrea Barnwell writes, the image portrays these farmers' lives as "contained and constrained within the boundaries of race and class.... Their posture and sorrowful demeanor, placed squarely in the foreground, emphasize that laborers – especially black laborers – carry the weight of the economic and social distress of the period."⁹⁴ The drawing won White the first prize in the art exhibition at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940 and appeared on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, indicating that it struck a chord with an African American community that had recently swelled with migrants from the south.

Because it offered social realist artists such as White the opportunity to illuminate the African American experience, the opening of the South Side Community Art Center was widely celebrated in the local and national black press. Articles in the *Chicago Defender* and the NAACP's *The Crisis* picked up on the links being forged between art and race politics in Chicago. Vernon Winslow's meditation on the larger significance of the opening in *The Crisis*, for example, argued for the "enormous amount of 'carrying power' which Negro art has long had for the socioeconomic growth of our group." After all, Winslow asserted, African Americans played a central yet unappreciated role in

⁹⁴ Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate Communications, 2002), 7.

American culture; he pointed especially to “the fact that true American art has its roots deeply embedded within our heritage. And yet, despite all this, we have neglected to establish a single institution devoted to the professional training of Negro artists.” For Winslow and others, institutions such as the community art center held enormous potential to both illuminate and enhance the hybridity of American culture. To be included into the fold of national identity would then further serve to advance the socioeconomic status of African Americans.⁹⁵ Editorials in the *Chicago Defender* likewise delineated the visual as an especially useful means of communicating black equality; art could etch ideas onto the general (read white) public consciousness in ways that words, in the form of “defensive arguments and counterclaims,” could not. “This art center may,” the paper opined, “we hope it will, serve as an avenue for honest appraisal and just interpretation of black America’s cultural contributions to white America’s national life.” Interestingly, “America’s national life” in the paper’s language still belonged to whites. Still, the SSCAC opened up the possibility of changing this state of affairs by carving out a space for blacks within the national identity.

The FAP-sponsored South Side Community Art Center thus forged links between art and race politics in a variety of ways, as sponsors, organizers, artists, and others from a range of political perspectives made meaning of the Center’s function and role in the South Side community and in the larger American culture. At the ground level, artists attracted to the politics of the left and social realist ideas exchanged ideas through their work at the Center and put those ideas into practice through their art and through their teaching and exhibition programs. Much of their work directly protested economic and racial inequality, and they sought both to spread messages of protest through widely

⁹⁵ Vernon Winslow, “Why a Negro Art Center?” *Crisis* 48: 325.

accessible images as well as to teach members of the community the means of production in order to foster wider political activism. Yet these fairly radical efforts coexisted with the liberal agenda of FAP administrators, elite members of the South Side community, and other intellectuals who saw the Center as an engine of cultural pluralism – a site where African American artists could insert black faces, black stories, and black lives into the larger understanding of American identity. The expansiveness of the Federal Art Project – its diffuse administrative structure and openness to a variety of aesthetic approaches and artistic philosophies – made it possible for these ideas to circulate and overlap within institutions such as the SSCAC. Indeed, as the FAP art centers in Harlem, Philadelphia, and the South Side of Chicago emerged during the Popular Front, a moment of alliance between liberals and the left, these goals were not mutually exclusive; both informed the art and activism of artists working for the FAP who were committed to social justice for African Americans.

By the end of the Depression, the visual arts held an altogether different place in African American social and political life than they had in the 1920s as a result of a blend of grassroots activism in northern black urban communities and assistance provided by the Federal Art Project. Contrary to the generally negative assessment of the FAP's record on race provided by most historians, the Project in fact offered unprecedented opportunities to African American artists to secure full-time employment in their craft, to gain some acceptance from and aesthetic exchange with white colleagues, particularly

those devoted to the politics of the left, and to provide widely accessible art education to their communities through art centers. These achievements deserve more than lip service on the way to pointing to the FAP's flaws, which certainly existed. The African American artists employed by the Project themselves highlighted the role the FAP played in helping to bring together politicized arts communities and presenting black and white artists a chance to work alongside one another. Elizabeth Catlett, for example, reflected in 1944 on the place of "The Negro Artist in America" and the experience of the FAP in a lecture she delivered at the ACA Gallery in Manhattan. African American artists "had been struggling for years and would never have developed to their present status had it not been for the Project," she remarked. "During [the FAP] period there was greater collaboration between Negro and white because of their common aim – economic security for the artist. The Artists' Union was established and was one of the greatest forces for the promotion of Negro-white art unity in the history of our country."⁹⁶ In their own minds, inclusion in the FAP and the union was what offered African American artists unprecedented opportunities to align themselves with the leftist art movement of the 1930s that produced art in service of social justice.

While attention to the voices of African American artists employed by the FAP complicates a uniformly negative assessment of the FAP, a closer look at the battles between the Harlem Artists Guild and the New York FAP administration, or between the artists who worked at the SSCAC and the upper-class members of the Center's Board of Directors, suggests the dangers inherent in a monolithic understanding of a program as large and bureaucratic as the Federal Art Project. Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff has recently

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Catlett, "The Negro Artist in America," *American Contemporary Art* (April, 1944): 5. This newsletter can be found in the ACA Gallery Papers, AAA.

discussed the tensions between the goals of Federal Theater Project and Federal Writers' Project administrators at the national level and those of the African American cultural workers employed on these projects, showing in particular how black actors and writers worked to "possess their own representation" despite officials' unwillingness to enact any real social and economic change within the projects.⁹⁷ The Federal Art Project also fits this model, as artists made use of the training and exhibition opportunities afforded by the project both to represent themselves as they chose and in many cases to issue a direct challenge to the political and social status quo. As is the case with many state agencies, there was room within the FAP for a variety of agendas to compete and find expression.

The greater significance of the FAP for African American art and politics is the degree to which it solidified a generation of young black artists who were committed to infusing their work with the social realist and pluralist politics they encountered and practiced through the Project. Speaking with writer Willard Motley in 1940, Bernard Goss summed up the political orientation that characterized this generation: "I want to do murals and paintings, to influence people," he declared. "I'm not satisfied with social and economic conditions. My aim is to do something about them."⁹⁸ Goss's friend Charles White added to these comments, asserting that he was interested in "creating a style of painting that...will take in the technical end and at the same time say what I have to say. Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent. If I could write I would write about it. If I could talk I would talk about it. Since I paint, I must paint about it."⁹⁹ Goss and White's reflections on their political role as artists demonstrate the

⁹⁷ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Ambivalent Inclusion: The State, Race, and Official Culture, 1930-1950," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2003, p. 6.

⁹⁸ Willard F. Motley, "Negro Art in Chicago," *Opportunity* 18 (Jan., 1940): 21.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

central space black artists carved out for themselves within the struggle for racial justice in northern urban black communities in the 1930s. As African American art historian James Porter pointed out in 1943, “the Negro artist uses the etching needle, the graver’s burin, and the lithographic stone as an electoral candidate would use the public address system to reach the masses of people directly and effectively.”¹⁰⁰ A new sort of activist, the African American artist would contribute to the civil rights effort by wielding the power of the visual image.

¹⁰⁰ James Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943), reprinted with an introduction by David Driskell, (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 156.

CHAPTER THREE: Picturing African American History, 1939-1949

While participants in the Federal Art Project produced myriad scenes of African American social and cultural life, economic inequality, and racial violence, the interpretation of African American history was perhaps the most important theme adopted by black artists who came of age in the social realist milieu of the FAP, as well as by a number of their leftist white colleagues. While the Federal Art Project was liquidated along with the rest of the WPA in 1942, many artists who had been affiliated with the FAP continued to produce social realist art well into the 1940s. In particular, these artists sought to educate the American public about African American achievement and contribution to American history through their work, and thus made claims to American citizenship through visual imagery. In the form of murals and prints, these works sought to instill racial pride in African American viewers while simultaneously serving as protest against the history and reality of economic and racial injustice in the United States. While these images might seem unremarkable for present-day viewers accustomed to celebrations of Black History Month and relatively familiar with African American historical figures, their appearance on the walls of public buildings and in circulated portfolios of prints in the 1940s constituted a radical political statement. Drawing strength from and participating in both the movement for civil rights that was gathering momentum during World War II and a growing black history movement, progressive artists, both black and white, placed their faith in the didactic power of the visual image to argue for African American social, political, and economic inclusion.

While the artists and writers engaging in black historical subject matter in this period held varying political convictions, the vision of African American history they articulated followed a general pattern of Popular Front pluralism. The images they created emphasized a separate and unique black experience of America, attempted to build racial pride among African American viewers, and protested the historical treatment of African Americans. At the same time, however, they asserted African American citizenship by placing blacks at the very center of key historical moments in the formation of the American nation, essentially integrating African Americans into the fabric of national identity. The tensions inherent in highlighting a unique racial and cultural identity while seeking social and cultural inclusion have existed throughout the history of African American intellectual production and political life, and thus characterize not only the historical art created in the 1930s and 40s, but also the larger civil rights movement of this period. This art thus reflected and participated in the intellectual and political milieu out of which it stemmed, making visible both the Americanness of blacks and the degree to which American history and culture was formed through a distinct African American influence.

For black artists in particular, the impetus to explore the historical role of African Americans arose out of a keen dissatisfaction with the lack of education they received on their ancestors' pasts as schoolchildren. Yet their interest in history did not emerge in a vacuum. Indeed, as many scholars have shown, American culture in the 1930s was marked by a collective obsession with finding a "usable past" that would offer solace and hope in the face of a crippling economic depression.¹ The 1930s saw the creation of both

¹ Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23 (Dec., 1971): 710-724.

Colonial Williamsburg, a living-history recreation of the colonial capital in Virginia that held as its motto “That the Future May Learn from the Past,” and the National Archives, to name two projects that actively engaged in national identity-building through historical preservation and interpretation.² The visual arts, in particular, also served as an important forum for the interpretation of American national identity in this period, epitomized by the New Deal murals gracing the walls of post offices across the country, which displayed local history in an effort to bolster the faith of the American public.³ In a moment of stunning discontinuity and change, history offered Americans a sense of continuity and social and cultural cohesion during the Depression and World War II.

Within African American communities, history likewise took on important meaning in the 1930s and 40s. Historian Carter G. Woodson had founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in Chicago in 1915, beginning what scholars have begun to call “the early black history movement”; by the mid-1930s, this scholarly movement picked up steam with the publication of important works by historians such as W.E.B. DuBois and Woodson himself.⁴ Woodson and the ASNLH also stepped up their activism in 30s and 40s, attempting to generate interest in black history among working-class African Americans by pressuring school boards to include African American history in the curriculum, encouraging the celebration of

² Warren Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 190.

³ Karal Ann Marling, “A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth,” *Prospects* 4 (1979): 421-40. On the role of the arts in national identity formation, see Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980).

⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1933); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, original 1935). On Woodson and the early black history movement, see Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Pero Gaglio Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

Negro History Week, and publishing the *Negro History Bulletin*, a magazine geared toward general readers.⁵ Black newspapers, too, stressed how important it was for readers to know “Your History,” including scores of historical biographies, accounts of black “firsts,” and political cartoons commenting on the exclusion of African Americans from the history books in their pages (fig. 3.1).⁶

Growing up in Harlem in the 30s, artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden remembered the degree to which the community took this charge to heart, pointing to the inspiration they received from individuals such as Charles Seifert, who spoke frequently on African and African American history in the neighborhood and shared his voluminous library with young Harlemites interested in their heritage.⁷ In New York and Chicago, African Americans were given access to the history they craved through the collections of the Schomburg Center at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library and those assembled by librarians Vivian Harsh and Charlemae Rollins at the George Cleveland Hall Library on the South Side of Chicago.⁸ In sum, African American communities were buzzing with a demand for more knowledge about

⁵ The ASNLH launched “Negro History Week” in February of 1926. It became “Black History Month” in 1976.

⁶ “Your History” was the name of an illustrated series in the *Pittsburgh Courier* by George E. Lee and Joel Augustus Rogers. See also Henry Brown, “Forgotten Pages of History,” *Chicago Defender*, January 13, 1934, p.A2; Jay Jackson, “Know Your History,” *Chicago Defender*, September 21, 1935, p.16; Jay Jackson, “There is Always a Silver Lining,” *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1938, p.16; for examples of political cartoons on black history.

⁷ Romare Bearden remembers Seifert’s influence on him when he was a young artist but calls him “Leopold Seyfert” in “The 1930’s – An Art Reminiscence,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1971, p.D24; he offers a more accurate and complete profile of Seifert in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 247-50. Seifert was also a major influence on Lawrence; see Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press in association with the Seattle Art Museum, 1986), 35.

⁸ Deborah Willis, “The Schomburg Collection: a Rich Resource for Jacob Lawrence,” in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed., *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (Washington, D.C.: Rappahannock Press in association with the Phillips Collection, 1993); Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women’s Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

where they fit into the American story. As Lawrence later recalled, “People would speak of these things on the street. I was encouraged by the community to do [narrative historical] works of this kind; they were interested in them.”⁹

The history produced by this early black history movement, both for popular and scholarly audiences, took a variety of approaches to understanding the African American past, at times downplaying systemic oppression by emphasizing the accomplishments of individual African Americans, while at other times pointing directly to the historical roots of racial and economic inequality. Amateur historian and journalist J.A. Rogers was particularly influential in spreading the “great men” approach to black history, popularizing this focus through illustrated profiles of unknown African and African American figures from the past in his widely-circulated “Your History” column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.¹⁰ Scholars who geared their work toward an academic audience also shared this approach, uncovering the lost history of heroic African Americans in the pages of the ASNLH quarterly, the *Journal of Negro History*, in order to make a claim to the civilization of blacks. Yet the *Journal of Negro History* was a multivocal publication, and other historians contributed articles that explored the history of political inequality and offered new perspectives on the legacies of slavery and Reconstruction. Directors of the ASNLH were particularly sensitive to the tensions between highlighting positive achievements and unearthing negative historical truths; Woodson wrote in his 1935 Annual Report, for example, that “the Negro must learn to look upon his past as creditable as that of any other people, but he must not become embittered against others

⁹ Lawrence quoted in Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter*, 42.

¹⁰ The illustrations from these columns were originally published in book form in 1940 by the Pittsburgh Courier Press, and were republished in the 1980s; see J.A. Rogers, *Your History: From the Beginning of Time to the Present* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1983).

who have wronged the weak.”¹¹ These tensions between the celebration of the achievements of individual black historical figures on the one hand and the possibility for anger and political activism as a result of knowledge of historical wrongs committed against African Americans on the other were also present in the historical artworks produced in the 1930s and 40s.

While artists incorporating African American historical themes into their work participated in this larger debate over approaches to black history, many also incorporated their the leftist political orientation they developed through the Federal Art Project and participation in the Artists’ Union into their work. In the early 1930s, radical artists pointed directly to the history of slavery and black oppression as evidence of the corruption of a capitalist economic system, producing cartoons and other images that they hoped *would* embitter viewers and motivate them to protest. An emphasis on black cultural contributions also characterized the less-militant Popular Front, as cultural workers sought to demonstrate the pluralist character of American society.¹² Drawing on these cultural and political currents, a number of artists placed African Americans squarely within the working class, aligning blacks with workers at the same time that they drew attention to the historical oppression of African Americans along the lines of race and class, and, in some cases, gender.

As artists worked to spread a vision of African American history through prints and murals in the 1930s and 40s, they infused their work with competing ideas about race, history, and politics. Indeed, the artistic images of black history from this period

¹¹ Carter G. Woodson, “Annual Report of the Director,” *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1935): 370.

¹² See Diana Selig, *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Selig shows that this emphasis on cultural pluralism went beyond the Popular Front, characterizing a wide range of liberal educational efforts in the 1930s and early 40s.

deeply reflect the changing values and approaches to civil rights politics that characterized this critical moment as the civil rights movement began to gain strength. These artworks thus served as focal points of discussion, through which these ideas were debated and contested. Featured prominently on the walls of black institutions and distributed through portfolios of prints, they made use of history not only to assert African American inclusion in the American national identity, but also to weigh a range of political perspectives against one another that had important implications for the future focus of the civil rights movement in the United States.

African American history as a theme in American art emerged in earnest out of the work of black artists employed on the arts projects of the New Deal. Always a pioneer, Aaron Douglas created what was perhaps the earliest extended exploration of black history in visual art in his 1934 mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, which was commissioned by the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP), the precursor to the Federal Art Project.¹³ Created for the walls of the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem, Douglas's four panels draw the viewer from an African dance scene, through slavery and Reconstruction, into life in the deep South marked by hard agricultural labor and lynching, and finally to the northern industrialized city in the Great Migration. Douglas, who grew interested in the Communist movement in the early 30s and became an active participant in leftist artists' circles, commented to a reporter for the

¹³ Roosevelt's first large-scale public art program, the PWAP lasted from December, 1933, to July, 1934; see Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

New York Amsterdam News on his frustration at being unable to include a fifth panel suggesting that “the unity of black and white workers in the class struggle” was “the way out for the Negro” because of anticipated objections from his PWAP superiors.¹⁴ Still, as art historian Amy Kirschke has shown, Douglas’s murals nevertheless contain hints of his Marxist view of African American history through his depiction of lynching scenes, laborers, and the crushing cogwheel of northern industry.¹⁵ Known by younger Harlem artists such as Lawrence and Bearden as the “Dean” of black art, Douglas set the tone for the creation of left-inflected public art exploring African American history.¹⁶

By the late 1930s, the exploration of black historical themes in mural art was exported out of northern cities as southern black colleges and universities drew on the training of the FAP cohort of African American artists to expand their art departments, resulting in the creation of several important nodes of artistic activity in places such as Atlanta University and Howard University.¹⁷ Hale Woodruff was among those called on to develop an art department at an all-black college. Born and raised in Nashville,

¹⁴ T.R. Poston, “Murals and Marx,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1934. The PWAP allowed artists much less leeway in terms of subject matter than the FAP later would. Douglas apparently never created the fifth panel because he assumed PWAP administrators would protest.

¹⁵ Amy Helene Kirschke, “The Depression Murals of Aaron Douglas: Radical Politics and African American Art,” *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 4 (1995): 19-29.

¹⁶ Douglas was not alone in his early interest in African American history as an artistic theme; Malvin Gray Johnson and Earle W. Richardson were also creating a series of historical paintings for the PWAP at the same time as Douglas. The PWAP withdrew funding from this project in 1934, however. See Jacqueline Francis, “Making History: Malvin Gray Johnson’s and Earle W. Richardson’s Studies for *Negro Achievement*,” in Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, eds., *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 135-53. For the “Dean” reference, see Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 131.

¹⁷ On the importance of black colleges and universities for African American art, see Richard J. Powell, *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art; New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem; Cambridge, MA: distributed by the MIT Press, 1999); and Amalia K. Amaki and Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, *Hale Woodruff, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, and the Academy* (Seattle and London: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2007). Atlanta University’s art program centered around Hale Woodruff, while Howard University faculty included artists James Lesesne Wells and Lois Maillou Jones, as well as art historians and intellectuals James Porter, Alain Locke, and James V. Herring.

Woodruff attended art school at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis in the early 20s, drawing political cartoons for a local newspaper to pay his tuition. After struggling to support himself as an artist in Harlem during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Woodruff took a position at Atlanta University in 1931 and subsequently enhanced both the size and the prestige of the school's art department as well as its collection of African American art.¹⁸

Like his fellow black artists in Harlem, with whom he remained in contact throughout his tenure in Atlanta, Woodruff embraced the philosophy of social realism in the 1930s, producing paintings and prints that illuminated the poor conditions experienced by African Americans in the South.¹⁹ As a teacher, he was committed to providing art training to working-class African Americans, offering public evening and weekend classes through the "People's College" he created on campus. As an artist, he worked hard to develop the social significance of his own work, taking a special trip to Mexico in 1936 to learn from the social realist master, Diego Rivera. Woodruff also put the images he created to work politically, donating two powerful prints, *Giddap* and *By Parties Unknown*, to the 1935 NAACP-sponsored antilynching exhibition, "An Art Commentary on Lynching," at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York City.

Woodruff would have a chance to put his Mexican training in historical mural painting to use with the commission in 1939 of a series of murals on the *Amistad* case for the new library being built at Talladega College, another black college in Alabama.

Talladega president Buell Gallagher commissioned the murals to commemorate the 100th

¹⁸ In 1942, with the assistance of Charles Alston, Woodruff created a competitive annual exhibition of black art that drew national attention to its participants and endowed the university with an extensive art collection until its discontinuation in the late 1960s.

¹⁹ In the local press, Woodruff and his students became jokingly known as the "Outhouse School," since so many of their works depicted rural African Americans' houses lacking plumbing.

anniversary of the case, in which slaves aboard the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* mutineered and subsequently secured their freedom through the assistance of legal representation from the abolitionist American Missionary Association, which also founded a number of all-black colleges in the nineteenth century, including Talladega College. Woodruff conducted meticulous research on the case at Yale University Library and the archives of the New Haven Historical Society for the murals and then completed them at his studio in Atlanta.

In three visually complex and vibrantly colorful panels, Woodruff relates the story of the *Amistad* revolt in a manner which places the slaves at the forefront of the case's history. In his first panel, *The Mutiny Aboard the Amistad, 1839*, Woodruff inserts the viewer directly in the thick of the chaotic struggle onboard the ship as the slaves overpower the Spanish captain and crew. Woodruff's careful composition presents a diagonal grid of lines made up of raised and bent arms and legs, gleaming machetes, and the barrel of a rifle, heightening the drama of the battle by drawing the viewer's eye around the painting to a series of pairings of slaves and crewmembers. The dominance of the African slaves in this image is striking; in each pairing, the machete-wielding African holds the advantage, each of them poised just before a brutal blow to his adversary. Woodruff also emphasizes their physical power by endowing each scantily-clad slave with solid, well-defined muscles. Here Woodruff drew on a leftist aesthetic strategy, emphasizing the powerful masculinity of the male laborer, but this time endowing him with black skin.²⁰ Such a depiction of black strength and aggression was a radical image for the walls of an institution located in the heart of Jim Crow Alabama.

²⁰ Jonathan Weinberg, "I Want Muscle: Male Desire and the Image of the Worker in American Art of the 1930s," in Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, eds., *The Social and the Real*, 115-34.

The second panel, *The Amistad Slaves on Trial at New Haven, Connecticut, 1840*, moves us from the violent whirlwind of the slave ship to the tense order of the courtroom. Woodruff places a proud Joseph Cinque, the slaves' leader who appears here still muscular although now dressed in western attire, as the key figure on the left side of the painting, standing before an interracial crowd of supporters. Gathered on the opposite side are the ship's crew and their white lawyers, led by a bearded Spaniard with his arm outstretched, pointing an accusing finger at Cinque.²¹ Here Woodruff celebrates the interracialism of the abolition movement, which worked in the *Amistad* case to ensure that the American justice system would provide Cinque and his fellow slaves with the freedom they deserved. Significantly, however, it is the slave leader Woodruff emphasizes here rather than the white lawyers of the AMA. Relinquishing the violence represented by their machetes and loincloths, which are presented at the center table as evidence, in favor of buttoned up American justice, the slaves themselves make use of the legal system to secure their freedom.

In his final panel, *The Return to Africa, 1842*, Woodruff again presents the now emancipated slaves among an interracial group of missionaries, this time bringing the gifts of literacy and prayer back to their homeland. This painting also shows Cinque in a leadership position, as he stands tall on the Sierra Leone shoreline before a group of fellow missionaries who are unpacking books and manuscripts from a trunk, pointing to the ship that brought him here and seemingly playing the role of visionary as he looks off

²¹ The lone black figure on the right side of the painting is the ship's cabin boy, seen escaping up the rigging in the previous panel. Interestingly, Woodruff paid close attention to detail in his portrayal of the individuals in this painting, having studied ambrotypes of the litigants in New Haven. He also managed to express his admiration for the work of those involved in the defense, however, by including himself among them. See M. Akua McDaniel, "Reexamining Hale Woodruff's Talladega College and Atlanta University Murals," in Amaki and Brownlee, *Hale Woodruff*.

into the distance. While, as a whole, the mural cycle accepts and even glorifies the slaves' abandonment of their African culture and adoption of Christianity, it also pairs this perspective with a close attention to the historical agency of the *Amistad* slaves, presenting them not as subject to the beneficence of white abolitionists but rather as central actors in the fight for their freedom, both through physical and legal means. In an era in which the prevailing historical line on slavery cast them as childlike creatures fitted for a condition of servitude, Woodruff's retelling of the *Amistad* revolt constituted a major revisionist historical statement.²² Viewed in the light of the artist's commitment to social realism, the emphasis on an interracial movement galvanized around issues of equality for black laborers in these works also allowed Woodruff to comment on contemporary politics by celebrating such an alliance.

Just as Douglas's PWAP murals encouraged the reading public of Harlem to consider their history, the *Amistad* mural sequence served an important educational and political purpose on the walls of the new Savery Library of Talladega College, as President Buell Gallagher made clear in an article he wrote about the library in the April, 1939, issue of *The Crisis*. Describing it as "the 'Scottsboro Case of the past century,'" Gallagher pointed to the *Amistad* episode as a fitting example of the space inhabited by African Americans historically, in which they had been forced to choose between servitude and rebellion. "The avenue of constructive citizenship has never been freely opened," he asserted, "not even in our own day." The centennial of the *Amistad* case provided the college with an opportunity to bring this fact to the nation's attention as

²² The view of slaves as "childlike" is most closely associated with the work of historian Ulrich B. Phillips; see his *American Negro Slavery, A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918). During the 1930s, scholars such as Herbert Aptheker and others associated with the ASNLH were working to combat this dominant interpretation of the history of slavery.

fascism began its spread across Europe, a moment when the United States “may well take stock of her progress in the democratic treatment of her Number One Minority.” The new library would provide Talladega College with better tools for the school’s main mission, one it shared with its fellow black colleges and universities: educating young people to dismantle the “caste structure” that denied African Americans their citizenship rights. The murals, Gallagher pointed out, played a central role in accomplishing this goal, serving as a daily reminder to students “of the false alternative American society thrusts upon us.” In the pages of the political NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, Gallagher thus made clear the college’s understanding of the power of the historical murals for motivating young people to political action.²³ This function was extended even further when the murals were reprinted in Woodruff’s Atlanta University colleague W.E.B. DuBois’s journal, *Phylon*, in 1941.²⁴

The *Amistad* murals connected Talladega College with the burgeoning visual arts activity at Atlanta University, yet these were not the only black colleges to participate in the trend towards politicized historical education through mural art. In 1943, artist Charles White secured a fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund to produce a mural entitled *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* for the Hampton Institute. White had grown up poor on the South Side of Chicago, the son of a migrant mother from Mississippi who worked as a housekeeper. Drawn to art at a young age, he attended Saturday classes at the Chicago Institute of Art and later won a scholarship to complete a

²³ Buell G. Gallagher, “Talladega Library: Weapon Against Caste,” *The Crisis* 46, no. 4 (April, 1939): 110-11, 126.

²⁴ “The Saga of L’Amistad,” *Phylon* 2, no.1 (1941): 2-6. A story on the murals was also planned for *LIFE* magazine but never appeared because it was scheduled for the week that Hitler invaded Poland. See Hale Woodruff, oral history interview, November 18, 1968, Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

degree there. As a member of the Arts Crafts Guild and employee of the Federal Art Project, White was a fixture at the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) and a key figure in the art scene that developed around it in the latter half of the 1930s.

White later recalled how he developed an interest in African American history after stumbling across a copy of *The New Negro* as a teenager. “This book opened my eyes,” he remembered, and inspired him to search for more books on African Americans. His devotion to black history was so strong he challenged his high school history teacher, asking her why individuals like Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass did not appear in their text books, a challenge to which the teacher did not take kindly. Showing his penchant for activism early, White refused to participate in the class for the rest of the semester, turning in a blank sheet as a term paper. As a young man, White thus recognized the power of learning and knowing one’s history.²⁵

White first explored these interests in two murals that he created while working for the Federal Art Project. The first of these, *Five Great American Negroes* (1939-40), presented portraits of Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Marian Anderson, and George Washington Carver as cultural and political leaders.²⁶ This mural served as a centerpiece of the first “Artists and Models Ball” to raise money for the SSCAC, effectively connecting historical pride with local cultural boosterism. His second attempt at a historical mural, *A History of the Negro Press* (1940), which was commissioned by the Associated Negro Press for its booth at the 1940 American Negro Exposition, likewise served as a visual reminder of African American achievement for black Chicagoans, stressing the role the black press had played in the political, economic,

²⁵ Charles White, oral history interview, March 9, 1965, AAA.

²⁶ See Andrea Barnwell, “Five or Six Great American Negroes?” in *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 55-66 for more on this mural.

and cultural life of African Americans.²⁷ Together, these works provided White with an opportunity to practice what he considered his primary mission: painting black history in order to educate and to bring about change. African American history as a subject had been “sadly neglected,” he told a friend in 1940. “I feel a definite tie-up between all that has happened to the Negro in the past and the whole thinking and acting of the Negro now.”²⁸

White would have an opportunity to probe the connections he saw between the past and the present even more thoroughly through *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (fig. 3.2), which he painted through a grant from the Rosenwald Fund in 1943. Established by Sears Roebuck owner Julius Rosenwald, the foundation served as a major funder of educational efforts for African Americans in the South, as well as an important source of fellowships to black artists and intellectuals in the 1930s and 40s.²⁹ Receiving the fellowship allowed White a year’s worth of uninterrupted time to create his masterpiece of African American history. Originally planning to travel to Mexico to paint the mural among the Mexican masters but denied permission to leave the country by his draft board, White and his new wife and fellow artist Elizabeth Catlett instead moved to New York City for the first part of the year to study with leftist printmaker and painter Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League.³⁰ There they easily integrated themselves into the Harlem art scene, while White researched African

²⁷ The mural has been either lost or destroyed, but a reproduction and further details on the mural can be found in Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate Communications, 2002), 7-11. It won first prize in the mural division at the Exposition.

²⁸ White quoted in Willard Motley, “Negro Art in Chicago,” *Opportunity* 18 (Jan., 1940): 22.

²⁹ On the Rosenwald Fund, see Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006); and Peter Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

³⁰ White was heavily influenced by Sternberg, later describing him as “the most important teacher I ever had”; White oral history interview, AAA.

American history at the Schomburg Center.³¹ White and Catlett then spent the second half of the year at Hampton Institute, teaching and installing the mural.

White's original fellowship application to the Rosenwald Fund gives a sense of what was by then his well-developed philosophy on the central role his artistic depictions of African American history could play in making real the promise of American democracy. He decried the ubiquitous stereotypes of "uncles," "mammies," and "pickaninnies" in American popular culture, arguing that the dissemination of such stereotypes amounted to "conscious attempts to dissociate the Negro's real position from the total life of America, to disparage his contributions to that life, and to place him in an inferior category," which in the end was "harmful to the eventual realization of the Negro as an integral part of American culture." White suggested that his proposed mural would work to counteract these stereotypes and offer a historical account of "the contributions which the Negro has made to American culture and the role which he plays in the endeavors to defend and extend our democracy."³² While White never mentioned the war directly in his application, his comments suggest that wartime rhetoric of democracy influenced his focus on the topic.³³ By rendering in paint the central role black people played in American history, White actively made a claim on democratic citizenship in much the same way as the concurrent "Double V" campaign.

³¹ White and Catlett forged friendships with artists such as Ernest Crichlow, Charles Alston, Gwendolyn Bennett, Robert Blackburn, Aaron Douglas, and Jacob Lawrence, as well as writers Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes, during this period; see Barnwell, *Charles White*, 30. See also chapter four of this dissertation.

³² Charles White, Rosenwald Fellowship Application, 1942, Julius Rosenwald Collection, Box 456, folder 6, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

³³ The topic of the war was clearly on White's mind; his Rosenwald Fellowship was renewed the following year to paint another mural on the role of African Americans in the war effort. White was never able to complete this mural, as he was drafted into the army in 1944.

White's highly complex mural depicts a series of historical episodes and important figures in order to explore three major themes: the active participation of African Americans in developing American democracy and culture, resistance to oppression, and the importance of black labor. The painting's circular narrative begins at the bottom left with a white colonist destroying a 1775 Resolution of the Provincial Congress forbidding the sale and importation of slaves to the American colonies; what follows is African Americans' historical response to this early breach of democracy. Included are black Revolutionary war heroes such as Crispus Attucks, falling before the rifles of the Boston Massacre, and Peter Salem, who fought in the battle of Bunker Hill, providing testimony of the central role of African Americans in the founding of the nation. White then turns to slavery, including portraits of leaders of slave revolts such as Denmark Vesey on horseback, and Nat Turner, holding up a torch to light the way for a group of slaves with chains around their necks. On the right side of the mural, Harriet Tubman leads a slave couple through a stylized doorway representing the Underground Railroad, and escaped slave Peter Still waves a conspicuous red flag declaring, "I Will Die Before I Submit to the Yoke." Abolitionist Frederick Douglass occupies the center of the composition, his bulky frame and enormous hands embracing both the violent resistance of Vesey and the participation of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment in fighting for the North in the Civil War. Douglass's trunklike fingers point the way to the postwar cultural, scientific, and political achievements of African Americans, represented here by Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Marian Anderson, National Maritime Union leader Ferdinand Smith, Paul Robeson, and Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter. At the top center, White also includes a pair of giant black hands wrapped

around shiny machinery, further pointing to the role of African Americans in the industrial labor force. Finally the larger circle of the narrative stops at the bottom center with the black working-class family, the woman holding her baby and the muscular, barefoot man kneeling to display a blueprint.³⁴

While far more ambitious in the breadth of its subject matter, White's painting follows Woodruff's *Amistad* murals in its celebration of African American refusal to accept the historical denial of their citizenship rights and active resistance against oppression. With such figures as Attucks, Salem, and members of the 54th Regiment, White takes his message one step further by inserting black soldiers into key moments of war and nation-building and thus includes them as architects of American democracy, a message that would have particularly resonated with wartime viewers. By including workers and union leaders, as well as Popular Front cultural figures such as Robeson and Leadbelly, White also presents a leftist vision of black history that stresses the role of African Americans in labor activism. As one Chicago observer pointed out about White three years earlier, "He sees the problems of Negroes as differing from those of other workers in degree or intensity rather than in kind. He believes that all working class people have a common interest and that there is a common solution for their problems."³⁵ The mural's centrifugal composition further draws attention to the working-class family, clearly headed by a masculine worker supported by a childbearing wife, suggesting that male-led resistance and labor activism constituted the blueprint for a more democratic

³⁴ Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Contribution of the American Negro to Democracy: A History Painting by Charles White," *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 4, (1995): 39-41; Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 64-71.

³⁵ Robert A. Davis, "The Art Notebook," *Chicago Sunday Bee*, October 6, 1940. Clipping in Charles White Papers, AAA.

American society. White thus simultaneously infused his image with both a celebration of black male individual achievement and an emphasis on the importance of working-class solidarity in resisting oppression.

Despite White's inability to study in Mexico, the influence of *Los Tres Grandes*, or "The Big Three" Mexican muralists – Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco – is also immediately evident. These three artists had played an active role in the development of a state-sponsored mural movement in Mexico in the 1920s which produced public art that celebrated the "indigenous" Mexican folk and was heavily influenced by Marxist politics.³⁶ Mexican mural art became particularly influential in American art in the later 20s and 30s as the Big Three completed a number of mural commissions in the United States and participated in leftist artists' organizations such as the American Artists Congress.³⁷ White became familiar with their work in particular through assisting Chicago mural artists Mitchell Siporin and Edward Millman, who had in turn worked with Rivera and Orozco.³⁸ The layered composition White used in *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, his emphasis on the role of labor and machinery, as well as the mural's highlighting of an ethnic minority as historic national heroes, all closely resemble the murals of the Mexican muralists. White thus drew on the model of Marxist public art provided by the Mexican artists in order to offer up a visual lesson in the proud, resistant history of African Americans for the Hampton community.

³⁶ Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros* (New York: Universe, 1993). For more on the Mexican School and their influence on African American artists, see Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Shifra M. Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1996).

³⁷ The New Deal arts projects were in fact inspired by the Mexican mural project; see McKinzie, *A New Deal for Artists*, 5.

³⁸ Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School," in LeFalle-Collins and Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance*, 55.

The mural also reached a larger audience through press coverage in both the national and local media, which reported on the formal presentation of the work at Hampton on June 25, 1943, coupled with a panel discussion on “Art and Democracy.”³⁹ The Communist *Daily Worker* published a full reproduction of the work, declaring it “a most important contribution to American culture,” and “a vital social document.”⁴⁰ In language that appears in several newspapers, suggesting it came from a Hampton press release, the paper interpreted the mural as “a striking portrayal of the Negro’s active protest against those anti-democratic forces which have sought to keep a strangle-hold upon the common people through economic slavery and social and political frustration.”⁴¹ The paper quotes White on his choice of a mural to convey such a message: “Easel paintings hang in museums and galleries where they are apt to be seen only by the privileged few. But art is not for artists and connoisseurs alone. It should be for the people. A mural on the wall of a commonly-used building is there for anyone to see and read its message.” White was thus able to present his vision of African American history both to the Hampton public that would encounter it every day and to a wider public reading about it in the newspaper.

Charles White was not alone in the family in his interest in exploring black working-class history in his work; his wife, Elizabeth Catlett, took up similar themes in her art. Born into an upper-middle-class family in Washington, D.C., Catlett studied art

³⁹ The panel included White; Viktor Lowenfeld, art instructor at Hampton; Hans van Weeren-Griek of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; James Herring, art professor at Howard University; Harry Sternberg; and Hale Woodruff. An invitation to the event can be found in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁴⁰ “Art Today,” *Daily Worker*, date unknown, clipping in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁴¹ This language also appears in “Hampton Mural is Contribution to History,” *Raleigh Carolinian*, July 3, 1943 (clipping in Charles White Papers, AAA); and “Negro Paints Story of Race in America,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1943, p.28. For coverage of the mural and the event, see also “Mural Depicts Negro’s Fight for Democracy,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 3, 1943, and other unattributed clippings in the Charles White Papers, AAA.

under James Porter and Lois Mailou Jones at Howard University in the mid-1930s, where she was drawn into political activism. She remembers alienating her proper D.C. childhood friends by standing with a noose around her neck at an antilynching rally on the steps of the Supreme Court.⁴² After college, Catlett completed an MFA at the University of Iowa with Grant Wood, and then spent the summer of 1941 in Chicago taking classes at the Art Institute and working at the South Side Community Art Center. There she met and married White, who accompanied her to New Orleans during the academic year 1941-42, when she taught at Dillard University, after which the couple moved to New York City for White's Rosenwald Fellowship.

In 1945, Catlett applied for and received a Rosenwald of her own, for a project that would interpret the history of African American women in a series of sculptures, paintings, and prints. Catlett and White spent that year living in New York and working at the George Washington Carver School, a Marxist school for working-class adults in Harlem.⁴³ The Rosenwald Fund continued Catlett's fellowship for a second year so she could complete the project, and in 1946 she and White went to Mexico to study at the Taller de Grafica Popular, a print workshop founded in 1937 in Mexico City that was dedicated to the production of political images geared toward the Mexican working class. Members of the Taller worked collectively both on portfolio projects they developed as a group and on prints for trade unions, student organizations, and the Mexican government's literacy campaigns.⁴⁴ Catlett learned the medium of the linocut, a Taller

⁴² Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Claremont, CA: Hancraft Studios, 1984), 11.

⁴³ For more on the George Washington Carver School, see chapter four.

⁴⁴ Alison Cameron, "Buenos Vecinos: African-American Printmaking and the Taller de Grafica Popular," *Print Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1999): 353-67; Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000). The Taller was founded by Leopoldo Mendez, Raul Anguiano, Luis Arenal, and Pablo O'Higgins.

trademark, while in Mexico, completing her Rosenwald series, *The Negro Woman*, while White studied lithography.

The applications Catlett submitted to the Rosenwald Fund for the *Negro Woman* series, along with statements she made later about the experience, reveal the political and aesthetic journey Catlett undertook during the mid-1940s, teaching working-class women at the Carver School while struggling to complete her own work and later participating in the group politics of the Taller. Suggesting the influence of her husband, Catlett's initial application proposed to do a series of works "on the role of the Negro woman in the fight for democratic rights in the history of America." Yet clearly, Catlett's project offered an alternative view of this history to that of her husband in its clear focus on women; in a sense, it was her response to his mural. "Negro women have long suffered under the double handicap of race and sex," she declared in her proposal.

At this time when we are fighting an all out war against tyranny and oppression[,] it is extremely important that the picture of Negro women as participants in this fight, throughout the history of America, be sharply drawn. The recent raping of Mrs. Recy Taylor, wife of a Negro soldier, in Alabama, is an extreme indication of the need for some knowledge of the role of Negro women in shaping the democratic progress of our country.⁴⁵

Like White, Catlett clearly held a firm belief in the power of images to educate viewers about the historical handicaps of race, class, and gender and thus assist in preventing incidents like the Taylor case from happening again. Her work at the Carver School influenced her greatly in this regard; she later remembered that "suddenly, I wanted to

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Catlett, Rosenwald Fund Application, 1945, Julius Rosenwald Fund Collection, Box 400, folder 7, Fisk University Special Collections. Twenty-four-year-old Recy Taylor was gang raped by a group of white men in Abbeville, AL, in September of 1944. Her case brought together a group of activists in Montgomery, AL, including Rosa Parks, that would later launch the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

draw these people, these women, who were to me so strong and so wonderful, and from whom I was learning a lot.”⁴⁶

Catlett’s renewal application to the Rosenwald Fund for 1946 suggests that the previous year had been one marked by aesthetic soul-searching rather than productivity; it is also likely that her duties at the Carver School, where she played an administrative role along with teaching, left her with little time to complete her own work. In any case, Catlett informed the Fund that she had spent her time developing a style that would incorporate her interest in modernist aesthetics but could also speak to “average Americans”: “If my work on this project was to have the desired effect, then it must be stated in language they will not ignore,” she wrote. The second application thus stressed the importance of reaching a wide audience to a much greater degree, proposing to limit the project to a series of prints that could be displayed in churches, libraries, and community centers. “Coming out of Harlem,” Catlett later recalled, “strengthened my belief in an art for people, all kinds of people, and the necessity for their being able to participate aesthetically in our production as artists.”⁴⁷ Her time studying with the printmakers of the Taller would further cement these beliefs, resulting in a series of prints that served as both a tribute and a call to arms to the women she had come to know at the Carver School.

A narrative series of fifteen linocuts, *Negro Woman* offers an intimate view into the lives and history of black working-class women, effectively making visible the experience of the most invisible of Americans. While images of white and even black working men abounded in the 1930s and 40s, and Rosie the Riveter made white women’s

⁴⁶ Quoted in Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 47.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 423.

war work a public phenomenon, rarely was the African American woman worker seen in art or popular culture.⁴⁸ Catlett's fifteen narrative captions draw the viewer through a history that emphasizes black women's work, their cultural contributions and their political resistance:

I am the Negro woman.
I have always worked hard in America...
In the fields...
In other folks' homes...
I have given the world my songs.
In Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of women as well as Negroes.
In Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom.
In Phillis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery.
My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized.
I have studied in ever increasing numbers.
My reward has been bars between me and the rest of the land.
I have special reservations...
Special houses...
...And a special fear for my loved ones.
My right is a future of equality with other Americans.

Accompanied by these captions, the fifteen linocuts of the series present an intimate view into the lives and experiences of both anonymous and famous black women from history, suggesting a frustrating continuity in that experience. One of only three images in the series that included color, the first print, *I am the Negro Woman* (fig. 3.3), is a close-up portrait of an African American woman's face framed almost like a photograph. The deep shadows on the face and around the eyes, achieved through hatchmarks characteristic of Taller prints, suggest both a heavy emotional burden and a proud defiance. Significantly, Catlett opens her historical narrative with a transhistorical Negro Woman whose life circumstances have changed little over time. Catlett thus began her

⁴⁸ On the emphasis on the white male worker in New Deal art and popular culture, see Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

story with an essentialist understanding of African American women that declared a shared identity across boundaries of class or historical time.

The series then immediately draws attention to African American women's work and cultural contributions, which she similarly presents as transhistorical. The trio of work prints, *I have always worked hard in America...*, *In the fields...*, and *In other folks' homes...* depict women on their knees scrubbing the floors, barefoot in the fields hoeing a line of crops near a ramshackle rural cabin, and resting wearily for a moment while holding a broom. Together, these prints highlight African American women's underappreciated historical role as domestics and agricultural laborers. Catlett then turns to culture in her second colored print, *I have given the world my songs* (fig. 3.4), a powerful image that points to working-class black women's perseverance in the face of racial violence, presented here in the form of a burning cross and a Klan member assaulting a black man in the background. Catlett particularly references Blues music by her choice of ink color in this print, celebrating the contribution of female Blues singers such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters, who had dominated the genre during the 1920s and early 30s. As scholars have demonstrated, Blues women used their art to assert a positive black female sexuality, intertwining these sexual themes with allusions to racial and economic injustice.⁴⁹ Unlike the sexually forward Blues singers of the 20s, however, Catlett's modestly dressed figure sits with a look of sorrow on her face, playing an acoustic guitar. Catlett thus downplayed the more playful side of the Blues in order to cast it as a protest genre and its female singers as working-class cultural activists.

⁴⁹ See Hazel Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," reprinted in Robert O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

Next Catlett turns to three portraits of female African American historical figures, celebrating their heroic achievements as activists, intellectuals, and resistant spirits. The portrait of Sojourner Truth depicts a no-nonsense, rather bulky woman standing before a Bible on the pulpit, one finger raised charismatically as she delivers an address. Together with the caption, which stresses both her feminism and her fight for racial equality, this image presents Truth as a physically commanding woman, despite her diminutive size in real life. Catlett's vision of Tubman and Wheatley likewise presents strong, proud women engaged in different forms of rebellion against slavery, through physical and intellectual resistance. The trio of historical figures was thus carefully placed in the narrative to suggest black women's unwillingness to accept the condition of servitude. Here Catlett abandoned her universalizing of black women's experience, focusing instead on individual achievements in a manner similar to the "great man" approach to history. Yet she subverted that historical approach by highlighting the acts of great women instead, emphasizing in particular the ways in which they helped others rather than their individual accomplishments.

Catlett then turns to how African American women carried on the tradition of resistance forged by Truth, Tubman, and Wheatley in the years after slavery. The artist's experience with leftist political activism and education informs prints such as *My role has been important to organize the unorganized* (fig. 3.5) and *I have studied in ever increasing numbers*. In the former, a sort of modern-day Tubman stands in the middle of an interracial crowd of workers gathered before a factory in the distance. Her powerful fist raised in the air, the union organizer stares out at the viewer fiercely as her lips part mid-chant. She is clearly at the center of the action in this scene, suggesting the crucial

and largely unappreciated role of the African American woman in the American labor movement; we might consider her a counterpoint to the figure of Ferdinand Smith in White's mural. The latter print offers a view into what is likely a Carver School classroom, with a female teacher bringing literacy and knowledge to a group of other black women. These women continue the tradition of self-education forged by Wheatley, priming them for the leadership evident in the previous print.

Yet despite these heroic efforts, the series tells the viewer, little has changed for black women in America. Instead, their "reward" has been Jim Crow segregation, depicted as a "colored only" section in the interior of a southern bus in *I have special reservations...*; residential segregation and poor housing conditions in the North which she highlights in *Special houses...*; and continued racial violence, represented as the dead body of a lynch victim in *...And a special fear for my loved ones*. These prints constitute a more direct protest against the injuries of race, class, and gender oppression black women continued to face in the United States. Finally, Catlett ends the series with another close-up of a black woman's face, her chin this time raised high in pride and strength, and a caption that presents an even more direct demand: *My right is a future of equality with other Americans* (fig. 3.6). This final image effectively draws the viewer full circle to emphasize the continuity of African American women's historical experience and thus enhances the urgency of Catlett's demand for equality.

Viewed as a sequence, *The Negro Woman* tells a story that is remarkably divorced from the larger narrative of American history, despite Catlett's original intention of showing the black woman's role in the development of American democracy. While White's mural places African American historical figures as key participants in moments

of nation building, Catlett's women remain curiously separate from wider historical developments. Yet in their own way, the prints represent an alternative telling of the master narrative of American history, pointing directly to the exclusion of black women from those larger developments. Thus black women labored in other folks' homes and fields, keeping their floors clean and feeding them as they participated in the movement of history. Black women pressed against the barriers of race, class, and gender wherever they could, a fact that Catlett clearly celebrates in this series, but it is the fact that these barriers remained frustratingly unmovable throughout history that emerges most clearly in this series. Both education and the organization of an interracial labor movement, Catlett suggests, provided the best hope for finally demolishing them. While *The Negro Woman* did not reach as wide an audience as Catlett hoped, it was exhibited at the Barnett-Aden Gallery in Washington, D.C., and subsequently toured a handful of colleges and universities.⁵⁰

Created just as World War II came to a close, Catlett's *Negro Woman* series carefully illuminated linkages between race and class in ways characteristic of Popular Front culture. Yet such an approach to African American history became increasingly unpopular by the end of the 1940s, as both the political climate and ideas about race underwent a major shift. Indeed, by the late 1940s, social scientific and popular conceptions of race began to move from a left-inflected emphasis on systemic racial inequality to a focus on racial prejudice as a moral and psychological issue.⁵¹ These ideas found their earliest and most influential articulation in Swedish sociologist Gunnar

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Catlett oral history interview, December 8, 1981, *Artist and Influence* 10 (1991): 6.

⁵¹ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

Myrdal's 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, in which he characterized racial inequality as a result of pathology among whites and suggested it could be abolished by changing white attitudes.⁵² African American social scientists also stressed the psychological implications of racial distinctions beginning in the mid-1940s; psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark, for example, published their study of "racial mental hygiene" in 1947, documenting black children's preference for white dolls and suggesting this was evidence of the damage racism inflicted on African Americans.⁵³ Such ideas funneled into mainstream culture and discourse as Americans became increasingly obsessed with psychological well-being in the affluent post-war world.⁵⁴

Following these larger shifts in conceptions of race, artistic visions of African American history took an increasingly conservative tone in the United States by the late 1940s. A set of historical murals commissioned in 1949 by the Golden State Life Insurance Company in Los Angeles, for example, demonstrates the degree to which the celebration of the achievements of great black men came to dominate visualizations of black history as the Cold War set in. Having grown tremendously in the 1940s thanks to the burgeoning size and prosperity of the black community in Los Angeles during the war years, Golden State Mutual hired Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston to create two murals

⁵² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944).

⁵³ Kenneth B. and Mamie P. Clark, "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," reprinted in Jonathan Scott Holloway and Ben Keppel, eds., *Black Scholars on the Line: Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007): 415-428.

⁵⁴ For more on the rise of experts and the cultural obsession with psychology in post-WWII America, see Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

depicting the history of the Negro in California for the lobby of their new headquarters.⁵⁵ The completion of these paintings thus expanded the movement to visualize black history for a wide viewing public into a bicoastal one, connecting the cultural community of L.A. with that of New York City. Created for the purpose of celebrating the success of a black business, the murals also demonstrate a shift in the focus of the art of black history away from the condemnation of economic inequality in a capitalist system, instead lauding individual African American achievement within that system.

Golden State Mutual could not have found a better pairing for their project than the close friends Woodruff and Alston, both of whom were living in New York in the late 1940s, Woodruff teaching at New York University and Alston working as a commercial artist. A major figure in the Harlem art scene, Alston had grown up in Harlem in an upper-middle-class family and attended Columbia Teachers College in the late 1920s. In the 1930s, Alston worked for the FAP as a teacher and a muralist, and was a key figure in organizing Harlem artists, both at “306,” his studio that became a sort of salon, and the Harlem Artists Guild. With the onset of World War II, Alston took a position drawing cartoons to boost African American morale for the Office of War Information, and then became a commercial artist when the war ended.⁵⁶ While Alston and Woodruff were both active social realists in the 1930s and early 40s, both increasingly abandoned social themes in their work as the political climate chilled in the latter half of the 1940s, taking up abstract expressionism as it came to dominate the art world in New York in this period.

⁵⁵ For the development of the African American community in Los Angeles during the 1940s, see R.J. Smith, *The Great Black Way: L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African-American Renaissance* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

⁵⁶ Harry Amana, “The Art of Propaganda: Charles Alston’s World War II for the Office of War Information and the Black Press,” *American Journalism* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 2004): 79-111.

Both men held a reputation as skilled muralists, however, and the life insurance company chose Woodruff and Alston to create murals that would place the company and the community it served within the larger history of the settling of the American West. The murals were commissioned for the lobby of the company's new six-story, 48,440 square-foot, \$974,000 building, designed by African American architect Paul Williams.⁵⁷ The construction of the building was fortuitously timed to coincide with the celebration of the California Centennial, making the history of black California a fitting subject for the lobby's artwork. As Californians debated how they should represent the history of the state in the Centennial celebration, the murals inserted the company and its customers within the state's construction of its past. As one magazine article pointed out, "in all the lavish pageantry, effusive oratory and spectacular exhibits, virtually nothing is being said by state officials about the remarkable Negro pioneers who helped to write history in California."⁵⁸ Golden State Mutual hired Los Angeles librarian Miriam Matthews and local historian Titus Alexander to research black figures in California history, and then invited the artists to the state to work with Williams, Matthews, Alexander, and company officials to develop a narrative. Alston and Woodruff were also taken on a well-documented tour of California landmarks to familiarize the artists with the landscape, generating press release photos of the New Yorkers curiously examining cacti and sketching the countryside (fig. 3.7), after which the company held a press conference to introduce the public to the project and generate excitement about the new building.⁵⁹ Golden State Mutual thus transformed historical artwork into a medium for generating

⁵⁷ "New Home of Golden State Mutual Cost \$974,000," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 27, 1949. Clipping in Charles Alston Papers, AAA.

⁵⁸ Unattributed magazine article, clipping in Charles Alston Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹ See press release dated July, 1949, as well as clippings from the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *San Diego Comet*, and other unidentified newspapers in Charles Alston Papers, AAA.

publicity for their business and thereby declaring African American faith and success in the long history of American capitalist development and western expansion.⁶⁰

Woodruff and Alston's murals for Golden State Mutual presented a pantheon of great black men in California history, marked by their individual achievement in opening up the west. While the artists worked on the murals side by side in order to achieve continuity of style and color, Alston painted the first panel of *The Negro in California History*, which he subtitled *Exploration and Colonization*, covering the sixteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, while Woodruff completed the second panel, *Settlement and Development*, covering 1850-1949. Both of these complex paintings present a relatively non-linear account of history, instead offering a pastiche of figures and events that insert black faces in key events in California history. The first panel points to black participation in early exploration and "discovery" of the West by including such individuals as Estevanico, a "Negro guide" for Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, the first European to cross the North American continent in 1527; a black priest who accompanied Francisco Vasquez de Coronado on one of his excursions in the sixteenth century; Jacob Dodson, who served as a guide for Captain John Fremont in exploring the Pacific Coast in 1842; and James Beckwourth, a trapper and trader who discovered the lowest point across the Sierras into northern California in 1850. Alston also includes black figures in important founding moments in this mural, such as the creation of the city of Los Angeles at the center of the composition and the painting of the flag of the California Republic in the lower right-hand corner. Attesting to California as a place of

⁶⁰ Phoebe Kropp has recently demonstrated the uses of public memory in southern California in the early twentieth century for the marginalization of Mexican Americans by Anglo-Americans; see *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). The Golden State Mutual murals in some ways counter white dominance through use of public memory, yet they also reinforce the dominant historical narrative at the same time.

opportunity were such figures as Biddy Mason, a slave who secured her own freedom through the courts in 1856 and subsequently became wealthy through real estate investments, pictured here wrapped in a yellow headscarf, and William Leidesdorff, who served as a San Francisco public official and United States Vice Consul to Mexico, perched in the upper right. As a whole, this first panel of the mural presented black Angelenos with a sense of their own legitimacy as members of the California community, placing them within the very origins of their city and state even when the vast majority of them had migrated west only recently.⁶¹

Indeed, Alston's painting served an important function in inserting blacks into the narrative not only of California history, but also of American history. American national identity has long been associated with the myth of the frontier, which crafted an imagined West where land was plentiful and available, where the trappings of civilization could be left behind, and where opportunity was ripe for the picking. Here Alston added to that image of the American West by suggesting it was also a place of racial harmony, at the same time that he revised it by giving its heroes a black face. James Beckwourth, for example, charges over the mountains as a black Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett, dressed in the fringed leather and coonskin cap of a western icon, while Biddy Mason takes the form of the pioneer mother accompanying a wagon train.⁶² By highlighting the heroicism of these previously obscure figures, Alston effectively provided black Californians with a western myth of their own and thus staked a claim for African Americans as central builders of the nation.

⁶¹ Description of the figures in these murals and all quotes come from an undated document in Charles Alston's papers, AAA.

⁶² Stacy I. Morgan makes the connection between Beckwourth, Boone, and Crockett; see *Rethinking Social Realism*, 83.

Spanning only a single century, Woodruff's panel offered an interpretation of the more recent past that highlighted African American labor and political resistance to a much greater degree than Alston's painting. Drawing on evidence uncovered by Matthews and Alexander of the "Sweet Vengeance Mine" worked by slaves, a scene in the upper left-hand corner presents the work of black gold miners to secure their own and their families' freedom. Along with scenes of a black Pony Express rider and black soldiers guarding the Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad, this scene continued the insertion of African Americans into the story of the opening of the West begun in Alston's panel. Yet in depicting African American political activism in California, Woodruff focused particularly on activists fighting for individual legal rights rather than protesting economic oppression. Woodruff included a scene from the *Elevator*, an "early militant newspaper" owned and edited by African Americans in San Francisco in the late 1860s, whose motto was "Equality Before the Law," suggesting black Californians' leadership in civil rights struggles in the aftermath of slavery. Next to the newspaper's office is Mammy, or Mary Ellen, Pleasant, who fought against the Fugitive Slave Laws and segregated street cars in California and reputedly gave John Brown \$30,000 to purchase rifles for his raid on Harpers Ferry. Pleasant looks toward a scene highlighting the activism of another civil rights group, the Convention of Colored Citizens of California, which gathered in Sacramento in 1856 to protest all laws in the state that discriminated by race. The pickets held by convention attendees demanding "Justice Under the Law," and that the state "Open Schools to Our Children" and "Let Us Own Homes" would also have held meaning for contemporary viewers, considering the

redlining and discrimination that was rampant in Los Angeles in the 1940s; such a scene suggested that California had made little progress in this regard in the preceding century.

At the same time, Woodruff's panel emphasized the role of black labor in the building of the West as well as the development of black businesses in spite of this history of discrimination. Looking like they might have been plucked out of a New Deal mural, black working men lend their elbow grease to the building of the Boulder (or Hoover) Dam and the Golden Gate Bridge, two marvels of engineering that served as symbols of the American conquest of the western landscape. By adopting the iconography of the male worker from New Deal murals, these scenes underscore African Americans' role in the building of the western infrastructure, picturing them literally as nation builders. Finally, the workers unfurling a blueprint at the construction site of the new Golden State Mutual Building in the lower right-hand corner bring the narrative into the present, placing the success of the company as the culmination of all the hard work of black Californians of the preceding four centuries. Alston's notes on the murals suggested that in the construction of Golden State Mutual's new headquarters, "Californians see a happy continuance of the valiance, industry, and spirit depicted in the historical murals."⁶³ Woodruff and Alston's narrative thus downplayed the African American population boom of the war years, instead giving both the company and the black community in Los Angeles a long and storied past. Unveiled in a public ceremony in August of 1949, the murals served an important function in legitimizing Golden State Mutual. The company was thrilled with the final product, writing to Alston that, "everyone who saw [the murals] is enthusiastic and unstinted in complimentary

⁶³ Undated document, Charles Alston Papers, AAA.

expressions... The mural you painted is a great work of art and fully justifies the expenses incurred by our Company in connection with your trip to California.”⁶⁴

Much like the historical artworks that came before them, Alston and Woodruff’s Golden State Mutual murals worked to insert African Americans into the larger narrative of American history, pointing to black contributions and emphasizing the ways in which the African American presence helped to shape the nation as it developed over time. Yet these murals had a different quality than their predecessors, in that they emphasized the achievements of great men above all else and avoided the allusions to militance or labor activism that had characterized previous historical works. Indeed, Woodruff’s portrait of African American involvement in opening the American west does little to challenge the dominant historical narrative. Instead, both artists emphasized individual achievement – a fitting message given both the increasingly conservative political tenor of the times and the fact that these artworks were meant to celebrate African American achievement within the capitalist economic system. For artists working in the 1930s and early 40s, the lesson of black history was the importance of labor activism in ameliorating economic inequality. By the end of the 1940s, the focus in the Golden State Mutual murals had shifted to the triumph of black business and individual initiative.

While Woodruff and Alston worked to proclaim the individual achievements of black Californians in Los Angeles, in the same year a group of leftist artists working in New York produced a series of prints that offer a contrast to the two artists’ approach to visualizing African American history. An interracial group of printmakers, the Graphic Art Workshop had its roots in the leftist arts movement of the 1930s and 40s, stemming out of the Victory Workshop of the Artists League of America, which was itself an

⁶⁴ George Beavers to Charles Alston, dated August 4, 1949, Charles Alston Papers, AAA.

offshoot of the American Artists Congress.⁶⁵ While the purpose of the Victory Workshop was to advance the role of American artists in the war effort during World War II, member artists such as Charles Keller, Jay Landau, and Leonard Baskin returned at the war's end to the goal of creating a politicized people's art. To this end, they formed the Graphic Art Workshop, modeled on the Mexican Taller de Grafica Popular. Keller asserted that the workshop consisted of a group of printmakers with a "social and political conscience" who wanted to produce art for "trade union audiences" rather than those of "57th Street."⁶⁶ Much like the Taller, the Graphic Art Workshop produced "service work" in the form of leaflets and posters for unions and progressive causes and worked collectively on print projects, creating two folios – *Yes, the People!* and *Negro, U.S.A.* – for widespread distribution. The group also developed a series of eight woodcuts for the Civil Rights Congress entitled *Jimcrow – A Government Policy*, four of which were reprinted in the July, 1950, issue of the leftist magazine, *Masses and Mainstream*.⁶⁷ As Leonard Baskin wrote in his foreword to *Yes, the People!*, the Workshop's artists held as their main goal to "establish honestly and forthrightly, intimate and strong ties with the working people of America....Art is fundamentally a form of language whose social function cannot be fulfilled unless it is seen, understood,

⁶⁵ Formed in 1942, the Victory Workshop's largest event was an exhibition at the New School for Social Research in the spring of 1943 entitled, "Art, A Weapon of Total War," which included a conference attended by around 200 artists.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 194.

⁶⁷ On the CRC pamphlet, see "A Centuries-Old Art Form Aids Negro People's Fight," *Daily Worker*, February 22, 1950. According to the organization's FBI File (in author's possession), the Graphic Art Workshop also produced an additional pamphlet for the CRC entitled "Deadly Parallel," which compared the history of Nazi Germany with contemporary America, most likely pointing to anticommunist political repression.

loved, and nourished by the people.”⁶⁸ The Workshop’s logo (fig. 3.8), a raised fist atop a sinewy arm, clenching artists’ tools, further underscored the dual identity of its members as artists and labor activists by utilizing a symbol of working-class solidarity and transforming it to characterize artists as workers.

Having personally experienced the collectivism of the Taller, Charles White was a particularly enthusiastic member of the Graphic Art Workshop. A letter he wrote to Keller in January of 1949, thanking Keller for sending a copy of *Yes, the People!*, suggests the hopes White placed in the Workshop for achieving his lifelong dream of putting his art to use in the class and race struggle. The portfolio, he beamed, was “the first concrete step forward I’ve seen in a people’s art movement in a long long time,” even if it was only a small step in light of “the overall job that needs to be done in this direction” by his fellow “class conscious artists.” American artists were willing to invest “time, sweat, and guts” for individual success, but never enough to bring about “success in terms of democracy,” a fact that was even the case among those artists who “identify ourselves socially or politically with the working class.” “It is fast nearing the time when we will have to identify ourselves artistically with the people,” he wrote. “And I sincerely feel, Charlie, that the workshop is the answer for a great many of us who are searching for a channel to work there... All the essential ingredients for the formation of a strong people’s art movement can be formulated in a workshop such as this one.”⁶⁹ White and his colleagues thus constituted one of the last vestiges of a form of leftist visual activism that directly addressed the intertwined politics of race and class and sought to circulate that message widely through prints.

⁶⁸ Leonard Baskin, foreword to *Yes, the People!*, copy in Charles Keller Papers, AAA. The portfolio’s title references Carl Sandburg’s populist Depression-era poem, “The People, Yes.”

⁶⁹ Charles White to Charles Keller, January 14, 1949, Charles Keller Papers, AAA.

Following a long interest within the political left in the lives and political needs of African Americans, the Graphic Art Workshop took up the theme of African American history with relish. The Workshop mounted a series of exhibitions of woodcuts and lithographs on the subject in honor of Negro History Week in 1945, for example, which they circulated among union halls, schools, and churches in New York.⁷⁰ In February, 1949, they released *Negro, U.S.A.*, a set of twenty-six prints and drawings by fifteen artists that was timed for release during Negro History Week. The folio presented a decidedly Marxist visual interpretation of African American history, one that was increasingly going out of favor by the late 1940s.⁷¹ Setting the tone was a foreword by the Communist historian Herbert Aptheker, which in a few short paragraphs effectively rewrote American history to include empowered black actors and stressed the vital connections between black history and working-class history in the United States.⁷² Aptheker characterized black history as a story of “perpetual and heroic struggle for liberation,” asserting that because they had been particularly oppressed, African Americans were a “touchstone for American democratic and working-class progress.” Echoing statements made by White, Woodruff, Alston, and the ASNLH, Aptheker pointed out that black history was not a separate history but rather “runs through the warp and woof of the fabric that is America...American life as a whole cannot be understood without knowing that history.” Moreover, such knowledge was crucial in mounting a

⁷⁰ Untitled exhibition announcement, *Daily Worker*, February 4, 1945, in Schomburg Clippings File.

⁷¹ Contributing artists included Leonard Baskin, Roy DeCarava, Antonio Frasconi, Robert Gwathmey, Bud Handelsman, Charles Keller, Louise Krueger, Jacob Landau, Al Lass, Jacob Lawrence, Jerry Martin, Leona Pierce, Jim Schlecker, Edward Walsh, and Charles White.

⁷² A virtual pariah in the academy during his lifetime due to his outspoken Communist political beliefs, Aptheker produced pathbreaking scholarship in the 30s, 40s, and 50s that stressed the agency of slaves as resisters to slavery, the centrality of slavery to the Civil War, and the role of African Americans in the abolition movement. See Eric Foner and Manning Marable, eds., *Herbert Aptheker on Race and Democracy: A Reader* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

leftist political movement, for “to disentangle the present from the past is impossible. The past is prologue, the present is heritage.” Truths such as those exposed in *Negro, U.S.A.* had to be disseminated among the working class in order to galvanize political action; by spreading this history in an easily accessible way, graphic art constituted “a weapon in the battle for a free America.”⁷³ Aptheker thus summed up the faith he and a left-oriented cadre of historians and cultural workers shared in the power of history, particularly when it was interpreted visually and disseminated widely, to motivate political action. His foreword also guided the viewer’s interpretation of the images that followed, further transforming them into political missives and didactic works of art.

Created in a wide variety of aesthetic styles, the prints of *Negro, U.S.A.* follow the left-oriented historical murals and prints that came before them in their attention to themes of slave resistance and African American participation in key moments of nation-building. Jim Schlecker’s “First to Fall” (fig. 3.9), for example, presents a stylized crowd of revolutionaries gathered around a fallen Crispus Attucks as the British soldiers line up their rifles in the background, while Edward Walsh’s “Peter Salem at Bunker Hill” depicts the black war hero in a dramatic pose, waving the stars and stripes above his head as the battle rages around him. The series also references historic black leadership and self-reliance by including prints portraying Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. Much like the artworks that predated them, these prints worked to insert blacks into American national identity by claiming a role for them as architects of American democracy.

Yet *Negro, U.S.A* differs from these other interpretations of African American history, particularly the Golden State Mutual murals, in that it presents a far less linear narrative, in effect rearranging the sequence of events in order to privilege a message

⁷³ Herbert Aptheker, “Foreword,” in *Negro, U.S.A* (New York: Graphic Art Workshop, 1949).

encouraging interracial working-class solidarity. For example, the narrative begins with “Terror of the Klan” by Louise Krueger, a brutal interpretation of southern lynch law, followed by prints depicting Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Nat Turner, yet the KKK arose out of the Civil War, after these figures mounted their attacks on slavery. An image of the interior of a slave ship by Antonio Frasconi appears as the tenth in the series, despite the ending of the international slave trade in the United States in 1808, predating the antebellum achievements of Douglass, Brown, and Turner. The series also interrupted the narrative by including generalized images of African Americans, such as Charles White’s “Negro, U.S.A.”, which appeared between a drawing of Underground Railroad escapees wading through a river by Jacob Lawrence and Frasconi’s interpretation of the brutality of plantation labor, and also as the image on the portfolio’s cover (fig. 3.10). While the series moves generally from slavery through the Civil War, Reconstruction, migration, and life in the urban North, the liberties it takes in ordering its historical narrative in effect serve to downplay the particularities of African American history and instead emphasize an economic interpretation of that history, characterizing blacks as an abused source of labor both on plantations and in capitalist factories. Much like Catlett’s *Negro Woman* series, it makes important use of sequencing to present the continuities in African American historical experience. The series also drew on aesthetic strategies that had characterized leftist art since the proletarian period of the early 1930s.

The Workshop further pressed its message of working-class solidarity by including a number of images depicting interracial friendship and cooperation throughout American history. Schlecker’s Crispus Attucks, for example, would fit nicely in the interwar labor movement despite his colonial garb; cradled tenderly by a white

revolutionary, he raises his fist high in a final rebellious salute. Other images in the portfolio were more overt in their celebration of interracialism, such as Leonard Baskin's "Comrade," which features a white woman cradling the head of an African American man in her lap. Capping off the series was "United Labor" by Antonio Frasconi (fig. 3.11), a print that would have been right at home in Lin Shi Khan and Tony Perez's "Scottsboro, Alabama." The image features black and white hands clenched together in unity before a background of factories, crowds of demonstrating workers, and a giant, presumably red, flag. Such an image made the Workshop's solution to race and class oppression in America patently clear: only through a united working-class movement, it declared in no uncertain terms, could the injustices of the past be rectified. Interpreting that message visually for a mixed-race working-class audience, the Graphic Art Workshop hoped that *Negro, U.S.A.* would go a long way toward bringing such a movement about.

In spite of these lofty goals, it is unclear how widely the portfolio in fact circulated, although both *Yes, The People* and *Negro, U.S.A.* were available for purchase in leftist book stores in New York.⁷⁴ In any case, the Workshop did not last long, disbanding in 1951 due to increasing pressure from the FBI.⁷⁵ In fact, the writing was on the wall for this brand of visual activism from the Workshop's inception. The group's concern with mounting anticommunist fervor, as well as the corresponding turn among American artists away from social realism to abstract expressionism, looms in a review of

⁷⁴ An FBI agent bought copies of both print folios at the Book Shop of the Jefferson School of Social Science in 1949; see memo from SAC, New York, to FBI Director, dated November 28, 1949, in FBI file.

⁷⁵ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 195. Hemingway gleaned this information in an interview with Charles Keller. The FBI did investigate the Graphic Art Workshop beginning in 1948 as part of its larger efforts to look into the cultural activities associated with the American Communist Party; see memo from FBI Director to SAC, New York, in FBI file, dated February 7, 1948.

Yes, the People! in the *Daily Worker*. Lauding the Workshop as “a group of social thinking artists, whose chief effort is to make, publish and distribute a living people’s art,” critic Angelica Kaufman characterized it as a reaction to and effort against anticommunism. Paraphrasing Keller, Kaufman reported that “with the shrinking of the market for independent ideas, the workshop plans outlets to sell these ideas to a mass audience.” Kaufman ended with her opinion that, “in the face of the destructive influence of individualism, the workshop takes a step forward in showing that art came to be an integrator of the collective ideas of people.”⁷⁶ As Kaufman’s comments suggested, leftist artists in New York found it difficult by the end of the 1940s to reconcile their work with the individualism that informed the rising abstract expressionism in art and pointed away from systemic views of racial and economic inequality in the larger American culture. Hemmed in by both the FBI and an art world that was increasingly suspicious of political activism in art, the Graphic Art Workshop ultimately proved unable to press its goal of producing art to motivate the working-class masses.

The socially-conscious artists who produced and circulated images of African American history in the late 1930s and 1940s, along with the activist scholars engaged in the early black history movement, were acutely aware of the power history holds in constructing national identity – in determining who belongs and who does not. The images they created were bold assertions of African American inclusion in that national identity, as artists sought to place black stories and black culture within the stories

⁷⁶ Angelica Kaufman, “The Graphic Workshop and Its First Portfolio,” *Daily Worker*, December 20, 1948.

America told itself about itself. As artists and scholars of African American history understood, those in a dominant position shore up their power by constructing a historical narrative that justifies that power; because of this, “Negro history [has] had no more chance than the proverbial cockroach at the roosters’ ball,” as J.A. Rogers wrote in 1940.⁷⁷ By illuminating the historical struggle of African Americans, demonstrating their participation in the building of the nation, and highlighting their resistance against economic and racial oppression, the art of African American history actively challenged the dominant historical narrative and thus sought to transform American society by changing its perception of its past.

The images considered in this chapter pointed to the uniqueness of African American culture and historical experience not in an expression of black nationalism but, on the contrary, to show how deeply integrated that separate experience was in the history and identity of America. In other words, African American identity for these artists was not some essential quality shared by black people through genes and blood, but rather the product of a history in which their lives had been shaped by economic and political oppression. To be “American” and to be “Negro” or “working class” or “a woman” were not mutually exclusive categories. As Charles Alston later commented, “I think you have a certain kind of American experience, be it an experience as a Negro in America, but it is an American experience. And I think it’s an important experience and I think it ought to be in the mainstream of American experience.”⁷⁸ In depicting African American history, artists clearly struggled with the tensions between their sense of a

⁷⁷ J.A. Rogers, “The Suppression of Negro History,” *The Crisis* 47, no. 5 (May, 1940): 136.

⁷⁸ Charles Alston, oral history interview, October 19, 1968, AAA.

separate African American identity and experience and their need to integrate that experience within the larger conception of what constituted America.

While these historical murals and prints made claims for African Americans within the historical American cultural identity, they also functioned as allegorical statements of contemporary politics, making use of depictions of the past in order to comment on what was necessary for the present. These works reflected the shifting understandings of race that characterized social science and civil rights politics in the 1940s. Artworks created in the late 1930s and during the World War II years took a distinctly Marxist view of African American history, identifying African Americans with the larger working class and illuminating the long history of black militant resistance. They offered a blueprint for future activism that was deeply rooted in labor activism and demanded equality in no uncertain terms. By the end of the 1940s, however, this approach became increasingly untenable as the anticommunist Cold War political culture limited the ability of leftist artists to create politically activist work. Instead, historical approaches such as Woodruff and Alston's Golden State Mutual murals, which presented a pantheon of great black men involved in developing the American West, were celebrated largely because they downplayed economic oppression and emphasized individual achievement and activism limited to the legal rights of individuals.

Yet what makes these works interesting is the degree to which artists grappled with the variety of understandings of race and civil rights that were circulating during this period. One can find both individual achievement and working-class solidarity in the works of Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett, for example. As social scientists and popular culture increasingly stressed the psychological damage racial oppression inflicted

on African Americans in the 1940s, these artists likely attempted to counteract that loss of self-esteem by celebrating black heroes. Indeed, this approach informed the early black history movement from the beginning, and became increasingly attractive during World War II. Langston Hughes emphasized the importance of studying African American heroes in a 1941 essay published in *The Crisis*, for example, suggesting that knowledge of such figures might inspire black youth “to be forthright, strong, clear-thinking, and unafraid.”⁷⁹ These ideas circulated in popular culture and informed the work of artists, as they sought to represent African American history in a manner that would bolster the black community psychologically as well as inspire them to fight for the rights of African Americans and the working class.

Historical murals and prints of the late 1930s and 1940s thus acted as key sites through which understandings of race and strategies for future activism were communicated and contested. To be sure, their effect is difficult to gauge. The murals that became fixtures at institutions such as the Harlem public library, Talladega College, Hampton Institute, and the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company reached a wider audience than the print portfolios, which were mostly circulated among a smaller circle of leftist political activists. As Stacy Morgan has pointed out, the fact that these artworks hung in all-black public spaces was probably what allowed them to exist in the first place, as their relatively radical revision of American history might not have been welcome in an Iowa post office, or, say, at Harvard University.⁸⁰ At the same time, black colleges and universities were important engines of intellectual production and political activism for African Americans, generating scholars and students who were highly

⁷⁹ Langston Hughes, “The Need for Heroes,” *The Crisis* 48, no. 6 (June, 1941): 184.

⁸⁰ Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*, 26-27.

influential in galvanizing the civil rights movement in this period and beyond. Prints circulated among leftist activists and art lovers likewise reached an audience that provided leadership for the civil rights movement in New York in the 1940s; in many cases, the artists and activists were one and the same.⁸¹ Because they spoke to such a targeted political audience, the murals and prints of artists such as Woodruff, White, Catlett, Alston, and members of the Graphic Art Workshop actively participated in the intellectual debate that brought about major changes in civil rights activism in the mid-twentieth century. They also played an important role in informing the future of the movement, as they contributed to the growing recognition of the importance of visual images in the African American freedom struggle.

⁸¹ On the early civil rights movement in New York, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). For the involvement of artists in the left-oriented civil rights movement in this period, see chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Rise and Fall of the Artist-Activist, 1940-1956

The Federal Art Project may have, in the words of artist Charles White, given substance to African American artists' hopes and dreams, allowing them to align their work with the political efforts of the antiracist left, yet the political aspirations of these artists found their fullest expression after the FAP's demise among a group of artists living and working in New York City in the 1940s and early 50s.¹ While they were producing prints, murals, cartoons, and other visual images that retold African American history, they also became actively involved in political organizations in New York that worked for social, political, and economic justice for African Americans. The organizational ties they established demonstrate the ways in which they understood themselves as both artists and political activists who had an important role to play in the African American freedom struggle.

Indeed, a very particular type of self-conscious artist-activist emerged out of the ashes of the FAP and the left-leaning social realist artistic milieu of the Depression era, placing a core group of visual artists at the center of leftist antiracist activism in New York. Embodied in particular by Charles White, but also including individuals such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Elizabeth Catlett, Ernest Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, and Norman Lewis, they were committed in differing degrees to devoting their work and their lives to mobilizing the masses around issues of racial and economic justice in the United States and abroad. In this fight, they worked alongside white allies such as Rockwell Kent, Robert Gwathmey, Hugo Gellert, Harry Sternberg, and others. While many of these

¹ Charles White, oral history interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, December 29, 1971, audiotape, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

artists came and went during the 40s and early 50s, serving in the armed forces or traveling on fellowships such as the Rosenwald, the group nevertheless came together in various combinations throughout the period through their involvement in antiracist activism. Teaching art to working-class children and adults, creating images for use in political magazines and pamphlets, and working as committed participants in civil rights and peace organizations, they formed the cultural arm of a larger civil rights movement gathering steam during World War II and its immediate aftermath.²

This artist-activist identity manifested itself in a variety of different ways, as each individual artist sought to integrate himself or herself within the larger movement. Most simply, a number of artists devoted their time and energy to civil rights organizations, performing administrative tasks, attending protests, chairing committees, and speaking at events; in these cases, they inserted themselves among the rank and file of civil rights activists working on the ground in Harlem. In addition to such common forms of activism, however, visual artists lent their services to civil rights organizations by producing images for inclusion in a wide range of materials and settings, from newspapers to postcards to art exhibitions. In doing so, they drew on the tradition of activist art that they carried with them from the FAP and believed deeply in the special role their images could play in galvanizing the masses around a political cause. Beyond this work directly within civil rights organizations, artists also understood their identity as artist-activists to include teaching art to working-class people, believing that art education could play a central role in larger educational projects geared toward fostering political consciousness among the masses. Finally, by the early 1950s, left-oriented artists shifted

² I take a wide definition of the term “civil rights” here, as these artists and other left-oriented activists in Harlem in this period tackled issues beyond just legal rights, including economic justice, cultural representations of African Americans, and foreign relations.

their focus towards a more narrow goal of integrating African American artists and performers into mainstream culture. Artists of this generation flouted the traditional conception of the artist as a lone genius, separate from the larger society, and instead integrated themselves directly in the institutions and organizations that made up the left wing of the civil rights movement in the 1940s and early 50s.

During World War II and the years directly following, these artists found themselves in the political mainstream in Harlem. The war years mark the moment of the Communist left's greatest strength in civil rights activism; indeed, as Thomas J. Sugrue and others have pointed out, "it was nearly impossible [in this period] to find a civil rights cause that did not include a sizeable number of partisan leftists."³ Indeed, the Harlem left served as a wing of New York's Popular Front - the liberal-left coalition dedicated to antifascism and other progressive political causes - well into the late 1940s. The political strength of the left in Harlem in this period was partially due to demographic changes in Harlem, as an influx of migrants from the South caused the black population in New York to rise 62% between 1940 and 1950, placing tremendous strain on housing and labor conditions in Harlem and drawing many into political activism.⁴ Artists, writers, actors, musicians, and entertainers in Harlem played an active role in this political ferment, developing a distinct formation of what Michael Denning has described as the "cultural front."⁵

³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 21. See also Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 3.

⁵ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

While leftist activists were influential in Harlem civil rights politics in the 1940s, they increasingly engaged in an ideological and political battle for survival as Cold War anticommunism took hold of American culture by the early to mid-1950s. Just as the larger labor-oriented civil rights movement lost its footing by the mid-1950s, the visual activism around civil rights issues practiced by these artists could not be sustained. The emphasis they placed on illuminating the relationships between racial injustice and class oppression, as well as their concerted effort to place those relationships within the context of international politics, brought them increased scrutiny from agencies of anticommunist repression such as the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). They also experienced pressure from the local community as the political atmosphere chilled in the late 1940s. While such persecution ultimately did not fully silence these artists, it did effectively limit their ability to function as radical art teachers and civil rights activists. It destroyed the institutions through which they worked and circumscribed the terms of debate by branding all discussion of injustice in the United States as disloyal. At the same time, the imperative of Cold War cultural diplomacy helped to bring about a shift in the art world toward abstract expressionism, making any overt political content in art increasingly unacceptable. The story of their art and activism in this period thus provides new perspectives on the ways in which the mid-century anticommunist crusade worked to control culture, as well as the limitations that crusade faced in fully squelching political dissent.

The vibrant world of civil rights activism in Harlem in the 1940s included labor activists, Communists, left-affiliated Popular Front political groups, fraternities, women's clubs, churches, and liberal groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. While there were clear ideological differences among these groups, they were nevertheless able to forge alliances to press for equal employment and housing opportunities, the expansion of social services such as public hospitals and child care, and the desegregation of northern public spaces.⁶ The Communist Party (CP) played an important role in this activism, drawing the criticism of a number of anticommunist liberals and conservatives in Harlem. Stung by previous betrayals in the Scottsboro case, the NAACP remained particularly wary of the CP, while prominent intellectuals such as Horace Cayton lamented in a 1944 roundtable discussion in *Negro Digest* that the Communists had abandoned their commitment to black rights. Conservative George Schuyler declared that the CP had never had a true concern for African Americans in the first place.⁷ Yet the same issue reported the results of a poll that showed that anywhere from two-thirds to three-quarters of African Americans believed that the Communist Party had not abandoned their civil rights efforts.⁸ As African American journalist Earl Brown wrote in 1945, "except for a handful of Socialists, and a few professional race leaders, red-baiting leaves Harlemites cold."⁹

⁶ For an excellent account of the contours of civil rights activism in Harlem in this period, see Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*.

⁷ See "Roundtable: Have Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" *Negro Digest* 3, no.2 (Dec., 1944): 56-70. Schuyler and Cayton were rebutted by William Patterson, Benjamin Davis, and James W. Ford. For more on principled anticommunism within the NAACP, see Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (June, 2007).

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Quoted in Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 46.

Much ink has been spilled on the subject of whether or not the CP in fact relinquished their commitment to fighting for the rights of African Americans in this period.¹⁰ To be sure, the American Communists presented African Americans with highly contradictory messages as they dutifully followed the Party line; after Stalin signed a pact of non-aggression with Hitler in 1939, the CP declared that the war in Europe was “not the Negro’s war,” yet upon German invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941, they changed their tune overnight and encouraged African Americans to support the war effort at all costs.¹¹ These dramatic changes in policy turned a number of African American intellectuals – most famously Richard Wright – away from Communism. Yet it is also important to note that the Popular Front was more than simply the Communist Party at the core and “fellow travelers” at the periphery; as Michael Denning has aptly demonstrated, it was in fact the “fellow travelers” – those who held sympathies to Marxism and deep commitments to leftist political causes but had little interest in joining the Party itself – who formed the core of the Popular Front.¹² Thus, for many among the rank and file members of the Harlem Popular Front, shifts in the Party line mattered far less than Communists’ willingness to participate in progressive political efforts.¹³

¹⁰ For an argument against Communist abandonment of civil rights, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); for a rebuttal, see Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism.” Other works that argue against the view that the 40s and 50s as a period of decline in Communist civil rights leadership include Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1994) and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹¹ For more on the ins and outs of CP policy in this period, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*

¹² Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xviii.

¹³ Harold Cruse claimed in his 1967 anticommunist polemic, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* that leftist artists in Harlem were entirely beholden to the CP during this period, but my research shows that this was not, in fact, the case; see Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967).

Visual artists were particularly active in the two major left-oriented civil rights organizations, the National Negro Congress (NNC) and its successor, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC). Founded in 1936, the NNC served as the first national coalition of political groups and organizations working to carve out a place for African Americans in the labor movement and within New Deal agencies. A true Popular Front coalition with seventy-five local councils across the nation, the NNC included labor unions, churches, civic groups, liberal organizations such as the NAACP, and a heavy dose of Communists.¹⁴ In its labor organizing in particular, the NNC combined the politics of race and class, pointing consistently to the economic roots of racial oppression. The NNC also included a cultural division, which pressed for the rights of African American cultural workers and thus brought artists into the political fold. African American visual artists such as Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett played an active role in this division of the NNC, and organized conferences on “democratizing” the arts during World War II.¹⁵ Charles White, who moved to New York in 1942 with his wife and fellow artist Elizabeth Catlett, was also a key player within the New York NNC.

Indeed, visual artists in Harlem became particularly involved in the NNC during the war years, after the organization moved its headquarters from Washington, DC, to New York City in 1942. From that year until its dissolution in 1947, the NNC recruited progressive local artists into their fold, making ample use of the visual images they created in their organizing efforts. The NNC launched a national newsletter, *Congress*

¹⁴ While scholars often assume that the NNC was entirely dominated by the Communist Party, Erik Gellman has shown that this was not the case; see his “‘Death Blow to Jim Crow’: The National Negro Congress, 1936-1947,” Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006.

¹⁵ See the call to establish a “Committee for Democratic Culture” within the NNC, NNC Papers, Part 2, Reel 1, Box 31; included here is the sign-in sheet for attendees to the meeting at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem on July 28, 1943. See also “NNC Launches Program to Democratize Arts,” *People’s Voice*, August 7, 1943; and “Cultural Group Stresses Negro Art Contribution,” *People’s Voice*, December 4, 1943.

Vue (later *Congress View*) in 1943 with the stated purpose of reflecting the “most urgent desire of the Negro people”: the “unity of organized labor, agriculture, and liberal white Americans with the Negro people” to bring about “the full liberation of the oppressed.” Circulating in around 2,000 copies per issue, *Congress Vue* was targeted in particular at unions locals, army bases, and NNC chapters.¹⁶ The editorial board, which included Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett, shaped the newsletter as an outlet for political discussion, including short articles on major issues of interest to the NNC as well as reportage on the “Negro cultural movement.”¹⁷

Along with employing artists on its editorial board, *Congress Vue* included political cartoons by artists such as Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Ernest Crichlow, and William Gropper that presented powerful visual statements about racial inequality and communicated a sense of urgency on key issues for which the NNC was fighting. These cartoons were featured as a centerpiece of the magazine, appearing on the “Action Now!” page that urged readers to write letters to elected officials and raise money for NNC causes, suggesting that the organization and its artists placed tremendous faith in the power of an image to motivate readers toward political action. Charles White contributed a cartoon in November, 1943, for example, that visually equated southern segregation with Nazism, depicting the “Reactionary South” in a loving embrace with Hitler, who holds a document entitled “Jim Crow in the Armed Forces” in his giant grip (fig. 4.1). As Hitler woos the enormous, swastika-adorned southerner, a group of men representing the “Negro and White United” attack the Jim Crow document with bayonets

¹⁶ See opening statement, *Congress Vue* 1, no. 1 (April, 1943). Erik Gellman points out that the newsletter likely reached more than 2,000 individuals, given the fact that it was targeted at organizations that would pass the copies around; see Gellman, “Death Blow to Jim Crow,” 200.

¹⁷ Report to the NNC National Board of Directors on the purpose of *Congress Vue*, dated September 26, 1943, NNC Papers, Part 2, Reel 4, Box 35.

from below, suggesting that segregation can only be eliminated through interracial cooperation. In constructing this image, White clearly drew on the aesthetic devices of proletarian political cartoons that had emerged a decade earlier, as an interracial group of workers advance on the powers that be.¹⁸ Yet here White adapted these conventions to create a true product of the “Double V” campaign, as the cartoon also equates Jim Crow with European fascism in order to call attention to the hypocrisy inherent in the United States fighting a war for democracy abroad when such democracy did not exist for African Americans in the South.

Visual artists also contributed cartoons to the *People's Voice*, an influential Harlem newspaper founded in 1942 by City Council member and civil rights leader Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. While the paper was largely Powell's project, it nevertheless served as a major outlet for the NNC; NNC President Max Yergan wrote regular editorials and columns, while NNC Treasurer and labor leader Ferdinand Smith contributed a weekly column on labor.¹⁹ Ernest Crichlow, in particular, contributed cartoons to the *People's Voice*, which were given a central place in the paper above the main editorial by Powell. Like White, Crichlow adapted the aesthetic conventions of leftist cartoon art to the politics of the war era. In a cartoon published in the midst of the Harlem riots in August of 1943, for example, Crichlow depicted “lawlessness” as a snake with a white human face, which two hefty workers, one white and one black, destroy with axes that look not unlike the hammer in the Soviet symbol (fig. 4.2). Paired with Powell's “Message to the Negro People” asking them to remain calm, return to work, and stop looting, the image highlights the importance of interracial unity in a moment of

¹⁸ See chapter one for more on proletarian cartoons related to the case of the Scottsboro in the early 1930s.

¹⁹ Gellman, ““Death Blow to Jim Crow,”” 199.

tension between white police and angry black Harlemites. Images such as these, placed prominently in local print media, thus played an important role in defining attitudes and building community in Harlem.

Beyond integrating visual images into periodicals and other print materials, the NNC also enlisted artists in their cause by mounting explicitly politicized art exhibitions in connection with their annual conferences. The 1946 NNC convention in Detroit, for example, included an art exhibit entitled, “A Tribute to the Negro People,” which included works on the theme of “racial equality and democracy” by an interracial group of leftist artists.²⁰ The exhibition was most likely organized by Ernest Crichlow and Charles White.²¹ Reviewers reported that it was a major draw at the convention and suggested that it had tremendous political power. The African American newspaper, the *California Eagle*, opined that the exhibition “promises to raise bold and sharp questions in the whole struggle against jim-crow and race discrimination,” while Communist writer Abner W. Berry reflected that “here was a real example of art as a weapon – a weapon of striking power against Jim Crow.”²² Bringing together the work of left-oriented black and white artists, an exhibition such as the NNC’s “A Tribute to the Negro People” demonstrates the central role the visual arts played in the civil rights movement by the mid-1940s.

²⁰ Elizabeth Catlett, “A Tribute to the Negro People,” ACA Gallery Newsletter, Winter 1946, ACA Papers, AAA. Exhibiting artists included Philip Evergood, Robert Gwathmey, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Louis Lozowick, Ernest Crichlow, and David Burliuk.

²¹ See correspondence between Thelma Dale and Ernest Crichlow from November of 1945 on a planned art exhibition he and White were organizing in Detroit through the auspices of the *New Masses* and the Detroit chapter of the NNC. While Crichlow suggests the exhibition will take place during Negro History Week in February, 1946, it is likely that the exhibition was instead the one mounted as part of the National NNC Meeting in Detroit in May that year.

²² “Negro, White Artists to Show Work in Detroit Art Exhibit; Air Blow at Jimcrow Practices,” *California Eagle* May 23, 1946; Abner W. Berry, “Rough, Tough and Angry,” newspaper unknown, June 18, 1946, in SCF. See also “Negro Congress Art Show,” *Daily Worker* May 29, 1946.

In addition to devoting their time and their art to the NNC, Harlem artists also worked as art teachers in the evening at the George Washington Carver School, an institution associated with the NNC.²³ Besides providing them with regular (if meager) income, the Carver School gave Harlem artists an opportunity to realize their goal of integrating culture into the wider leftist cause of bringing about racial and economic equality for those on the bottom rungs of society. Drawing on Federal Art Project ideas about the creation of a “cultural democracy” through community art centers that would provide access to the arts for all Americans, artists living in Harlem picked up where the FAP-sponsored Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC) left off and devoted themselves to educating the working class both in the politics of class and race and in the arts. Just as the FAP in many ways equated cultural production with citizenship, artists working at the Carver School and other labor schools of the Popular Front period sought to use culture to inspire working-class Americans to demand what they were due.

Founded in Harlem in 1943 under the leadership of Gwendolyn Bennett, the Carver School grew out of both the HCAC, of which Bennett had served as Director, and the School for Democracy, a left-wing school for working adults in Manhattan where Bennett taught after leaving the HCAC. The School for Democracy had been founded in 1941 as a sort of haven for left-wing faculty who had been ousted from the City College of New York by the red-baiting Rapp-Coudert Committee.²⁴ One of many labor schools that emerged on both the East and West Coasts during the Popular Front period, the

²³ NNC President Max Yergan was Chairman of the Carver School Board of Directors and taught a class there, while NNC administrators Mayme Brown and Thelma Dale also performed administrative duties and taught courses at the Carver School.

²⁴ On the Rapp-Coudert Committee witch hunt, see David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anticommunist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); and Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). On the formation of the School for Democracy, see “Ousted Teachers in New Faculty,” *New York Times* January 12, 1942, p. 13.

Carver School allowed Bennett to take the model of progressive adult education and apply it to the needs of her own community, the Harlem working class.²⁵ The school's course catalogues provide rich evidence of the ways in which Bennett and the group of artists, intellectuals, and educators she gathered around the Carver School worked to transform Harlem's workers into informed, proactive citizens. A quote on each semester's course catalogue by the school's namesake, African American scientist George Washington Carver, made its mission clear: "Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom to my people."²⁶ Through a wide array of courses, the self-described "People's Institute" sought to equip Harlem's workers with a knowledge of African American history, a decidedly left-inflected understanding of the economy, and a set of skills both practical and cultural that would prepare them to demand their rights as citizens. Founded during World War II in the thick of the "Double V" campaign that sought victory against racism and discrimination both at home and abroad, the Carver School also took a concerted internationalist perspective, stressing the importance of making African American citizens aware of international political developments.²⁷ As Bennett commented to a reporter in 1943, the school was "part war effort and part of the

²⁵ Prominent examples of left-affiliated "labor schools" are the School for Democracy and the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York, and the California Labor School in the San Francisco Bay Area; see Marvin Gettleman, "The Lost World of United States Labor Education: Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944-1957," in Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor, eds., *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 69-71. While Gettleman lumps the Carver School together with these other institutions as a "Communist" school, it was not funded by the CP, and sought to include participants from a variety of political backgrounds. It was, however, clearly Marxist in its approach to education.

²⁶ The Carver School's course catalogues can all be accessed in the Schomburg Clippings File, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

²⁷ This internationalist perspective on African American social, economic, and political circumstances characterized civil rights organizing in this period; see Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*.

future,” as its aim was to “make the citizens of Harlem better able to take their rightful place in society after this war is won.”²⁸

The Carver School’s course offerings demonstrate these goals and shed light on the ways in which art instruction was integrated into the larger mission of citizenship training for working-class African Americans. Courses were offered only in the evenings, making them accessible for working adults, and ranged widely from the philosophical to the practical, providing opportunities for Harlemites both to open their minds and train their hands. Some courses touched on race and class relations in the United States, including “American History” with Philip Foner, “Negro History” with Gwendolyn Bennett, “Trade Unions and the Negro” with labor organizers Edward S. Lewis and Ferdinand Smith, and “Psychology and Human Living” with Mamie Phipps Clark, who was then embarking on the influential doll studies that were used by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Others focused on international politics and current events, such as “The World is Smaller Than You Think,” and “Analyzing the Newspapers.” Another set of course offerings taught practical skills for daily life and political organizing, such as “Your Dollar and How to Spend It,” “How to Write Good English,” “How to Master Mimeographing,” and the popular “How to Make a Hat” and “How to Make a Dress,” taught by Elizabeth Catlett. In addition, a set of courses in painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture were offered by an interracial faculty that included Catlett, Charles White, Ernest Crichlow, Norman

²⁸ Ann Rivington, “The George Washington Carver School,” *Daily Worker* October 26, 1943. For more reportage on the Carver School and its director, see also “Harlem to Open Center Named for George Washington Carver,” *New York Herald Tribune* October 24, 1943, p. 5; Ramona Lowe, “Harlem’s Carver School Draws Capacity Classrooms,” *Chicago Defender* February 5, 1944, p. 18; Leatha Hackshaw, “Harlem Portraits,” *Pittsburgh Courier* May 26, 1945; Earl Conrad, “A Lady Laughs at Fate,” *Chicago Defender* January 5, 1946, p. 9; and “This is the Carver School,” *Daily Worker* February 3, 1946.

Lewis, Harry Sternberg, and Robert Gwathmey. These courses offered Harlem citizens opportunities for access to culture and self-expression that were, according to the course catalogue, “the very embodiment of the purposes for which our school was founded.”²⁹ Artists employed at the Carver School thus integrated their art instruction into the larger project of educating and emboldening Harlem’s working class to “unlock the golden door of freedom.”

Enrollment at the Carver School generally fluctuated between 200 and 500 students per term, and the Board of Directors worked throughout the life of the school to recruit more students in order to assist with the school’s constantly tight budget.³⁰ A report on the enrollment breakdown for the 1944 Winter Term suggested that the school was reaching and pleasing its target audience: of the 222 students enrolled that term, fifty-one had learned of the school through trade unions, sixteen through consumer councils, thirteen through churches, and eleven through “political organizations,” while sixty-two were listed as “unidentified.” Fifty-eight students were repeat Carver School attendees. Students flocked in particular to the course on Negro History, which the school offered in three sections to a total of fifty-one students. Art courses also proved particularly popular, enrolling thirty-five students, along with an additional twenty-two participants in Catlett’s “How to Make a Dress.” Students also attended other practical courses such as “Your Dollar and How to Spend It” and public speaking and writing classes in large numbers.³¹

³⁰ See minutes for meetings of Carver School Board of Directors in NNC Papers, Part 2: October 8, 1943, Reel 1, Box 31; March 23, 1944, Reel 7, Box 38; and March 17, 1945, Reel 16, Box 48.

³¹ Breakdown of Winter Term Enrollment, NNC Papers, Part 2, Reel 7, Box 38. Unfortunately, these appear to be the only extant enrollment statistics.

Elizabeth Catlett's experience at the Carver School suggests that participation in its mission could be as transformative for the artist instructors as it was for the students themselves. Catlett played an important role in the administration of the school, working as both an instructor and also the promotion director. She later joked that this often meant finding herself "directing a broom and promoting the dirt out the door."³² Unlike the majority of her colleagues at the Carver School, Catlett grew up in a relatively well-to-do family in Washington, D.C. She was inspired by the strength of her working-class students and learned a great deal from them. "I was ashamed of myself for looking down on these people," she later reflected.³³ Drawn into the politics of the left, she incorporated discussions of class and race into her instruction, even in courses that were practical in nature. People would ask her how she taught Marxist ideas in a course such as "How to Make a Dress," and she would tell them, "Well, while we're sewing, we talk. And when a lady says, 'I have to leave early to get my news,' I say, 'Do you know what the news thinks of you and black people?' And we'd get into a discussion of why newspapers are printed, and who reads them, what they support, what they don't support... It was that way that we worked."³⁴ In this manner, the Carver School made possible an exchange of ideas between artists and working-class Harlemites that left both more aware of race and class politics and committed to the struggle for equality along both of these lines.

While the Carver School offered Harlem artists an opportunity to engage in activist teaching of adults, Workers' Children's Camp, or Wo-Chi-Ca, gave them a

³² Catlett quoted in Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Claremont, CA: Hancraft Studios, 1984), 19.

³³ Catlett quoted in Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

chance to further develop their artist-activist identity with working-class children in a setting that emphasized racial equality. The camp was opened in the mid-1930s by the International Workers Order (IWO) in rural New Jersey, a federation of ethnic mutual benefit societies affiliated with the Communist Party, as a summer getaway for the children of union members in the New York City area. One of many left-oriented children's camps formed in the New York metropolitan area in the 1930s, Wo-Chi-Ca served as a small part of what historian Paul Mishler describes as the "Communist Children's Movement" that sought to bring the entire family into Communism and make Marxism "a way of life."³⁵ As such, the camp provided working-class children from New York with not only a chance to leave behind the sticky urban heat and escape to the countryside, but also an education in progressive politics.

While the critic might quickly jump to characterize these summer camps as sites of indoctrination, their participants instead remember them more as utopian experiments – attempts to live out the larger leftist movement's ideals of racial and social equality and pass this model on to the next generation. Wo-Chi-Ca was determinedly interracial, and its directors worked hard to recruit African American staff and campers.³⁶ The camp also had a good deal of ethnic diversity, as might be expected from an IWO organization, with a number of Jews, Italians, Asians, and Puerto Ricans in its ranks. Camper Sheila Walkov Newman recalled the degree to which interracial and interethnic respect was emphasized at Wo-Chi-Ca, remembering in particular a verse of a song she learned at

³⁵ Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 2. Other leftist children's camps of the era include Kinderland, Nitgedaigit, Unity, and Woodland. As their names imply, Kinderland and Nitgedaigit were also oriented towards Jewish culture.

³⁶ According to June Levine and Gene Gordon, nearly 20% of the children attending Wo-Chi-Ca and fully a quarter of its staff were African American; see Levine and Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca: Blacks, Whites and Reds at Camp* (San Rafael, CA: Avon Springs Press, 2002), xi.

camp: “Where the children of the workers/ Live as one big family/ Black and white we are united/ In a true democracy.”³⁷ A photograph from the 1947 Wo-Chi-Ca yearbook (fig. 4.3) further emphasizes the camp’s goal of bringing about utopian interracial harmony: here a line of teenaged campers, black and white, walk together in a line with their arms around one another’s shoulders, while the caption asserts that, “WO-CHI-CA is the dream of freedom’s people making marching songs of human hopes.” As Charles White’s second wife, Frances Barrett White, later recalled, “for those of us associated with it, it served as a model for harmonious integration.” For both Frances and Charles, who met at the camp in 1942 when White was an art teacher and Frances a camper, “Wo-Chi-Ca was a symbol of what could be accomplished.”³⁸

Indeed, at least in the memories of the Wochicans themselves, the camp was far from a site of Communist brainwashing and instead a place deeply rooted in the progressive education movement, which encouraged the development of independent critical thinking skills in children.³⁹ Alongside their participation in standard American summer camp activities such as softball, bonfires, and capture the flag, campers were encouraged to discuss current world issues such as the Scottsboro trial, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise of Nazism in Germany.⁴⁰ While such topics of debate clearly reflect the left-wing orientation campers likely adopted from their parents, the camp nonetheless encouraged open communication. Campers were given the opportunity for direct participation in the governance of Wo-Chi-Ca, as each bunk elected a representative to a camp council that had a say in how the camp would be operated. Wo-Chi-Ca also placed

³⁷ Quoted in Levine and Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca*, 5.

³⁸ Frances Barrett White, with Anne Scott, *Reaches of the Heart* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994), 44.

³⁹ I take the term “Wochican” from the camper-run newsletter, the “Daily Wochican.” Issues of the newsletter are available in the Wo-Chi-Ca collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

⁴⁰ Levine and Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca*, 12, 79.

heavy emphasis on involving the children directly in addressing racial tensions that inevitably flared up from time to time; as one camp publication claimed, “relationships and problems are not glossed over, but are met and discussed. Out of this process grows close understanding and unbiased companionship.”⁴¹ In these ways, Wo-Chi-Ca worked to dismantle the divisions of race and ethnicity that served to fracture the working class and create citizens who took responsibility for their own ideas and actions.

This emphasis on progressive education geared toward building interracial alliances is what drew left-oriented artists to the camp in the 1940s, and their presence at Wo-Chi-Ca made the visual arts an integral part of the camp’s overall mission. A number of African American artists living and working in Harlem in this period summered at Wo-Chi-Ca. Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett provided art instruction at Wo-Chi-Ca in the summer of 1942; they were joined by Ernest Crichlow and the white artist Rockwell Kent, who also served as President of the IWO (fig. 4.4). Jacob Lawrence and his wife and fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence spent a summer there, as well, as did Margaret Goss Burroughs, who knew White and Catlett from the FAP in Chicago. Gwendolyn Bennett was also affiliated with Wo-Chi-Ca through her husband, Richard Crosscup, a white school teacher who served as educational director of the camp. For these artists, the camp offered more than just a paycheck. Frances White remembered that because of painful memories of racism from his own childhood, her husband Charles “was excited by the possibilities” inherent in working with youth, believing that “to secure the future of a just society, children must be nurtured and

⁴¹ “The Wo-Chi-Ca Workshop, a Children’s Program of Recreation, Education, and Culture,” in the IWO Papers, Cornell University, quoted in Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 97.

valued.”⁴² Artists thus saw the teaching of art to an interracial group of working-class children as an opportunity to make a significant social change.

Much like the Carver School, the camp developed cultural programming that played a central role in its larger mission. Ernest Crichlow, who served as art director, articulated this vision of culture as a means to a much larger end:

The function of art at camp should be to further the self-expression of the camper. Art should not be approached as the special gift of a few but as the means of expression for the many. Every effort must be made to encourage campers to discuss their work and the work of fellow campers. This will aid them in understanding and appreciating each other’s ideas and differences. This working together lays the basis for our democratic way of life.⁴³

Crichlow’s conception of art education as a means to greater understanding among children echoes what historian Diana Selig has identified as the “cultural gifts” movement in education in the 20s, 30s, and early 1940s - an effort among liberal educators to eradicate racial antagonisms in the future by familiarizing children with the “gifts” each racial and ethnic culture contributes to America. As Selig points out, these ideas were also taken up by the Popular Front left and integrated into Communist educational efforts that at the same time encouraged discussion of the economic roots of racial inequality.⁴⁴ The artists who worked at Wo-Chi-Ca thus made art an integral part of the camp’s greater effort to assist in bringing about social and economic equality in the United States.⁴⁵

⁴² Frances Barrett White, *Reaches of the Heart*, 75-76.

⁴³ Crichlow quoted in Levine and Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca*, 20. The authors give no date for the quotation, although they present it as a statement he wrote during his tenure as art director at the camp in the early 1940s.

⁴⁴ Diana Selig, *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 225.

⁴⁵ Wo-Chi-Ca offered campers a wide range of cultural programming and drew individuals from a number of cultural fields to serve as employees or visiting lecturers. For example, Pearl Primus taught dance at Wo-Chi-Ca, while Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, writer Howard Fast, and *Daily Worker* cartoonist Del visited

During World War II, Harlem's activist artists thus immersed themselves deeply within Popular Front civil rights activism by donating their time and art to the key organizations, periodicals, and educational institutions of the movement. This activism continued well into the early 1950s, even as the emerging anticommunist politics of the Cold War effected a change in the political atmosphere of Harlem in the late 1940s. The National Negro Congress fell apart in 1947 due to internecine political battles regarding the influence of Communists within the organization. Formed that same year, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) picked up where the NNC left off in incorporating culture into political activism on behalf of African Americans and the working class. Created as a national amalgamation of the NNC, the International Labor Defense (ILD), and the National Federation of Constitutional Liberties, the CRC was more closely affiliated with the Communist Party than the NNC had been, and developed a left-inflected variety of civil rights activism that combined legal action with mass protest politics.⁴⁶ In particular, the CRC rallied around a series of legal cases over racial violence and political persecution that emerged in the late 40s and early 50s, drawing national and international attention to them using tactics similar to those employed by the ILD in the Scottsboro case. Also notable, however, was the CRC's concerted efforts to galvanize cultural producers in service of their cause, to a degree even greater than the NNC. The CRC's

the camp frequently. Robeson was particularly connected with Wo-Chi-Ca, and sent his son Pauli there as a camper.

⁴⁶ The CRC was active in both the North and South; see Sarah Hart Brown, "Communism, Anti-Communism, and Massive Resistance: The Civil Rights Congress in Southern Perspective," in Glenn Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004). Brown finds that members of the CRC were genuinely committed to the defense of African American prisoners, while other scholars view the CRC as more interested in saving the Communist Party; see for example Carol Anderson, "Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948-1952," in Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

allies and activists included a wide range of writers, dancers, singers, and entertainers.⁴⁷

Among their ranks were a number of visual artists from the Harlem group, including Ernest Crichlow, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett, who was now divorced from White and living in Mexico but remained connected with the New York cultural and political community, sending political artwork back into the U.S. with friends who came to visit her.⁴⁸ Among the images she created for the CRC, for example, showed CRC President William Patterson holding back the hands of Death, dressed in a Ku Klux Klan robe, from a young black boy seated on a chair (fig. 4.5).

Among the visual artists in Harlem, Charles White was particularly active in the CRC, attending rallies and creating and circulating works of art that drew attention to the key cases it took on during the late 40s and early 50s. White created a drawing of the Trenton Six in 1949, for example, which appeared in the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, alongside an explication of the story of the case (fig. 4.6). Convicted of the murder of a white shopkeeper on very little evidence and condemned to death, the Trenton Six represented for many a legal lynching in the North; the case was frequently compared to that of the Scottsboro Boys. White's drawing shows the six defendants behind a grid of barbed wire, their large eyes and stylized facial features suggesting both their anguish and their hope for ultimate justice. They look toward the figure of Bessie Mitchell, a sister of one of the men who took the case to the CRC for appeal, as their last hope. Draped in robes, Mitchell appears as a version of the Virgin Mary, raising her large hands in an appeal for justice. The image thus represents an intriguing departure for

⁴⁷ These included Katherine Dunham, Dashiell Hammett, Elia Kazan, Arthur Miller, Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, Alice Childress, Josephine Baker, and W.C. Handy, among others.

⁴⁸ Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988). On Catlett's sending CRC artwork into U.S. with friends, see Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 101.

White, who had stressed the working-class identity of African Americans in his previous work in order to point to the confluences of race and class. Perched on the page below a headline that declares that “The Atmosphere Was Set for a Frame,” White’s drawing instead conveys a tremendous amount of emotion as it works along with the written story of the Trenton Six to recruit readers to action on their behalf.⁴⁹ Due in part to international public pressure that images such as this helped to mount, the Trenton Six were eventually found not guilty and released from prison.

Following his involvement in the campaign for the Trenton Six, White also contributed artwork to yet another CRC case, that of Rosa Lee Ingram, a Georgia tenant farmer and widowed mother of twelve, and her sons. In 1948, Ingram and two of her sons were convicted of the murder of John Stratford, a white tenant farmer who had sexually harassed Ingram and was killed when one of the sons hit Stratford on the head with a rifle in an attempt to defend his mother. Despite the accidental nature of the death, Ingram and both sons were sentenced to the death penalty. After over a decade of legal wrangling and protest, the family was set free in 1959. White’s drawing of Ingram and her sons, completed in 1949, uses similar devices as his depiction of the Trenton Six; here bars take the place of barbed wire across the front plane of the drawing, crowding the Ingrams close together in what appears to be a tiny jail cell (fig. 4.7). Like the Trenton Six, they have large, searching eyes and stylized facial features that convey both their dignity and a sense of urgency. White also clothes the Ingrams in the flowing, biblical robes he placed on Bessie Mitchell, in effect taking the case out of time and

⁴⁹ Elwood M. Dean, “The Beginning: The Atmosphere Was Set for a Frame,” *Daily Worker* September 11, 1949, p. 4. See also Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2002), 44.

suggesting the universality and even holiness of the plight of this mother and her sons.⁵⁰

Appearing in periodicals that acted as important tools for organizing political activism on the left, White's drawings of the Trenton Six and the Ingrams served to put these CRC cases on the agenda of the activist left, adding tremendous gravity to news articles that told the defendants' stories in words.⁵¹

Reactions to White's work in the leftist political community further suggest the value activists on the left placed on art for communicating political ideas. The writer Howard Fast, for example, reviewed a set of four drawings White contributed to the February, 1950, issue of *Masses and Mainstream*, a left-wing cultural and political journal on whose editorial board Charles White served. These drawings included those of the Trenton Six and the Ingrams, as well as "Toward Liberation," which depicts an African American man looking pensively to the sky before iron gates and a bare tree, and "The Living Douglass," a composition that shows a large Frederick Douglass embracing and pointing the way through a tangle of barbed wire for a group of activists and educators.⁵² Writing in the *Daily Worker*, Fast celebrated White's drawings as "the

⁵⁰ Additional images White donated to CRC efforts for the Ingram defense include a postcard drawing of black mother and child that the CRC distributed for people to send Mother's Day greetings to Rosa Ingram in jail and to write to Georgia governor Herman Talmadge pleading for the Ingrams' release; in CRC Papers, Part 1, Reel 8, Box 8.

⁵¹ White's drawing of the Ingrams accompanied articles in various leftist news outlets, including IWO's *Fraternal Outlook* and *The Worker*; see Edward L. Nelson, "TWO Members Work for Ingram Family's Freedom," *Fraternal Outlook*, October-November, 1949; and "The Ingram's Jailed – America's Shame," *The Worker*, undated clipping; both available in Charles White Papers, AAA. Charles White also contributed other drawings to the CRC cause; see for example, his portrait of Paul Robeson delivering the CRC petition, "We Charge Genocide!" to the United Nations, *Freedom*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February, 1952): 1; and his portrait of CRC National Executive Secretary, William Patterson, for the cover of "We Demand Freedom!", a publication of two speeches by Patterson, both in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁵² The grouping of drawings was entitled "Lift Every Voice," see *Masses and Mainstream* v.3, no. 2 (February, 1950): 22-25. "The Living Douglass" also served as a large, half-page illustration on the cover of *The Worker* magazine on February 12, 1950, above an article by Abner W. Berry suggesting that the "Time for Civil Rights is Now!"

fruition of two centuries of graphic art in service of the oppressed.” White’s art, he suggested, was forceful because it pointed to the strength of the working class:

Notice in his pictures the use he has made of hands – not hands as an anatomical detail, not hands which are abstract forms for design, but hands which proudly demonstrate the glory of man as man. His Negro worker at the gates is no gentle Christ-figure exhibiting the stigma with forbearance and humility; rather it is the scarred hand pregnant with resistance and strength – even as the hands of Mrs. Ingram and her two sons overwhelm the iron bars which they seem to clutch. In each case, they seem to say, “Look at my hands and fear them, for the strength of my hands is immeasurable.”⁵³

In Fast’s eyes, White’s work served to empower African American workers by showing them as literally ready to break through the bars of racial oppression and injustice. By reviewing the drawings in the *Daily Worker*, Fast drew the attention of the paper’s working class readers both to White’s art and the power of art to convey the importance of rallying behind cases such as that of the Ingrams.

White’s work for the CRC did not go unnoticed by the organization; indeed, they celebrated him in 1951 along with Ernest Crichlow and other artists and entertainers involved in the CRC for their “selfless devotion, their readiness to appear on short notice, and their unrestrained enthusiasm” which “indicated their awareness of the role of cultural workers in the fight for Negro rights and peace.”⁵⁴ In the words of New York CRC executive Russell Meek,

the realization by cultural workers of all the arts that their activities can play a major part in the struggle for peace, Negro rights and human dignity is a major step in the achievement of first class citizenship for all Negroes and for the liberation of the entire working class. But just as important is the realization of political leadership in the progressive movement, that the forces of culture both collectively and individually must be constantly enhanced,

⁵³ Howard Fast, “A Note on the Graphic Art of Charles White,” *Daily Worker*, February 9, 1950, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Other honorees included artist Walter Christmas, singers Ernest Lieberman, Laura Duncan, Hope Foye, Peggie Mair, Betty Saunders, and Louise Jeffers, and playwright and comedian Les Pine.

nourished, given leadership, and brought forward to their proper place in the struggle for human rights, Negro liberation, and for peace.⁵⁵

Suggesting that both artists and civil rights activists pay even closer attention to the ways in which culture could assist in bringing about social and political change, Meek's comments summed up the integral relationship that had been forged between left-oriented civil rights activism and cultural production in New York by the end of the 1940s.

In working for organizations such as the NNC and CRC, artists such as Catlett, White, and Crichtlow were able to fulfill one aspect of the artist-activist identity they developed in the FAP: the direct use of their artwork as a mode of communication and inspiration in the struggle for racial and economic equality for African Americans. Yet they also participated in two interracial cultural organizations during the late 40s and early 50s, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (CNA) and the Council for the Arts, Sciences and Professions (ASP), that allowed them to fulfill the other: the advocacy of the rights of black artists as artists. As Cold War anticommunism began to take hold in American culture in the late 1940s, making a direct critique of economic oppression increasingly difficult, black artists began to shift their focus to the idea of equal opportunities in the arts and the elimination of negative stereotypes of African Americans in American popular culture. The CNA and the ASP thus served as important vehicles for linking the fight for equality in the arts to the larger civil rights struggle.

Formed out of the cultural division of the National Negro Congress, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts was created at a conference at the Murray Hill Hotel in New York in March of 1946. Intended to advocate for equal opportunities for African

⁵⁵ John Hudson Jones, "Harlem CRC Hails Negro and White Cultural Workers Who Aided McGee," *Daily Worker*, May 25, 1951. While Ernest Crichtlow was also celebrated at this event and therefore appears to have played an important role in the CRC's activities, little evidence of this involvement remains.

Americans in all of the arts, the CNA included white and black members from a wide variety of cultural fields, and included visual artists such as Charles White, Ernest Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Robert Gwathmey.⁵⁶ The call to the conference suggests the ways in which its organizers imagined the role of “cultural workers, Negro and white,” arguing that “ours is an industry that teaches and persuades, that moves and inspires. If it teaches democracy, we are proud – but if it inspires degradation and discrimination then we, who are part of it are guilty, too.”⁵⁷ For members of the CNA, cultural workers of all types thus played an important part in educating the masses about racial equality. Interestingly, artists of the CNA held onto an understanding of themselves as workers, even as they shifted their emphasis away from economic inequality and instead focused on the importance of eliminating stereotypes and changing individual attitudes. The CNA thus straddled the leftist politics of the Popular Front and the emerging racial liberalism, summed up in Gunnar Myrdahl’s influential 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, which viewed racism as a problem of attitudes rather than systemic inequalities.⁵⁸ Despite the fact that the African American intellectual Harold Cruse would later describe the CNA as “the cultural arm of the Harlem political leftwing” and disparage its members as “obedient sycophants” who

⁵⁶ Members of the CNA also included Harry Belafonte, Aaron Copland, W.E.B. DuBois, Philip Evergood, Howard Fast, Shirley Graham (soon to be DuBois), Robert Gwathmey, Oscar Hammerstein, Langston Hughes, Canada Lee, Alain Locke, Dorothy Parker, Pearl Primus, Anton Refregier, Paul Robeson, and Fredi Washington. This list comes from the CNA letterhead on a letter from Crichlow to Locke, dated February 8, 1951, Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-22, folder 29, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University. The list is not exhaustive, as Crichlow himself points out to Locke in the letter.

⁵⁷ See call to a conference “to build the cultural division of the National Negro Congress,” in Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-81, folder 15, MSRC.

⁵⁸ For a detailed look at how this shift came about, see Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*.

“dutifully appl[ied] a muzzle to their own free imaginations,” the CNA was in fact relatively moderate.⁵⁹

Roy DeCarava, a photographer who had received art training at the Harlem Community Art Center and the Carver School, best articulated the CNA’s emphasis on battling stereotypes in his address before the CNA’s Fifth Anniversary celebration at the Rockland Palace in Harlem in 1952. Speaking as the chair of the Art Chapter, DeCarava condemned the racism inherent in American mass culture, “this culture of mistrust, frenzy and fear, of white gods and black demons – this culture that says ‘I,’ ‘Me,’ ‘Mine’ instead of ‘Us,’ ‘We.’ That says ‘might is right’ when it’s white. This culture of the toothpaste smile, the fish-cold eye, tight-lipped calculation and facile manipulation. A culture of tall, blonde lies, dehumanized man with blue eyes.” He described what the CNA was fighting for: “A culture that looks like you and me. Pictures of, songs about brown faces, black faces, tan faces. Tan hands, brown toes and black arms around brown babies. And white arms around black babies. Paintings of us with dignity....A picture of my President, blacker than me, smiling in a frame – at ‘We.’ That’s worth working together for.” Rallying his colleagues around this idea of positive African American representation in American culture and political life, DeCarava ended his speech pressing the audience to “find out why Negroes die for something they never had. Find out the why and, when you do, talk about it, teach it and glory in your knowledge that you’ll soon be free.”⁶⁰ DeCarava’s poetic remarks illuminate how members of the CNA aligned

⁵⁹ Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 208, 231.

⁶⁰ Program for Fifth Anniversary Celebration of Committee for the Negro in the Arts, Rockland Palace, New York City, November 14, 1952, in Charles White Papers, AAA. The program includes DeCarava’s speech and drawings by White.

their work as cultural producers counteracting negative images of African Americans in popular culture with the liberal black freedom struggle in the early 1950s.

Many of those who joined the ranks of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts were also members of another progressive cultural and professional organization, the Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (ASP). A national organization that drew together left-oriented individuals from a variety of fields, the ASP worked toward a variety of progressive causes including peace, civil rights, and in particular the fight against the anticommunist curtailment of cultural and intellectual freedom. Like the CNA, the ASP emphasized the importance of positive representation in culture, holding a special conference on “Equal Rights for Negroes in the Arts, Sciences and Professions” in November of 1951. Pointing in particular to the closing of cultural opportunities for left-oriented cultural workers due to growing anticommunist persecution, the conference program declared that “standards of truth and humanism cannot be maintained in our cultural media so long as the truth of the Negro people’s lives is denied expression.”⁶¹ The speakers at the conference, which included Paul Robeson, Jacob Lawrence, and Gwendolyn Bennett, emphasized this point and further asserted the connections between cultural and political freedom for African Americans. Charles White likewise equated freedom of speech for artists and intellectuals with the larger struggle for African American rights in a speech he gave before three hundred people gathered at an ASP-sponsored “Fight-Back Rally for Culture” at Manhattan Towers in March of 1953. The gathering was hailed by the *Daily Worker* as a powerful counteroffensive against McCarthyist curtailment of freedom of expression. White’s speech, however, explicitly

⁶¹ Program for ASP conference on “Equal Rights for Negroes in the Arts, Sciences and Professions,” held November 10, 1951, available in SCF.

linked these efforts to stem the tide of repression with the growing civil rights movement. According to the *Daily Worker*, White “called for greater efforts in fighting for the rights of the Negro people, for whom culture has been an important weapon in their struggle for freedom.” He commented on the fact that African Americans continued to be denied full access to cultural opportunities; “As an artist I have exhibited in museums I could not enter,” he told the crowd. White thus placed the African American freedom struggle within a wider context, suggesting that the infringement of freedom of expression on one front was essentially an infringement of freedom on all fronts. As fellow rally speaker Dr. Edward Barsky put it, “the attack on cultural freedom is tied to the fight for peace and democracy.”⁶²

Yet the rhetoric of the CNA and ASP suggests the degree to which leftist artist-activists and other intellectuals were forced to change their message as they increasingly found themselves on the defense against anticommunist repression. Indeed, the focus for activists involved in these organizations became “cultural freedom” above all else – the ability to express oneself freely, creatively and politically. This trope of cultural freedom placed the emphasis on the individual rights of artists and intellectuals, in many ways sapping the left-oriented cultural front of the collective politics they were fighting for in the first place. Ironically, at the very moment the United States was trumpeting American cultural freedom abroad, that freedom became a major point of contention domestically as leftist artists and intellectuals increasingly abandoned their commitment

⁶² “300 At Fight-Back Rally for Culture,” *Daily Worker*, March 12, 1953.

to highlighting the intersections of race and class and instead fought for the freedom to speak at all.⁶³

Never to be left out of a progressive political cause, Charles White also became deeply involved in the peace movement in the early 1950s as his view of race and class relations in the United States took on an increasingly internationalist perspective. White was drawn into peace activism around 1950, the year the Soviet Union announced its possession of a nuclear weapon, the Korean War began, Alger Hiss was convicted of espionage, and a year after the “fall” of China to Communism – a moment of enormous political tension. As anticommunist repression tightened, the peace movement nevertheless gathered a good deal of momentum in the summer of 1950. For many peace activists, both on the left and in the political mainstream, the link between civil rights and peace was clear; as Bishop William J. Walls asserted in his call to the Harlem community to support the Mid-Century Conference for Peace, “we know that H-bombs can bury our country’s destiny of full democracy for all in the same grave with our shattered hope for full citizenship.”⁶⁴ Or, as John Pittman argued in *Masses and Mainstream* in 1952, “by their struggle amidst war to abolish the conditions of class and national oppression which generate war, the Negro people fight to establish the conditions of peace. The struggle for Negro freedom *is* an indispensable part of the struggle for peace.”⁶⁵ Because, like Pittman, many peace activists considered war the inevitable consequence of widespread

⁶³ The CIA funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which spread American cultural propaganda throughout Europe, in the 1950s and early 60s, as well as an affiliated American Committee for Cultural Freedom that included a range of intellectuals and artists; see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999). For American Cold War cultural diplomacy that stressed smooth race relations in the United States, see Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ “370 Negro Leaders Back Peace Parley,” *Daily Worker*, May 18, 1950.

⁶⁵ John Pittman, “The Long Struggle for Peace,” *Masses and Mainstream* (February, 1952): 39.

oppression in the world, they increasingly came to posit a crucial link between the call for peace and the call for racial and economic equality in the United States. As deeply connected to the Harlem progressive political and cultural scene as White was, it comes as no surprise that his thinking took a similar turn in the early 1950s.⁶⁶

While White's peace activism began to take shape in his work with organizations such as the ASP, he was particularly transformed by a trip he took to East Berlin and the Soviet Union in 1951. Thirty-three years old at the time and accompanied by his wife Frances, White served as the leader of a delegation of sixty-six Americans to the Soviet-sponsored Third World Youth Festival in East Berlin. Put on as part of what Secretary of State Dean Acheson described as the Soviet "peace offensive," the World Youth Festival in Berlin drew as many as 1.5 million attendees, hailing from 104 countries.⁶⁷ The festival included sporting events, exhibitions, and performances that served the dual purpose of bringing together diverse nations around common cultural opportunities while showcasing the power and vitality of the Soviet bloc. As historian Joel Kotek explains, "in theory the Festivals were non-political, and their programs consisted essentially of cultural and social events. But in practice, politics were ever-present."⁶⁸

The Festival, as well as the tour of the Soviet Union he and several other Americans took afterwards, was clearly transformative for Charles White. Reflecting upon his return on what he took from the Festival, White suggested that meeting other

⁶⁶ For more on the links between civil rights activism and peace activism, see Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); and Marian Mollin, *Radical Pacifism in Modern America: Egalitarianism and Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ Lesley Wood, "Shifting the Struggle: The World Youth Festival for Youth and Students (1947 to 2005)," Conference Paper delivered at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, in possession of the author.

⁶⁸ Joel Kotek, trans. by Ralph Blumenau, *Students and the Cold War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 189. For more on the American delegation and their subsequent trip to the Soviet Union, see John Hudson Jones, "The Future Looks Good," *The Worker*, December 23, 1951.

“colonial” peoples broadened his vision of the civil rights struggle in the United States, allowing him to see that their “oppression and fight is identical with the kind of threefold oppression we suffer here in the U.S. – political, economic and social.”⁶⁹ Struck by this new international perspective, White wrote a great deal on the links between the issue of world peace and race relations and oppression in the United States. “The key question which confronts the people of the United States,” he argued,

...is the national liberation of the Negro people. For no decisive blow will be dealt against the forces of reaction, the forces of war, unless the freedom of the Negro people is realized. Not even the right to fight for peace in this country will endure if the Negro people are continually deprived of their liberties.⁷⁰

White’s romance with the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc is clear in his writings about the trip, as he suggested in the same essay, for example, that the ex-Nazi youths of East Berlin were “a people reborn,” free of any racist sentiment whatsoever. Clearly, White’s affinity to Soviet Communism stemmed from bitterness at racial inequalities in his own country; balking at American propaganda that the U.S. offered a “better way of life,” White pointed to his history of two lynched uncles and a poor childhood as evidence that this was clearly not the case. “Better than what!” he wrote rhetorically.⁷¹ Viewed through the lens of the carefully orchestrated Youth Festival and Soviet tour, the eastern bloc appeared as a utopia of racial equality to White.⁷²

⁶⁹ Charles White, “Until the Day I Die, My Life is Dedicated to My People,” *Freedom*, February, 1952, in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁷⁰ Charles White, “A Negro Artist Speaks,” undated speech in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁷¹ White, “Until the Day I Die, My Life is Dedicated to My People.”

⁷² Like the majority of cultural contact between the Communist bloc and the West in this period, the 1951 World Youth Festival was in fact carefully controlled by Soviet Union; see J.D. Parks, *Culture, Conflict, and Coexistence: American-Soviet Cultural Relations, 1917-1958* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1983). These festivals would later serve to bring America culture, including blue jeans and rock and roll music, to Soviet youth, despite the efforts of the Soviet government to control cultural imports; see Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

White's participation in the 1951 World Youth Festival reinforced his conviction that culture served an important role in bringing freedom for African Americans. "Our culture has been an integral part of over 300 years of struggle for the cause of freedom," he observed upon his return. "It is thereby a major weapon in the fight for peace." White celebrated the alliance in the United States between left-wing politics and culture of which he had been a part, suggesting that artists involved in this movement "tore into the body of our society and exposed its cancerous growth, power, hunger, race hatred, fascism. They exposed it to the world to see, in all the creative mediums at their command." Most important to White, these artists spoke directly to the working class: "What gave these artists real heroic stature and historic significance was their alliance with labor and the mass movements of the people." While bemoaning the loss of this alliance as anticommunism closed in and abstract expressionism became dominant, White continued to feel that "there is hope," suggesting that a handful of artists remained who shared his political convictions. "To these few falls the major task of placing the brush, the pen, the chisel, the photo at the disposal of the peace fighters," he wrote.⁷³ In a newfound romance with Soviet Communism and culture, White returned from the eastern bloc with a renewed sense of himself as an artist-activist, whose task was to fight not only for the rights of African Americans and the working class in the United States, but also for the oppressed across the world. This commitment was evident both in the art he produced (fig. 4.8) and in his continued political and cultural activism in the early 1950s.⁷⁴

⁷³ Charles White, "A Negro Artist Speaks."

⁷⁴ White spoke and wrote extensively about his trip, and also about the power of Soviet art. See, for example, David Platt, "Charles White Finds USSR Creating Finest Art," *Daily Worker*, December 12, 1951; David Platt, "Soviet Art Reflects Life of a Heroic Society, Says White," *Daily Worker*, December 14,

Despite concerted efforts by White and other artists on the left to resist mounting anticommunist pressure, the form of cultural activism they had forged became increasingly unsustainable by the middle of the 1950s. Artists such as White proved difficult to silence, yet as “the great fear” set in, leftist cultural workers lost their ability to communicate their political ideals as the agencies of anticommunist repression systematically destroyed their outlets for expression.⁷⁵ In addition, an increasingly conservative political culture slowly narrowed the terms of debate in civil rights politics to a discussion of individual rights and a focus on attitudinal changes and moral suasion rather than addressing systemic inequalities. While hardly transforming artist-activists’ political ideas, mid-century anticommunism certainly succeeded in dismantling the labor-oriented alliance between culture and politics that flourished on the left in the 1930s and 40s. By branding all discussions of economic inequality as communist and therefore disloyal, it effectively squelched the links this movement made between economic and racial oppression in the United States.

Perhaps the most important way in which anticommunism limited artists’ activism was by placing tremendous pressure on the institutions where the artists worked. While both the FBI and HUAC kept an eye on left-wing children’s camps, including Wo-Chi-Ca, the camp ultimately met its demise as a result of pressure from nearby residents of

1951; Charles White, “Eyewitness Report on Soviet Art by an Outstanding Negro Painter,” *Daily Worker*, November 23, 1952.

⁷⁵ The “great fear” is David Caute’s term; see Caute, *The Great Fear*.

the surrounding rural New Jersey community.⁷⁶ Locals were apparently suspicious of Wo-Chi-Ca as early as 1941. An FBI report made three years later claimed that the New Jersey State Police Sub-Station located at Washington, NJ, had received a complaint about the camp and undertaken an investigation in October of that year, learning from nearby farmers that it was “a Communist camp from New York City and consists of people of all races and creeds.”⁷⁷ While it is unclear whether the camp’s Communist affiliation or its interracialism was at issue in this investigation, it is clear that neighbors were suspicious of camp activities. By the summer of 1942, the FBI was keeping an eye on Wo-Chi-Ca, including sending undercover agents to events at the camp.⁷⁸

Locals ultimately proved unwilling to tolerate the left-wing camp in their midst. During the summer of 1950, a group of men, reportedly drunk, stormed the camp and demanded that the “nigger” sign on the playhouse, which was named after Communist activist and now political persona non grata Paul Robeson, be taken down. The men threatened to return the following day, and made good on their word, lining the road to the camp with cars in an effort to intimidate camp leaders. Worried for the campers’ safety, the board of directors capitulated and renamed the playhouse, against the pleas of members of the staff. For Charles and Frances White and others affiliated with the camp, the board’s surrender to anticommunist political pressure was the ultimate betrayal in that it went against everything that Wo-Chi-Ca had previously stood for.⁷⁹ No longer

⁷⁶ HUAC held hearings on “Communist Activities Among Youth Groups,” singling out summer camps as particularly active in Communist indoctrination, on February 6-7, 1952.

⁷⁷ From FBI report on Gwendolyn Bennett dated May 11, 1944, in Bennett FBI file, in author’s possession.

⁷⁸ Report dated September 7, 1942, Wo-Chi-Ca FBI file, in author’s possession. This surveillance was possibly part of the FBI’s larger investigation of racial conditions in the United States during World War II; see Robert A. Hill, ed., *The FBI’s RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States During World War II* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

⁷⁹ See letter from Charles to Frances White, quoted in Frances Barrett White, *Reaches of the Heart*, 46.

willing to press for interracial working-class unity, the camp ceased to be a place where artist-activists could pursue their work of building a more just society.

Wo-Chi-Ca's relatively isolated location was probably what kept it out of the anticommunist limelight for most of the 1940s; the Carver School, on the other hand, faced trouble from its inception, most likely due to its placement in the center of Harlem. Not long after the school was formed in 1943, it was embroiled in controversy over its politics. That December, six members of the school's board of directors, all of them white, resigned, claiming that the board was controlled by Communists.⁸⁰ According to Elizabeth Catlett, at the root of the problem was the issue of whether the school would be controlled by those involved in the local community or by those coming in from outside of it. "When the university people realized they weren't going to get control of the project," she recalled, "they left in anger."⁸¹ Board member Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. confirmed that the resignation had racial undertones, writing in the *People's Voice* that "the day of domination of Harlem projects by whites has passed."⁸² While the true motivations of the board members who resigned are hard to assess, it is also possible that they were, in fact, uncomfortable with the overt Marxist politics of many people involved in the school.

Anticommunist leaders in the black community also took the opportunity to deride the Communist Party through an attack on the Carver School. Even before the six board members resigned, Socialist Harlem labor leader Frank Crosswaith declared to the

⁸⁰ Those who resigned included E. George Payne, Dean of the New York University College of Education; Alice V. Keliher, Associate Professor of Education at NYU; Frank E. Karelsen, attorney; Theodore Fred Kuper, former Law Secretary of the New York Board of Education; Leonard Covello, Principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem; and James Waterman Wise, Research Director of the Council Against Intolerance in America. See "Six Directors Quit the Carver School," *New York Times*, December 18, 1943, p. 17.

⁸¹ Catlett quoted in Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, 19.

⁸² Adam Clayton Powell, "Soapbox," *People's Voice*, January 1, 1944.

press that the school was “recognized by the thinking people of Harlem as a Communist attempt to exploit Carver.”⁸³ The *New York Times* reported that NAACP director Walter White also spoke out against the school, agreeing with Crosswaith that the Carver School was a move by Communists to recruit members to the Party; White later disavowed the article, however, claiming he had merely told the reporter that he disagreed with the Communist philosophy but also felt Communists had a right to organize and spread their message in a democratic country.⁸⁴ Distressed by these attacks on the school, Communist board member Doxey Wilkerson wrote an op-ed in the *Daily Worker* disparaging the reported red-baiting by Crosswaith and White. Like Catlett and Powell, Wilkerson suggested that the shake-up with the board of directors contained a racial element, giving “special tribute” to the “still remaining white members who refused to go along with efforts to disrupt the wholesome inter-racial unity which finds expression in the Carver School’s governing board.” Finally, Wilkerson was unapologetic about the influence of Communists at the Carver School; the school’s critics should also acknowledge that “Communists are waging an ‘unashamed’ campaign to up-root every vestige of jim crowism from our national life, that they consider the establishment of full citizenship rights for the Negro people as an urgent wartime necessity of the nation as a whole.”⁸⁵ The 1943 controversy surrounding the board members’ resignation thus established the Carver School as important terrain in the battle over control of political

⁸³ Frederick Woltman, “Carver School Name Called Red Negro Ruse,” *New York World-Telegram*, November 16, 1943. Crosswaith was the leader of the Negro Labor Committee and an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). See also “Carver School Hits Red Charge,” *PM*, November 24, 1943; “Carver School Hit As Red Institution,” *New York World-Telegram*, date illegible; and “Reds Alarm Negro Educators,” *New York Post*, December 21, 1943, all in SCF.

⁸⁴ “Red Drive to Win Negroes Charged,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1943, p. 29. For White’s attack on the *New York Times* for spinning his comments, see Walter White, “People and Places,” *Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1944, p. 13.

⁸⁵ Doxey Wilkerson, “Out-of-Date Tactic,” *Daily Worker*, December 30, 1943.

organizing in Harlem during World War II, pitting white and black liberals and Socialists against the Communist left in a heated ideological struggle.

Anticommunist pressure on the Carver school finally reached a breaking point in 1947. That spring, the school was nationally identified as one of ninety schools and organizations named on the Attorney General's list of "subversive" organizations. Any association with organizations on the list could be used by newly established loyalty boards as grounds for dismissal from government positions. The George Washington Carver School made the list along with the National Negro Congress, the Civil Rights Congress, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, the International Workers Order, and the Ku Klux Klan, and a number of other leftist and extreme rightist organizations and schools.⁸⁶ This final designation of the Carver School as an un-American and even dangerous institution was apparently too much for the Harlem community to stomach; lacking funds due to decreased enrollment, the school closed its doors by the end of the year.

Harlem's artist-activists thus found their world closing in on them by the late 1940s as they lost both steady employment and their opportunity to effect social change through art education. Indeed, ultimately all of their outlets for political and cultural expression fell victim to the forces of anticommunism. Hounded by the FBI and devoting the bulk of its funds to the legal defense of its leader, William Patterson, the Civil Rights Congress imploded in 1956. Even the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which had limited its efforts to cultural integration rather than fighting for economic or

⁸⁶ See "90 Groups, Schools Named on U.S. List as Being Disloyal," *New York Times*, December 5, 1947, p. 1.

political equality, folded due to anticommunist pressure by 1955.⁸⁷ In addition, the left-oriented magazines and newspapers that had provided artists with a medium for spreading both their art and their political messages were forced to cease publication by the mid-1950s: the *Daily Worker* and *Masses and Mainstream* both stopped publishing in 1956, for example. In spite of their continued efforts to thwart red-baiters' attempts to silence them, by 1956 the cohort of politically active artists that had flourished in Harlem in the late 30s and 40s essentially had lost all opportunities to put their mission for activism around the issues of race and class into practice, as well as outlets for expressing their ideas both visually and verbally.⁸⁸

Among the most powerful ways in which the Cold War affected their artistic and political practice was the imperative placed on apolitical art in this period. Indeed, changes in the art world, increasingly devoted to abstract expressionism, placed tremendous pressure on social realist artists to dismantle the links they had forged between their role as artists and their role as activists. Some left-oriented activists made the shift to abstraction early in their career, before it became the ruling aesthetic in American art. Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, and Romare Bearden all joined in the growing disillusionment in the mainstream art world with political art.

Lewis later recalled his epiphany:

I used to paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination, and slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn't move anybody, it didn't make things better and that if I had the guts to, which I did periodically in those days, it was to picket. And this made things better for Negroes in Harlem. Negroes

⁸⁷ The actual date at which the CNA disbanded is unclear, although Ernest Crichlow told FBI agents who visited him in February, 1955, that the organization had fallen apart due to its placement on the Attorney General's List; see memo dated February 9, 1955, in Ernest Crichlow FBI file, in author's possession.

⁸⁸ Julia Mickenberg has recently argued that Ernest Crichlow, along with a group of other left-oriented artists and writers, were able to continue to pursue their leftist politics throughout the Cold War through illustrated children's books; see her fascinating *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

were employed and they had jobs and stuff like that but it still didn't make my art any better. But I felt that political things had one thing or at least kind of protest paintings that I was trying to do never solved any situation. I found the only way to solve anything was to go out and take some kind of physical action.⁸⁹

While Lewis never abandoned his leftist political orientation, he increasingly separated his politics from his art, which became more and more abstract as the decade progressed and he joined in the circle of abstract expressionists that orbited around artists like William de Kooning and Robert Motherwell. Lewis continued to fight for the African American working class through "physical action," like teaching at the Carver School, yet he withdrew his own art from the political causes of the period. Disenchanted with the idea that visual images could engender political and social change, Lewis and others thus vehemently separated their identity as artists and as activists by the early 1940s.⁹⁰

While the shift to abstraction in American art arose out of a range of postwar aesthetic and cultural developments in the United States, the style's cultural triumph also had deep political roots. A number of scholars have demonstrated how the anticommunist fervor that escalated after World War II coincided with a shift in the art world towards the style of abstract expressionism, showing how policy makers influenced cultural producers to create an art that fit with American Cold War liberalism.⁹¹ As the

⁸⁹ Norman Lewis, oral history interview with Henri Ghent, no date specified, AAA.

⁹⁰ Ann Gibson has argued that Lewis's abstract works continued to contain subtle political messages; see her essays in *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975* (New York: Kenkeleba House, 1991); and *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998). Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson also characterize Lewis as straddling the boundaries between pure abstraction and social content, pointing to the ways in which he pressured the New York abstract expressionists to consider their relationship with the larger world; see their *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 320-323.

⁹¹ See William Hauptman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum* (Oct., 1973): 48-52; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June, 1974): 39-41; Jane de Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (Oct., 1976): 762-787; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Erika Doss,

United States emerged from the war a world power, American officials actively sought a new form of American art that would represent the nation's international political hegemony through the development of an artistic style that would distinguish it from Europe and the Soviet bloc. Because it emphasized the expression of the inner soul of the artist and eschewed overt political messages, abstract expressionism served as a fitting symbol of American individualism. Lauded by powerful museum executives and art critics, the style quickly became dominant in the American art world, making it difficult for artists still interested in conveying a social message to maneuver. The rise of abstraction as the epitome of American aesthetic expression placed a great deal of pressure on politically-oriented artists to either join the artistic mainstream or at the very least water down the politics in their art. Indeed, even an artist as steadfastly committed to visual activism as Charles White changed his aesthetic over the course of the 40s and 50s, divesting it of direct commentary on economic oppression – a shift of which he may or may not have been aware.

Harlem's artist-activists also experienced anticommunism through targeted FBI surveillance of them as individuals. Gwendolyn Bennett, Ernest Crichlow, and Charles White were of particular interest to the FBI, which generated enormous files documenting every scrap of connection each of these artists had with suspected Communist organizations and causes. For Bennett, the red-baiting trouble came as early as 1939, when she was suspended from her post as director of the FAP Harlem

Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Cockcroft in particular makes convincing and intriguing links between the foreign policy elite and artistic tastemakers such as art museum administrators in this period. On the rise of "corporate cultural hegemony" in the postwar United States, see Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Community Art Center due to her supposed membership of the Communist Party.⁹² The charges against Bennett were eventually dropped due to insufficient evidence, and she was cleared to be reinstated on the WPA. Embittered by the controversy, however, and perhaps sensing that the WPA's days were numbered, in 1941 Bennett instead decided to take the teaching position at the School for Democracy. Not to be cowed by red-baiting, however, she informed her friend Alain Locke, "I have decided that I will continue telling the story of the Negro's cultural contribution to American culture, no matter what my enemies have tried to do to me."⁹³

The FBI opened a file on Bennett in 1941 due to a "complaint" alleging that Bennett had lied when she submitted an affidavit to the WPA claiming she was not a Communist.⁹⁴ The Bureau subsequently undertook an extensive investigation of Bennett, assembling evidence of her connections to the Communist Party in New York. Her file illustrates the FBI's ethos of guilt by association, listing known and suspected Communists as acquaintances; simply knowing these people was evidence that she was also a Communist to the FBI.⁹⁵ Agents also interviewed informants in Harlem who attested to her Communist beliefs, and also connected Bennett to the School for Democracy, Wo-Chi-Ca, and the Carver School, further establishing her guilt by association with suspected subversive organizations.⁹⁶ Based on this evidence, the FBI deemed Bennett a significant threat, placing her on the Security Card Index of suspected

⁹² Bennett, who was a strong personality, believed that this attack was the result of a personal vendetta by someone who disliked her. See her letter to Alain Locke, dated November 30, 1941, Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-13, folder 30, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Memorandum from Robert J. Bounds, Director of the Division of Information, to J. Edgar Hoover, dated June 24, 1941, Gwendolyn Bennett FBI file, in the author's possession.

⁹⁵ Listed acquaintances included James W. Ford, Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, Earl Browder, Robert Minor, Ferdinand Smith, and her husband Dick Crosscup.

⁹⁶ See report on Bennett dated March 23, 1944, in Bennett FBI file.

subversive individuals in May of 1944, and going so far as to place a “mail cover” on the Crosscups’ residence and collecting a handwriting sample for further evidence against her.⁹⁷ Likely due to the combination of the implosion of the Carver School and all of this scrutiny by the FBI, Bennett reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown in 1947 and retreated from public life. An informant told the FBI in 1949 that she was in “poor health” and that she “seldom leaves her apartment,” while another claimed that she was “through with the Communist Party.” The FBI subsequently took Bennett off of the New York Key Figure list and removed her from the Security Card Index.⁹⁸ They continued to keep tabs on her, however; in 1953, two agents stopped her for an “interview” outside of her work at the Consumer’s Union, to which she crisply replied that “she had no information about herself or her husband that the FBI does not already have.”⁹⁹ While it is difficult to glean Bennett’s overall experience of the FBI’s surveillance of her from the file, the snapshot provided by this interview report suggests that she was intimately aware of the Bureau’s activities. Anticommunist pressure may not have succeed in making her willing to cooperate with the FBI, but she nevertheless dropped her commitment to blending art with leftist activism by the late 1940s.

Ernest Crichlow, too, was subject to FBI surveillance throughout the 1950s. Crichlow’s FBI file lists all of his leftist affiliations, including his work at the Carver School, Wo-Chi-Ca, and the ASP, along with the damning evidence that he had registered to vote as a Communist in 1936. FBI agents “interviewed” Crichlow at his home on several occasions, later reporting his hostility upon being questioned about his

⁹⁷ Ibid. For handwriting sample, see memorandum from SAC New York to FBI Director and Laboratory, dated February 22, 1945, in Bennett FBI file.

⁹⁸ Memorandum from SAC New York to FBI Director, dated November 2, 1949, in Bennett FBI file.

⁹⁹ Memorandum from SAC New York to FBI Director, dated November 5, 1953, in Bennett FBI file.

political activities. The artist bravely told agents that he did not care which organizations were on the Attorney General's list – “he would promote and continue to associate with any organization as long as it meant the advancement of the Negro and the end of discrimination.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, continued harassment from the Bureau likely had a powerful influence on Crichlow as he turned to illustrating children's books in the late 40s and early 50s.¹⁰¹

Despite his high degree of activism throughout the 1940s, Charles White seems to have escaped scrutiny by anticommunists until his trip to East Berlin and the Soviet Union in 1951. White's passport application had made no mention of travel in eastern Europe and instead claimed he was planning to vacation in France, England, and Italy. This misuse of his passport caught J. Edgar Hoover's attention, and Hoover subsequently instructed the New York and Washington offices to undertake an investigation of White.¹⁰² The New York office assembled a mountain of evidence of White's participation in leftist political and cultural groups, as well as his contribution of art and written articles to left-wing periodicals.¹⁰³ This evidence, along with testimony from informants verifying his leftist political views, earned White a place on the Security Card Index, and in May he was even marked for “Comsab,” meaning the FBI thought he was a Communist saboteur.¹⁰⁴ Agents also hounded White, attempting unsuccessfully to corner

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum dated February 9, 1955, in Crichlow FBI file, in the author's possession.

¹⁰¹ Children's literature became a haven for leftist artists and writers during the Cold War; see Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰² Memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover to FBI Communications Section, dated October 10, 1951, in Charles White FBI file, in the author's possession. A copy of White's passport application is in Charles White file, Series Five, HUAC Investigative Name Files, Box 195, 9E3/3/18/6, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The witness on this application was White's close friend, Ernest Crichlow.

¹⁰³ See report on Charles White, dated March 9, 1953, in Charles White FBI file.

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum dated May 14, 1953, in Charles White FBI file.

him on the street outside his home and making “pretext” calls to his home and work.¹⁰⁵

Never able to pin White to political activity that legitimately qualified as sabotage, the FBI subsequently backed off of White, but continued to keep tabs on him through the mid-1960s, even following his move from New York to Los Angeles in 1956.

The evidence the FBI assembled against White likely fueled the case of HUAC against the artist, as well.¹⁰⁶ As part of the larger government effort to control who spoke for the United States abroad, HUAC was particularly interested in the problem of U.S. passports being used for undocumented travel into the eastern bloc. HUAC opened files on White that contained much of the same evidence as that assembled in his FBI file, and in many cases arranged the same way.¹⁰⁷ HUAC held hearings on the issue of passport misuse on February 6th and 7th of 1952, in which their staff investigator and professional witness, Donald Appell, testified on the delegation who attended the World Youth Festival and directly named White.¹⁰⁸ HUAC then issued a subpoena for White to appear before the committee on February 13th. For unknown reasons, the committee postponed this subpoena indefinitely.¹⁰⁹ They retained interest in White, however, and issued a second subpoena to appear four years later for another “Passport Hearing.” White then hired the law firm of Donner, Kincy, and Perlin to inform HUAC that he could not appear due to his health; White had contracted tuberculosis in the army during WWII and was

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum dated December 18, 1953, in Charles White FBI file.

¹⁰⁶ On Hoover and the FBI’s leakage of information to Congressional anticommunist committees, see Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), ch. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, one of the two extant HUAC files on Charles White also contain press clippings about a Charles H. White, an African American Communist who had worked for the Federal Writers Project in New York and later served as a witness before the Dies Committee in 1939. This White was stabbed and left dead in a Harlem doorway, apparently causing some confusion for HUAC staff. See Charles White file, HUAC files and Ref., Box 368, 9E3/2/19/5, NARA.

¹⁰⁸ Testimony of Donald Appell before the House Un-American Activities Committee, 82nd Congress, Second Session, February 6-7, 1952.

¹⁰⁹ A copy of the subpoena, along with a telegram to White postponing the subpoena with no explanation, can be found in Charles White file, HUAC Investigative Name Files, Box 195, NARA.

subject to bed rest due to a resurgence of the illness, the law firm informed them. HUAC accepted this excuse and thereafter left White alone.¹¹⁰

Charles White proved particularly difficult to intimidate, despite continued surveillance by the FBI and two HUAC subpoenas in the first half of the 1950s. On the contrary, this persecution seems in some ways to have enhanced his outspokenness in this period. White continued to speak and write about the merits of the Soviet Union, publishing an article on the glory of Soviet art in the *Daily Worker* just eight months after his first HUAC subpoena had been dropped. Perhaps unaware of the degree to which the Soviet government controlled the content and style of art, limiting it to socialist realism that served the state, White praised Russian art as exposing “the core of man’s basic struggles” and containing “sensitive human content.”¹¹¹ White also issued a direct protest against the HUAC witch hunt, signing and perhaps even writing a petition entitled “We Will Not Be A ‘Silent Generation’” that also bore the names of a variety of other left-oriented cultural workers and peace activists who had been called before the committee.¹¹² The petition contained a scathing critique of HUAC: “We despise the Un-American Committee whose only function is to harass, intimidate, threaten and jail, decent, honest and patriotic citizens.” HUAC did not represent America, but rather “the racists and bigots, few in number, who would destroy democracy and pave the road to

¹¹⁰ This second subpoena, along with subsequent telegrams regarding communication with the law firm regarding White’s health, can be found in Ibid.

¹¹¹ Charles White, “Eyewitness Report on Soviet Art by an Outstanding Negro Painter,” *Daily Worker*, November 23, 1952.

¹¹² Other signers included Paul Robeson, Jr., singer Hope Foye, members of the group People’s Artists, Doris Koppelman, Vice Chairman of the Young People’s General Assembly for Peace; Joy Silver, former Secretary of the Committee for World Youth Friendship and Cultural Exchange; Dorothy Gottlieb, former Executive Secretary of American Youth for a Free World; and Sidney Kramer and Joseph Bucholt of the Labor Youth League. My suggestion that White may have written the petition stems from the fact that his name is listed first. A copy of the petition can be found in the Charles White Papers, AAA.

fascism.” But White and his colleagues refused to hold their tongues out of fear, for “this is alien to democracy, and we mean to speak out.”

Yet, by 1956, anticommunist repression had clearly taken a toll on White’s health and well-being. While he and Frances moved to Los Angeles that year ostensibly due to a resurgence of his tuberculosis, it is likely that the continued hounding and second subpoena from HUAC contributed to their decision to relocate. Interestingly, in interviews and memoirs, neither Charles nor Frances mentioned the second subpoena, rather they focused on Charles’s health. Yet in at least one interview, Charles White hinted at how the chilling of the political climate in New York in the early 1950s affected him deeply. He remarked that,

the environment back east reached a point where it was just too stultifying. I felt that everything was closing in on me, I think particularly after we came back from Europe having been in Europe for quite a while, I found New York intolerable, in terms of the pressures, the pace of life, and I just couldn’t readjust as comfortably as I thought I’d be able to.¹¹³

While it remains impossible to know the degree to which the pressures of anticommunism contributed to the couple’s decision to move across the country, White’s comments suggest that his trip to East Berlin and the Soviet Union left him with a sense of New York as an increasingly repressive place – ironic, given his unwillingness to see the repression inherent in East Germany and the Soviet Union. Physically exhausted and disillusioned with the politics of city he called home, White retreated to California in order to lead a quieter and less politically active existence in the late 1950s and early 60s.

¹¹³ Charles White oral history interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, Hatch-Billops Collection.

The story of Harlem's artist-activists in the 1940s and early 50s not only sheds light on the ways in which an interracial, leftist cultural community immersed itself directly in the civil rights movement in this period. It also offers perspective both on how anticommunism and the conservative culture of the Cold War functioned to limit the boundaries of acceptable political debate and activism over time, as well as how difficult it was for anticommunist agencies to control culture. Historian Ellen Schrecker has demonstrated that anticommunist repression functioned as a two step process: first, a government body, whether HUAC, the FBI, or a state or local board, would publicly identify those individuals considered to be dangerous or un-American, and then the punishment was carried out by employers, who routinely fired those individuals as a result. Anticommunist agencies thus depended to a large degree on both public and private sector employers to carry out their sentence.¹¹⁴ The position of artists outside of the traditional world of work made it more difficult (although hardly impossible) for anticommunists to carry out punitive measures against them. This gave an artist like Charles White the freedom to issue such a scathing petition against HUAC in 1952 declaring that he would not succumb to fear; used to living hand to mouth and cobbling together a living through teaching and sales of his work, the artist had less to lose in protesting the growing repression.

It is also remarkable, however, that it was not the content of these artists' work that drew the attention of anticommunists, but rather their participation in political activism. Nowhere in Bennett, Crichtlow, or White's FBI files is there discussion of the art they produced; instead, the Bureau was only interested in which Communists they knew and which left-wing organizations they belonged to. The Attorney General's list

¹¹⁴ Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*.

did target cultural organizations like the CNA, yet when the FBI listed the CNA as one of White's key causes, it described the organization as a Communist front created for the ultimate purpose of recruitment to the Party. Government agencies like the FBI and HUAC were evidently unthreatened by the content of art, suggesting they placed little value on the idea among social realists that art could indeed serve as a powerful weapon to unite the masses around a common cause.¹¹⁵

The relative freedom Harlem's artist-activists enjoyed well into the early 1950s to spread their relatively radical message through their art also speaks to how difficult a job it was for the anticommunist crusade to suppress dissent. The picture one receives from White, Crichtlow, and Bennett's FBI files is of an agency stretched to its limits attempting to chase down every individual who might have been involved in what they perceived as an enormous conspiracy; that the FBI did not even notice Charles White before he lied on his passport application speaks to the fact that, with a definition of "subversive" that was growing every day, it simply proved impossible for the Bureau to go after every individual. It also suggests that the shift to a conformist culture that narrowed the terms of acceptable political debate was neither sudden nor complete, but rather a long process that reached a saturation point in the mid-50s. Yet the repressive political culture of the 1950s ultimately failed to divest individuals such as White, Crichtlow, and Bennett of their leftist political values. In the famous words of cultural critic Stuart Hall, "hegemonizing

¹¹⁵ One exception is Congressman George A. Dondero of Michigan, who launched on a crusade in the early 50s against all modern art, including Abstract Expressionism, claiming it was part of a Communist conspiracy against the traditional American way of life. See Jane de Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America."

is hard work,” and this proved particularly true for anticommunists in the 1940s and early 50s.¹¹⁶

Finally, the story of Harlem’s artist-activists also adds weight to recent discussions of the how mid-century anticommunism limited and transformed the African American freedom struggle in such a way as to silence that movement’s international perspective on racial injustice as well as the links it made in the 1930s and 40s between the politics of race and class.¹¹⁷ Indeed, these artist-activists played a central role in galvanizing an interracial, labor-oriented Popular Front network in Harlem in this period that generated remarkable strength and drew a great deal of attention to the intertwined nature of race and class inequalities. This was a moment Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein have described as an “opportunity found and lost,” as Cold War anticommunism ultimately limited the extent to which they could point to the structural and economic causes of racial inequality. Narrowly focused on individual rights, the 1950s civil rights movement abandoned the vivid illustrations of economic and racial oppression that had circulated widely in the pamphlets, prints, painting, cartoons, and murals of the previous decades.

Yet, as the stories of Charles White, Norman Lewis, Ernest Crichlow, Elizabeth Catlett, and others also suggest, the perspective these artist-activists shared on race and

¹¹⁶ Stuart Hall, “For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation,” in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (Dec., 1988): 786-811; Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

class inequality in America and abroad, as well as their commitment to the idea that art could serve as a political weapon, did not disappear entirely as a result of anticommunist repression. All of these artists, even Lewis, retained a sense of themselves as having an important role to play in the ongoing freedom struggle. These were lessons they ultimately carried with them through the Cold War, to be further explored along with a new generation of young black artists who came of age during the 1960s.

CHAPTER FIVE: Photographing “How It Feels To Be Black,” 1945-1969

The rise of Cold War anticommunism may have limited the outlets through which left-oriented artists could illuminate the twin oppressions of race and class, but it hardly eliminated visual activism as a powerful strategy of the civil rights movement. The Popular Front of the 1930s and 40s produced an entire cadre of visual artists dedicated to participating in the African American freedom struggle by putting brush to canvas, rolling ink on lithograph stone, or pressing pen to paper. Carefully composing the images they created, these artists crafted artworks born of their own imaginations to convey the history, dignity, and rights of African Americans. Out of this social realist artistic milieu came two influential African American photographers as well, who likewise created images that communicated a social message. As products of the art communities that came together around Federal Art Project community art centers, Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks were both deeply influenced by the political commitments they saw in their fellow artists. Both men carried the lessons they learned through this experience with them throughout their successful careers as photographers, adapting those lessons into aesthetic strategies that allowed them to flourish in the Cold War. While colleagues such as Charles White, Gwendolyn Bennett, Elizabeth Catlett, and others increasingly found themselves the victims of anticommunist surveillance and persecution by the mid-1950s, effectively limiting their ability to maneuver as visual activists, DeCarava and Parks were able to achieve critical acclaim and popular success in the 1950s and 60s.

Their success had much to do with developments in the field of photography that in many ways mimicked the shift to abstract expressionism in painting that arose out of

the politics of the Cold War. The 1930s and early 40s were in many ways the heyday of American documentary photography, marked in particular by the photographs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which sought to convey the essence of the American people and make known the conditions under which so many suffered during the Depression.¹ Many documentary photographers in this period were influenced by the same left-oriented cultural currents that guided social realist visual artists who sought to create images that could act as a political weapon. With the onset of the Cold War, however, documentary photographers were also persecuted by the government; the leftist Photo League, for example, made its way onto the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations in 1947. Documentary photographer Lisette Model later recalled the restrictions placed on her work due to the political climate: "It was terrible. You didn't know *what* to photograph."² As art historian Lili Corbus Bezner has aptly demonstrated, these political pressures resulted in the bifurcation of the photographic medium; fine art photography followed painting in emphasizing the expression of the artist's inner truths and subjective experiences, while documentary photography was increasingly categorized as photojournalism. Photographers faced a choice: explore the abstract and remain an artist, or continue with a documentary aim by pursuing a career in photojournalism.³

As young artists who were deeply influenced by their training in politically relevant art, Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks faced these political and aesthetic changes

¹ See John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

² Quoted by Helen Gee in *Photography of the Fifties: An American Perspective* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Press, 1980).

³ Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

that came with the onset of the Cold War. Each artist chose a different path, DeCarava striving to succeed as a fine art photographer and Parks embarking on a long career as a photojournalist with *Life* magazine. Both of these men maintained their commitment to using their work to press for African American social and political inclusion, yet each found a unique way to transform this mission to fit the aesthetic and political constraints and philosophies of the Cold War. From their earliest acquaintance, Parks and DeCarava developed a mutual antipathy for one another, as each developed a very different conception of himself as an artist. Despite their differences, however, both photographers produced and circulated images that, much like the murals, cartoons, prints, and drawings of their colleagues in the 1930s and 40s, served as a forum for a range of competing ideas about race and civil rights politics. In particular, the work of both DeCarava and Parks reflected important shifts in the civil rights movement's approach during the 1950s and early 1960s, as social scientists and civil rights activists increasingly downplayed the systemic causes of racial inequality and emphasized the psychological and moral effects of racism on whites and blacks alike.⁴

The photographs of DeCarava and Parks in many ways followed these trends, as they sought to make a psychological appeal to viewers by visually representing the lived experience of being black in America. DeCarava's intimate portrait of the community of Harlem and Parks's *Life* magazine photo-essays conveying "How It Feels To Be Black" in many ways drew both artists away from a direct condemnation of economic and social structures in favor of an attempt to connect to viewers emotionally. Yet their work also

⁴ For an in-depth account of this philosophical shift, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008). On the vogue for psychology in post-WWII America, see Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

illuminated a wide range of perspectives on race and the civil rights struggle as it evolved over the course of the 1950s and 60s, offering challenges to white privilege and visualizing the growing frustrations and demands of African Americans. As photographers, DeCarava and Parks thus negotiated the intricate and changing relationship between art and politics in the 1950s and 60s to forge two very different and unique styles that in their own way served as important sites of political contestation. The work of both men also served as inspiration for a younger generation African American photographers who documented the civil rights movement in the 1960s and beyond.

The careers of DeCarava and Parks thus demonstrate how the political climate of the Cold War shaped, but did not destroy, strategies of visual activism on behalf of African Americans in the 1950s and 60s. Scholars have begun to uncover the ways in which black cultural figures took advantage of the diplomatic imperatives of the Cold War in order to press for greater rights for African Americans. Penny von Eschen has shown how “jazz ambassadors” such as Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong made use of their state-sponsored world tours to draw attention to racial inequality in the United States, while Mary Dudziak has illuminated the ways in which Josephine Baker capitalized on the tensions of Cold War diplomacy to speak out on race in America in her international performances, as well.⁵ As this scholarship demonstrates, the early Cold War was both limiting and liberating for civil rights activism in the United States: limiting in the sense that it narrowed the terms of debate to exclude economic analyses of racial inequality, but liberating in the sense that it opened new opportunities for activists

⁵ Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Mary L. Dudziak, “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (Sept., 1994): 543-570.

to make use of culture to argue for the rights of African Americans. The photographic practice of DeCarava and Parks represents an additional example of how Cold War politics created an opening for new forms of cultural activism and visual resistance. The work of Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks illuminates the ways in which the social realist idea of art as a weapon was harnessed and adapted in two very different ways during the conservative Cold War political climate. In addition, it allows us to explore the places in which socially conscious art photography and photojournalism converged and diverged as the medium increasingly took a central place in the African American liberation struggle in the postwar era.

If any single artist can be described as a true product of the leftist art world of Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, it is Roy DeCarava. Born in 1919 to a Jamaican immigrant mother, DeCarava spent the majority of his life in Harlem and devoted much of his work to exploring the contours of the neighborhood. His training in art began when he was one of only two black students chosen to attend Textile High School in lower Manhattan, where he learned design. Upon graduating in 1938, DeCarava received a scholarship to study art at The Cooper Union. Cooper's art school proved to be an uncomfortable place to study, however. "I was the only black student there," he later recalled, "and there was nothing overt, no cross burnings or anything like that, but there was just a very chilly atmosphere."⁶ While DeCarava quickly forged a friendship with white leftist painter

⁶ *Conversations With Roy DeCarava*, video, directed by Carroll Parrott Blue (New York: First Run Features, 1984).

Robert Gwathmey, who was teaching at The Cooper Union at the time, he nevertheless experienced hostility from most of the rest of the faculty, causing him to leave the school.

Feeling rejected by the downtown art world, DeCarava instead sought art training closer to home. He enrolled in painting classes at the FAP-sponsored Harlem Community Art Center, an institution that was a marked contrast from Cooper Union. DeCarava later remarked on the difference:

It was so open, you know. It was like a workshop situation in which there was not much distinction between the teachers and the students. There was this give and take that was so warm and a fully integrated faculty. To me, it was a watershed in terms of really meeting the black artistic community, and it was wonderful for the two years that I attended.⁷

His connections at the Art Center helped him to secure a position making posters for the FAP while he developed his skills as a painter. While his early paintings no longer exist, his work clearly followed the rest of the Harlem art community in addressing racial themes; DeCarava recalled exploring themes such as Harriet Tubman, and slaves bound by rope.⁸ After the demise of the Harlem Community Art Center, DeCarava continued his education at the George Washington Carver School in 1944 and 1945, following many of his previous teachers and colleagues. There, he developed an especially deep attachment to Charles White, and remembered being impressed by White's identification with "the mass of people who are disenfranchised and miserable" in his art.⁹ White and others at the Harlem Community Art Center and the Carver School thus trained DeCarava in the tenets of social realism, instilling in the young artist a deep respect for art that proclaimed the dignity and declared the rights of the African American masses.

⁷ Roy DeCarava interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, March 27, 1988, published in *Artist and Influence* 8 (1989), 29.

⁸ Peter Galassi, ed. *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 16.

⁹ DeCarava quoted in Galassi, p. 15.

During his tenure at the Carver School, DeCarava abandoned painting and took up serigraphy (or silkscreen printing), and a handful of these prints survive. The prints that remain attest to DeCarava's early commitment to addressing the politics of race and class in his art. "Landlord's Philosophy," for example, uses very little subtlety in disparaging the poor housing conditions available to African Americans in Harlem. The viewer stands looking up at a towering Harlem tenement adorned with an enormous sign advertising that the building is "Now Renting to Select Colored Tenants – References Required," while labels on each floor denote the meager number of rooms, ranging from one to one and three-quarters, that make up each apartment. As this signage makes clear, even those "select colored tenants" who pass the screening of racist landlords are confined to tiny spaces. By offering the viewer a worm's eye view of the tenement, DeCarava further conveys the daunting experience of attempting to secure adequate housing for black residents of Harlem. Another DeCarava silkscreen from this period, "Pickets," pays homage to African American political activism, showing two nondescript black men bundled up in trenchcoats, one with a blank white sign around his neck. Clearly, it is not important what these men are protesting – DeCarava is only interested in the act of picketing itself, suggesting his support for mass action on the part of African Americans and the working class. Both of these prints, created sometime in the mid-1940s, demonstrate that DeCarava was deeply influenced by the philosophies of social realism.¹⁰

DeCarava's switch to the photographic medium stemmed from his work in serigraphy; the artist took up a camera to do studies and generate ideas for prints, and

¹⁰ Both prints can be found in the Langston Hughes Papers, Beineke Library, Yale University (hereafter LHP). While they are undated, we can assume they date from the mid-1940s, the period when DeCarava worked in serigraphy.

eventually abandoned printmaking altogether by the end of the 1940s. Working as a commercial illustrator by day, DeCarava dedicated his evenings and weekends to creating photographs of life in Harlem. While his day job paid the bills, he considered these photographs his art and sought to achieve success as a fine artist. He remained deeply enmeshed in the Harlem art community and participated in the cultural activism that characterized this period, serving as President of the Art Chapter of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (CNA), for example. In 1950, DeCarava found his break: mounted in an exhibition at a small, unknown gallery on West 44th Street owned by the painter Mark Perper, his work caught the attention of the photographer Homer Page, who was a protégé of Edward Steichen, the famous photographer who was then serving as Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Page brought DeCarava's work to the attention of Steichen, who subsequently purchased three of DeCarava's photographs for the museum's collections and began to include his work in MoMA photography exhibitions. Under the wing of one of the most influential figures in the world of fine art photography, DeCarava's profile rose tremendously.

DeCarava's entrée into the world of fine art photography came at a moment of tremendous change, as artists began to abandon the straightforward politics of documentary photography, instead producing images that they felt expressed some aspect of their interior world. Art historian Gretchen Garner has characterized this shift as a move away from "spontaneous witness," or the philosophy that the photographer should capture and thus comment on a clear social reality in the external world, toward an

emphasis on personal expression.¹¹ Fine art photographers such as Robert Frank, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, and particularly Minor White through his editorship of the influential photography journal *Aperture* increasingly rejected documentary modes and aligned photography with abstract expressionist painting. While gaining a modicum of acceptance in the mainstream art world through Steichen's sponsorship, DeCarava remained a somewhat marginal figure in that world. He later mused that in taking DeCarava under his wing, Steichen was assuaging his guilt at having had an African American caretaker as a child, for example, suggesting that DeCarava felt he was a token black photographer for Steichen.¹² Nevertheless, DeCarava was deeply influenced by the larger changes in aesthetic philosophy that characterized fine art photography in the early 1950s. Indeed, he seized on circulating ideas about infusing the photographic image with subjective experience to develop a unique style that maintained a commitment to the social usefulness of visual art at the same time that it abandoned the distanced didacticism that he and other photographers associated with documentary photography.

The shift in DeCarava's political and aesthetic philosophies from his earlier social realist days is particularly evident in his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he won in 1952 with the assistance of Steichen. DeCarava was the first African American photographer to win the award. In his proposal, he wrote that:

I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc.... I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people. Not the famous and the well known, but the unknown and the unnamed, thus

¹¹ Gretchen Garner, *Disappearing Witness: Change in Twentieth-Century American Photography* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); see also Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America*, on this shift.

¹² Roy DeCarava, interview with Camille Billops, *Artist and Influence*.

revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings.... I do not want a documentary or sociological statement, I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret. I want to heighten the awareness of my people and bring to our consciousness a greater knowledge of our heritage.¹³

The statement presents an interesting mix of social realist ideals and denial of those ideals; while on the one hand he strives to depict the experiences of the “unknown and unnamed,” he nevertheless insists that his project will not be a “documentary or sociological statement” but will rather be a “creative expression.” Pitching his proposal toward a foundation that played a central role in the mainstream art world, DeCarava assured his readers that despite his focus on everyday people, his work would not serve a didactic or political purpose, as terms like “documentary” and “sociological” denote. More than a strategy for securing funding, however, DeCarava’s rejection of a documentary approach suggested a deep distrust for the impersonal political righteousness he associated with that artistic style.¹⁴ Yet DeCarava’s statement is hardly apolitical, as he asserts his wish to “heighten the awareness” of African Americans. It reveals the degree to which DeCarava was engaged in forging a new form of visual politics, one heavily reliant on the expression of subjective experience.

Indeed, in the first half of the 1950s DeCarava proved uniquely capable of melding the emphasis in fine art photography on the expression of individual emotion with his continued interest in documenting the social and political world of African Americans. In DeCarava’s eyes, it was the camera that made this possible; as he later commented when remembering why he took up the medium, as a photographer “you

¹³ Quoted in Galassi, p. 19.

¹⁴ DeCarava had a distaste for the term “documentary” throughout most of his career as a photographer; see Galassi, p. 27.

have to deal with *people*, you have to deal with *things*, and you have to *be* wherever it is that you're photographing." This he contrasted to painting, which he saw as a withdrawal from the social world; in photography "you don't withdraw, you go *into*."¹⁵ Given a year on the Guggenheim to explore his art full time, DeCarava developed an aesthetic style that made use of the medium's inherent socialness to create images that were both creative expressions and subtle social and political statements. In the apt words of Sara Blair, "drawing on realism and expressionism, referentiality and abstraction, formalism and vernacular codes, DeCarava amalgamated and transformed them, and in the process expanded the possibilities for the camera as an instrument of cultural response."¹⁶

The photographs DeCarava took in Harlem during his Guggenheim year demonstrate this hybrid aesthetic. While previous photographic projects that documented everyday life in Harlem, such as the Photo League's 1938 "Harlem Document," attempted to achieve a level of sociological distance in order to instruct viewers on the conditions in the neighborhood, DeCarava's work sought to show the lived experience of working-class African Americans from the perspective of an insider.¹⁷ True to his grant application, he captured a variety of scenes of Harlem life including people at work and play, street life, subways, parades, preachers, protesters, as well of scenes of typical family life taken in the homes of friends. In almost every image, he uses camera angles and compositional strategies that draw the viewer in and involve him or her

¹⁵ Roy DeCarava interview with Esther Rolick, ca. 1970-71, audiocassette in Esther Rolick Papers, Archives of American Art (hereafter AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 50.

¹⁷ On the Photo League and "Harlem Document," see Blair, *Harlem Crossroads*; Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America*; and Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*.

psychologically in Harlem life. Taken together, these photographs represent a complex and tender visual love letter DeCarava wrote to the neighborhood of his birth.

DeCarava's photographs dating from 1952 and 1953 stress in particular the psychological toll taken by hard labor and poverty on Harlem's working class. "Man Coming Up the Stairs," for example, sums up one man's exhaustion upon returning from work in a single step and tight-mouthed grimace. Other photographs offered a more metaphorical view into the psychological experience of poverty; "Hallway," for example, comments on housing conditions in Harlem in a manner very different from his earlier print. The artist later remembered this photograph as an especially important image for him, describing it as "autobiographical," and stating that it was "about a hallway I know I must have experienced as a child. Not just one hallway; it was all the hallways that I grew up in. They were poor, poor tenements, badly lit, narrow and confining; hallways that had something to do with the economics of building for poor people."¹⁸ Gray and dingy, the hallway in the photograph disappears in the distance as the narrow walls seem to close in on the viewer. The claustrophobia brought on by "Hallway" thus tells the story of tenement life and substandard housing much more abstractly and emotionally than his earlier "Landlord's Philosophy." Yet at the same time, DeCarava's photographs share with his earlier work a commitment to exposing economic hardship and racial inequality in housing, only using a different aesthetic strategy.

The most emotionally compelling photographs in DeCarava's Guggenheim collection, however, are those he took of the families of friends. Depicting everyday life inside of one of those tiny Harlem tenement apartments, DeCarava captured messy

¹⁸ DeCarava quoted in Sherry Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," in James Alinder, ed., *Roy DeCarava, Photographs* (Carmel, CA: The Friends of Photography, 1981), 14.

breakfasts, children at play, mirthful laughter, drinking and dancing, and warm embraces – all scenes that served to humanize the African American working-class family and place it within larger cultural expectations of a solid nuclear family that were so prevalent at the time. While the 1950s were marked by cultural emphasis on the “traditional” white nuclear family, postwar social science and popular culture alike characterized the African American family as uneven and unhealthy, led by overbearing “matriarchs” whose dominance produced sons who lacked sufficient masculinity.¹⁹ DeCarava’s family photographs offered a direct challenge to this trope, pointing instead to the warmth and stability of African American relationships and family life. “Shirley Embracing Sam,” for example, lets the viewer in on a private, loving moment between an African American husband and wife. Their gaze away from the camera tells us that they are not here to prove their affection; instead, we are allowed in as intimate friends to witness its private strength. Sam’s bulging arm and Shirley’s tight curls and delicate dress straps suggest that gender roles are in balance in their relationship. The image thus actively contradicts the notion of dominant matriarchs and absent, unmasculine fathers that set working-class African American families apart from the 1950s norm.

DeCarava’s Guggenheim photographs made a subtle yet powerful claim for African American social and political equality by inviting viewers into the interior of African Americans’ communities, homes, and personal lives. Two projects – *The Family of Man* exhibition at MoMA and a book of photography and fiction he produced with Langston Hughes entitled *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* – brought his work to a wide

¹⁹ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). On the postwar popular cultural emphasis on the white nuclear family, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

viewing public and made use of the mix of social commentary and artistic subjectivity that characterized his work to argue for African American social inclusion. In each case, DeCarava's photographs illuminated the lived experience of being black in America and extended an emotional appeal to viewers to recognize the common humanity shared by whites and blacks alike.

Assembled by Edward Steichen and mounted at MoMA in January of 1955, *The Family of Man* exhibition was a huge success, achieving tremendous popularity in New York and subsequently touring thirty-seven countries in eight years. Viewing the exhibition as an opportunity to protest the international antipathies that by 1955 were at a Cold War high, Steichen described the show as "a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world."²⁰ The exhibition included 503 photographs arranged in a manner not unlike the layout of *Life* magazine; by using the popular periodical's format exploded onto the walls of the museum, as well as a number of photographs from *Life*'s files, Steichen was able to provide viewers with a familiar visual experience and draw on the assumptions of truth-telling that most viewers brought to photojournalism. Steichen arranged the images in clusters that told the story of the human experience from childbirth to death and asked viewers to meditate on the parallels among human lives the world over. The exhibition then drew attention directly to Cold War politics, shuttling viewers into a dark room with an image of an atom bomb explosion lit from behind. *The Family of Man* was thus far from subtle in its attempt to convince attendees of the oneness of humankind and the dangers of Cold War cultural and political animosities.²¹

²⁰ Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 4.

²¹ The scholarship on *The Family of Man* is voluminous. See in particular, Allan Sekula, "Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring, 1981): 15-25; Eric Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Bezner,

The four DeCarava photographs Steichen chose for the exhibition presented a powerful commentary on the humanity of African Americans and asserted their inclusion in the wider vision of what constituted the American people. Each section of the exhibition included images taken in countries around the world; DeCarava's photos of African Americans represented the United States, suggesting that black faces and lives were as typically American as those of whites. Steichen placed "Man Coming Up the Stairs," for example, among a series of images showing a variety of male bodies engaged in physical labor, letting DeCarava's tired worker stand in for all American workers. Two of DeCarava's family photographs, including "Shirley Embracing Sam," joined a panoply of images depicting heterosexual love from around the world. A fourth DeCarava photograph, a dark composition of a young African American woman deeply moved while playing the cello, was included in the music section of the exhibition, suggesting a common human experience of cultural fulfillment. While critics may disparage the show's tendency to craft the image of the family of man around distinctly American cultural values, the fact that Steichen offered black Americans a seat at that family's table was relatively progressive for its time.

The larger political implications of the *Family of Man* were not lost in the African American community. The New York Urban League, for example, presented an award honoring Steichen "for making mankind proud of its humanity." Because it asserted racial and cultural equality, the organization's leaders declared, the exhibition "narrates the Urban League credo with an eloquence seldom before heard or seen."²² Urban League executive Lester Granger also promoted the book version of the exhibition upon

Photography and Politics in America; and Rob Kroes, *Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2007).

²² "'Family of Man' – A Photographic Tone Poem," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1955, p. 8.

its printing, lauding it as the “greatest value for a dollar – or five – since the Bible was printed for the masses.”²³ Clearly, the show inspired the Urban League to explore further the possibilities for photographic activism, as they invited Steichen to chair a project called “America’s Many Faces” in 1960 that solicited photographs showing “friendship and cooperation across the lines of race, religion, and national origin,” as well as “the difficulties, prejudice and open conflict which sometimes result from differences in background or origin.”²⁴ Roy DeCarava was on the jury to decide which images were worthy to be judged as finalists in the competition, while Gordon Parks served as a judge in the final round.²⁵

While the *The Family of Man* placed a handful of DeCarava’s intimate portraits of Harlem life before a wide viewership, he simultaneously sought an outlet through which he could distribute his body of work as a whole in order both to advance his career as an artist and pursue his goal of heightening the visual awareness of African Americans.²⁶ This opportunity came through his collaboration with poet Langston Hughes on *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, an almost pocket-sized collection of DeCarava’s photographs from the early 1950s coupled with a fictional narrative that Hughes crafted to connect them. Struck by the young photographer’s images, Hughes took the lead on securing a publisher for the book, convincing Simon and Schuster to take a chance on the project in 1955. The little book was a commercial and critical success, selling out of its initial

²³ Lester B. Granger, “Manhattan and Beyond,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 2, 1955, p. 18.

²⁴ “Seeks Photos Showing Multi-racial America,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 2, 1960, p. 8. See also “Steichen to Head NUL ‘Faces’ Search,” *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1960, p. A19; Jacob Deschin, “America’s Faces: Steichen Heads National Urban League Project,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1960.

²⁵ See National Urban League press release dated February 1, 1960, in Schomburg Clippings File, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The photographs appear never to have been exhibited, although a selection was printed in the *New York Times*, see “Scheduled Events,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1961.

²⁶ *The Family of Man* was decidedly against presenting photographs as individual works of art, and contributing photographers relinquished all control over their images upon submitting them to the show.

printing of 3,000 clothbound and 22,000 paperbound copies, and necessitating a second printing of 10,000 additional copies.²⁷

In ninety-eight pages, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* offered readers an intimate view of everyday life in Harlem while asserting both the dignity of African American working-class people and the hopes they held for the burgeoning civil rights movement in the mid-1950s.²⁸ Several elements set the book apart from previous documentary photo-books such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941); while these projects attempted to attach informational text to photographs in an overt political effort to instruct and persuade readers, in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* Hughes seamlessly integrated DeCarava's images into a fictional narrative that served as subtle social commentary.²⁹ Photographic historian Maren Stange has aptly characterized the book as "a conscious mock- and antidocumentary," arguing that it "subverts at every point the possibilities for the kinds of representations DeCarava disparaged as superficial, caricatured, or sociological."³⁰ Yet this very subversion of the conventions of the documentary photo-book allowed Hughes and DeCarava to offer an intimate psychological appeal to readers and argue for African American social and political inclusion.

The Sweet Flypaper of Life narrates and visualizes the observations of a fictional elderly black woman, Sister Mary Bradley, as she reflects on her life, her family, and her

²⁷ Galassi, *Roy DeCarava*, 22.

²⁸ Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).

²⁹ DeCarava reported having little to no involvement in the assembly of the book or the writing of the narrative, suggesting that Hughes was largely responsible for the final product.

³⁰ Maren Stange, "Illusion Complete Within Itself: Roy DeCarava's Photography," in Townsend Ludington, ed., *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 294.

Harlem neighborhood. From the beginning, the text signals the early rumblings of the postwar civil rights movement; Sister Mary tells us in the opening pages that the “bicycle of the Lord bearing His messenger” has come to take her away, yet she refused, declaring that, “for one thing, I want to stay here and see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like.”³¹ Illustrating the same page is a close-up photograph of a young African American girl, her innocent, hopeful face resting on the edge of a table and her wide eyes making a direct appeal to the reader (her eyes also grace the cover of the book). The girl, we learn, is her granddaughter Ronnie Belle, and by implication the potential beneficiary of future integration. Sister Mary’s expression of hope for the United States post-*Brown v. Board*, coupled with the image of Ronnie Belle, thus frames the rest of the story and signals that the book will offer more than simply the personal musings of an old lady.

Hughes’s text draws the reader through a series of portraits of Sister Mary’s family members, presenting us with a variety of types that make up the diversity of the Harlem community. Mary’s grandson Rodney, who cannot seem to keep a job and prefers to gamble and fritter away his money in the juke joints and “king-kong basements,” in some ways serves as a cautionary tale for what can happen to young black men drawn to the dark side of Harlem life. Another grandson, Chickasaw, acts as Rodney’s foil; one photo shows a dapper “Chick” dutifully waiting for the bus to get to work, while another shows us his “girl,” who, Mary assures us, lives in a building with an elevator. Mary refuses to judge her favorite grandson Rodney, however, because life “ain’t always so sanitary as we might like it to be.”³² By pointing to the variety of

³¹ DeCarava and Hughes, *Sweet Flypaper*, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 39.

personalities within the black community and offering insight into the intricacies of their lives, the text and images work together to complicate one-dimensional images of African Americans prevalent in popular culture. Inviting readers into Sister Mary's life, they present a heartfelt appeal to white Americans to recognize the similarities between their own lives and subjective experiences and those of African Americans. At the same time, the book offered black readers a chance to see visual and textual justice done to the communities they inhabited.³³

The narrative of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* moves seamlessly between scenes of everyday life in Harlem – children playing in the streets, the work-weary riding the subway, men and women engaged in leisure activities – but the heart of the book lies in a section on the family of Mary's daughter Melinda and her husband, Jerry, with whom Mary now lives. Here Hughes paired the photographs DeCarava took of the families of friends during his Guggenheim year with powerful text that further reinforced the images' declaration of the wholeness and tenderness of the African American working-class family.³⁴ Sister Mary reflects on the warmth of this home, her discussion of the couple's love, their mutual parenting, and the community they build with friends punctuated by DeCarava's photographs of embracing couples, smiling children, and intimate dinner parties in a tenement flat. One series makes a point to emphasize the degree to which Jerry is a "family man": while the text assures us that Jerry is quick to attend to the baby when it awakens and he "laughs and loves that child to sleep," the photographs show us Jerry holding the infant close to his face, comfortable with her

³³ On uses of photography for imagining a community, see Louis Kaplan, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

³⁴ DeCarava and Hughes, *Sweet Flypaper*, 39-57.

perched on his lap, and happily comforting her on his shoulder while engaged in conversation. The story then shifts to a series of images of Melinda as a doting and gentle mother, tending to the baby, fixing the children's toys, feeding them supper, braiding their hair, and finally stealing an exhausted moment to read the newspaper at the end of the day. Hughes thus wove DeCarava's photographs into a portrait of a typical American nuclear family, a trope that held enormous cultural weight in the mid-1950s. By giving that family black faces and a working class identity, however, the book asserted the utter Americanness of Harlem's black residents. Indeed, as scholar Waldo Martin has observed, the book represents "a critical meditation on an African-American working-class vision of the postwar American Dream."³⁵

Leaving the confines of Melinda and Jerry's apartment, the narrative then returns the reader's attention to the larger environment of Harlem as Sister Mary comments on the lack of public space available to foster community life. Harlemites prove able to rise above these cramped conditions, however, congregating on stoops and in the streets, and engaging in political activism to fight for their rights as citizens. Numerous images of black protesters, picketers, corner soapbox speakers, and their audiences illustrate these comments, suggesting the pride and communal engagement of Harlem. Following the section on the home of Jerry and Melinda, this segment of *Sweet Flypaper* suggests that the larger family community is as strong as the nuclear family at the same time that it claims a right for individuals like Mary's daughter and her husband to demand their due. Hughes then masterfully draws the narrative toward a close by subtly asking readers what comes next, bringing our attention back to the question Mary initially raised about the

³⁵ Waldo Martin, *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics and Postwar America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 127.

possibilities inherent in desegregation. The narrator alludes to her hope while musing on Harlem's windows, arguing that rear windows "ain't much good for looking out. I never did like looking backwards nohow."³⁶ Mary then reminds us of Rodney, asking, "What do you reckon is out there in them streets for that boy?" In this one simple question, Hughes sums up the message of the book, appealing to the hearts of readers and asking them to make good on the promise of *Brown v. Board*. Hughes and DeCarava thus walked a political tightrope of sorts in the book, expressing their artistic autonomy while still conveying a political message, commenting on the social and political position of African Americans while avoiding any explicit didacticism.³⁷

Having left the selection and assembly of photographs to Hughes, DeCarava expressed some ambivalence about the final product. In a letter responding to fellow fine art photographer Minor White's comments on the book, DeCarava stressed the Guggenheim photographs' original purpose as "single photographs of Negro people in Harlem" and described the book's inclusion of text with his work as "a compromise with the economic and cultural realities of our time and place." While such sentiments assured the abstractionist White of DeCarava's bona fides as a fine art photographer, the letter nevertheless goes on to defend Hughes's text, claiming that "the story does not bind itself too tightly and mechanically around the pictures because the words are felt rather than thought, the heart rather than the mind.... It is the kind of writing which allowed the photographs to live and breathe." Because Hughes's writing took a similar aesthetic

³⁶DeCarava and Hughes, *Sweet Flypaper*, 85.

³⁷ In this way, the book was not unlike Langston Hughes's "Jesse B. Semple" stories, which he wrote concurrently with *Sweet Flypaper*; the stories commented on Harlem life and politics through his alter-ego, the working-class Semple, in a manner similar to the musings of Sister Mary Bradley. Hughes even suggested that he and DeCarava promote *Sweet Flypaper* by including photographs from the book with Hughes's "Semple" column in the *Chicago Defender*, indicating that Hughes also saw a connection between the book and his work on Semple; see Langston Hughes to Roy DeCarava, dated July 3, 1955, in LHP.

approach as DeCarava's photographs, DeCarava ultimately felt comfortable with its message. "Langston's writing," he assured White, "surpassed my wildest expectations."³⁸

Perhaps because it moved the genre of the photo-book beyond straightforward politics and appealed to a public that increasingly took a moral and psychological approach to race relations, the book was widely praised. "When it was first issued," DeCarava later recalled, "we received letters from all over the States, from white middle America, saying, 'This family you've photographed, this is my family; it's just like me.'"³⁹ The book was widely advertised and reviewed in the mainstream press; ads and reviews alike stressed the warmth and intimacy of the images and the text. One advertisement in the *New York Times* described *Sweet Flypaper* as "Good for the heart," and a "charming [Christmas] present for warmhearted people."⁴⁰ The *Times* reviewed the book no fewer than three times, lauding its smooth integration of pictures and text and stressing its "great emotional impact." The political valences of the book were not lost on reviewers, however; Gilbert Millstein argued, for example, that, "it is probably hortatory to say so, but the chances are it could accomplish a lot more about race relations than many pounds of committee reports."⁴¹

³⁸ Roy DeCarava to Minor [White], dated November 21, 1955, copy in LHP.

³⁹ Roy DeCarava interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, in *Artist and Influence*.

⁴⁰ "Good for the heart," display ad, *New York Times*, November 27, 1955. The ad appeared in other issues of the newspaper as well, including December 1, 1955.

⁴¹ Gilbert Millstein, "While Sister Mary Sticks Around," *New York Times*, November 27, 1955. See also "Pictures and Words," *New York Times*, December 18, 1955; and Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," December 23, 1955. For other reviews of the book in the mainstream press, see "The Warm Human Essence of Harlem," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 18, 1955; and a review in the *Nation* dated December 17, 1955; both of which can be found in the Schomburg Clippings File, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. For reviews in the art press, see M[inor] W[hite], "Reviews: The Sweet Flypaper of Life," *Image* 4, no. 9 (Dec., 1955): 71; and James Peck, "Book Reviews: The Sweet Flypaper of Life," *Aperture* 4, no. 1 (1956): 38.

Reviewers for the black press likewise recognized the political potential in the images presented in the book, even if they interpreted it differently. Beneath columns on integration and the Emmett Till case, the *New York Amsterdam News* editorial page applauded the book's focus on family life, opining that it refreshingly showed "some of the happier phases of life in our community," instead of the "fights and numbers playing and loud-talking and dirty ashcans" that characterized popular depictions of Harlem.⁴² As cultural critic bell hooks has written of photographs such as these,

the camera was the central instrument by which black folks could disprove representations of us created by white folks... More than any other image-making tool, it offered African Americans disempowered in white culture a way to empower ourselves through representation. For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place.⁴³

As *Amsterdam News* editors understood, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* provided Harlem residents with a multifaceted snapshot of themselves that fought against centuries of unidimensional, racist representations. In contrast, the reviewer for the *Pittsburgh Courier* offered a more directly political reading of the book, suggesting that Ronnie Belle's eyes staring out from the cover ask the reader, "What is back of the life in this great black slum that makes it so full of poverty and pain, depression and dirt?"⁴⁴ In either case, African American reviewers understood the degree to which *Sweet Flypaper* inserted itself into the conversation on the subject of racial inequality.

Following the success of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava continued to take photographs, although he never fully achieved his ambition of becoming a full-time fine art photographer. While continuing his work as a commercial illustrator by day,

⁴² "Happiness in Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 3, 1955.

⁴³ bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 48.

⁴⁴ Hugh H. Smythe, "Photo Light on Harlem," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1956.

DeCarava opened A Photographer's Gallery in Manhattan in 1955, one of the first galleries in the city devoted exclusively to photography; the gallery proved financially difficult to maintain, however, and closed two years later. DeCarava's reputation as a photographer grew strong enough by 1958 to allow him to quit his job and support himself for the next decade as a freelance photographer for magazines such as *Fortune*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *McCall's*, *Newsweek*, *Scientific American*, and *Time*. From 1968 to 1975, he took a position as a contract photographer for *Sports Illustrated*. DeCarava viewed the work he produced for these magazines as his bread and butter, rather than his art, and continued to pursue his art photography in his spare time. Faced with a choice between identifying as a photojournalist or an artist, he clearly chose the latter.

DeCarava's fine art photographs continued to walk the line between social commentary and emotional subjectivity throughout the 1960s, as he was increasingly drawn to capturing the civil rights movement with his camera. While a large number of photojournalistic images of the movement produced in this period offered straightforward documentation of black activism, DeCarava created images that at times delved deep into the emotional experience of those involved in protest, and at times commented abstractly on the violence they encountered. Taken in Brooklyn in 1963 at a protest organized by the Congress of Racial Equality calling for the hiring of black construction workers to build the Downstate Medical Center, "Force, Downstate" is a somewhat unrecognizable scene upon first glance. The frame zeroes in on a crowd at waist level and focuses our attention on a woman being forcibly removed from the demonstration; all we can see is her rear end and a pair of white hands holding her ankles aloft. DeCarava later recalled:

I wanted people to look at this picture as an abstraction, then to discover what it was.... No matter how abstract it is, it's still what it is and you really can't escape it. It could have been made very dramatic, very forceful with all the gory details, but I don't think that's necessary. There are areas in which force manifests itself in pervasive ways and in quiet ways. Force, violence isn't always spectacular and monumental and epic. Sometimes it is very quiet and insidious, almost imperceptible.⁴⁵

DeCarava thus offered a meditation on the violence and resistance faced by African American citizens claiming their rights by reducing it to an essence in this photograph.

As was the case for painters such as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, and even Norman Lewis, the rising civil rights movement of the late 50s and early 60s inspired DeCarava to revisit direct representations of political activism. Discussing "Five Men," for example, DeCarava claimed that "the motivation at that moment was my political understanding of the treatment of black people and their response to injustice."⁴⁶ The image captures the staggered heads of five African American men as they exited a New York City church after attending a service mourning the death of four young girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in September of 1963. Only two of the men's faces can be seen clearly; both men appear shell shocked, with wrinkled brows and beads of sweat on their foreheads. The complete darkness of the background, along with the composition, which places these men in a line emerging into the light, conveys their solidarity in mourning the southern girls. Like so many of DeCarava's photographs, "Five Men" abandons a straightforward documentation of the scene in favor of bringing the viewer up close, deep into the hearts of his subjects.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Sherry Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," 18-19.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Galassi, *Roy DeCarava*, 31.

Indeed, throughout the 1950s and 60s, Roy DeCarava forged a unique artistic style that spoke the language of fine art expressionism while maintaining its commitment to a visual declaration of African Americans' right to social and political inclusion. His art drew on the psychological focus of Cold War racial liberalism, appealing to the hearts of viewers to recognize African Americans' dignity and fellow humanity. Yet DeCarava also never fully abandoned his commitment to illuminating the larger social and economic forces at the root of racial inequality, as photographs such as "Hallway" demonstrate. He thus drew on his early training as a social realist, maintaining his understanding of art as a powerful political tool, yet transforming that tool in ways that were informed by the political and aesthetic currents of the Cold War.

While Roy DeCarava channeled the philosophies of social realism into his work as a fine art photographer, melding the idea of art as a weapon with an emphasis on individual subjectivity, Gordon Parks took a different path in his photographic career, crafting an identity for himself as the objective truth-teller. Interestingly, both men earned a living as photojournalists; for Parks, however, the images he created for popular magazines were both his art and his political platform. As Cold War politics excluded documentary photography from the realm of fine art in the 1950s and 60s, Parks followed his deeply felt commitment to conveying a social message in his work into the world of photojournalism, forging a tremendously successful career as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine. Despite the clear differences that emerged in the two artists' sense of

themselves and their purpose as photographers, Parks and DeCarava nevertheless both built on their social realist foundations to convey to a wider public the lived experience of being black in America.

Because Parks published a number of autobiographies in his later years, the details of his early life are well known.⁴⁷ Born in 1912 in Fort Scott, Kansas, into a loving but poor family, Parks moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, as a boy to live with an older sister after the death of his mother. The numerous accounts he wrote of his young life detail the poverty, violence, and racism he faced in this period, as he took on a variety of jobs that ranged from working as a bus boy at a posh St. Paul supper club and playing piano at a brothel. Marrying young, in the late 1930s Parks settled into a position as a waiter on the North Coast Limited, the train that traveled from St. Paul through Chicago to Seattle. Working as a waiter afforded him some down time on the train, in which he would peruse the popular picture magazines, such as *Life* and *Vogue*, that passengers left behind. These magazines turned the young Parks on to photography, which he picked up as a hobby after purchasing his first camera at a shop in Seattle. Hooked, Parks increasingly devoted his free time to taking photographs.

While Parks's earliest success as a photographer came in photographing portraits as well as women's fashions for Frank Murphy's store in St. Paul, he quickly turned his camera to documentary subjects by the end of the 1930s. This shift was largely influenced by his association with the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC),

⁴⁷ These include *A Choice of Weapons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); *To Smile in Autumn* (New York: Norton, 1979); *Voices in the Mirror* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and *A Hungry Heart* (New York: Atria Books, 2005). In addition, Parks wrote a novel that was based on his own childhood, *The Learning Tree* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). Parks carefully crafted his image through these autobiographies and memoirs; these sources therefore need to be approached with a grain of salt. They do, however, offer ample evidence that Parks's early career was deeply embedded in the social realist/documentary art world of the late 30s and early 40s.

which he frequently visited during stopovers in Chicago. Parks later remembered how much he had gained there from black and white artists alike, recalling how he learned from

the graphic protests of Charles White, Ben Shahn, Isaac Soyer; the grim paintings of the jobless and oppressed by Max Weber and Alexander Brook; the merciless satires of William Gropper and Jack Levine. Their works, on exhibit there, had forsaken the pink ladies of Manet and Renoir, the bluish-green landscapes of Monet, hanging at the Art Institute several miles to the north on Michigan Avenue.⁴⁸

Caught up in the excitement of the politically committed creative environment he found at the SSCAC, Parks moved his family to Chicago in 1940 to join the center as staff photographer and pursue his art full time. Equipped with his own darkroom, Parks immediately felt at home at the SSCAC; “the entire place, a haven for striving painters, sculptors, dancers, writers and poets, was always alive with some sort of activity,” he later wrote.⁴⁹

The friendship Parks forged with Charles White at the SSCAC, more than any other factor, had a deep influence on the photographer’s aesthetic and political philosophies. In the eyes of Parks, White was “mild-appearing, bespectacled, and blessed with humor, but his powerful, black figures pointed at the kind of photography that I knew I should be doing.”⁵⁰ Inspired by White’s art, Parks began “photographing depressed black people and the shacks and brick tenements that entombed them” on the South Side.⁵¹

I knew, more than anything else, that I wanted to strike at the evil of poverty. Here it was, under my feet, all around and above me. I could

⁴⁸ Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 207-208.

⁵¹ Ibid., 213.

point my camera in every direction and record it. My own brush with it was reason enough, yet this landscape of ash piles, garbage heaps, tired tenements, and littered streets was worse than any I had seen.⁵²

Parks created images of the interiors of poor black people's homes, the storefront churches so prevalent on the South Side at this time, and a variety of other urban scenes. These photographs engaged in a dialogue with the work of social realist artists like White and others, joining them in protesting the devastating intersections of race and class that kept so many African Americans in poverty. As he later told an interviewer, his work tried to envision the South Side environment "in a social conscious way.... I, you know, thought I had the instinct toward championing the cause."⁵³

While his contact with social realist artistic practice at the SSCAC influenced him deeply, Parks received an even more extensive education in political art by working under Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which by 1940 had established itself as the very heart of documentary photography in the United States. Stryker took on Parks as the first African American photographer to work for the FSA, educating the eager young man in documentary aesthetics and challenging him to channel his anger into his art.⁵⁴ Wanting to give Parks a taste of segregation in Washington, Stryker sent him out to try to eat in an all-white restaurant and shop at a segregated department store; when Parks returned livid, Stryker suggested he work on figuring out ways to express racism in a visual image. "I was a Negro and Roy I think taught me to use that disadvantage in an intelligent way instead of striking back with violence any

⁵² Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 57-58.

⁵³ Gordon Parks interview with Richard Doud, December 30, 1964, AAA.

⁵⁴ Parks was not employed by the FSA directly, but rather had been awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship for that year.

longer, so I put it into the camera,” he recalled.⁵⁵ Among the many photographs that highlighted poverty and racial inequality that Parks took during his time at the FSA was a series depicting the family and work life of Ella Watson, a government charwoman; perhaps his most famous photograph, “American Gothic,” refers ironically to Grant Wood’s painting of the same name, stressing African Americans’ lack of access to the American dream by placing the glaring female janitor before the American flag holding a broom and mop. As Parks’s images of Watson and her family demonstrate, his time at the FSA reinforced his commitment to convey a political message in his work. These were lessons he carried with him throughout his career, as he later articulated by arguing that photographing “the inhumanity [black people] suffered” was “what I was doing there – the preparation for my future work.”⁵⁶

Working for the FSA opened a number of doors for Parks in the mid-1940s, catapulting him into a career as a successful photojournalist. Impressed with his abilities, Stryker hired Parks and other FSA photographers onto the staff of the Office of War Information (OWI) after the FSA was dismantled in 1942. After the war, Parks followed Stryker to Standard Oil of New Jersey, a company that sought to develop its own private archive of images of rural America in order to show the ubiquity of oil mining and usage. While doing freelance work for Standard Oil, he also made a name for himself as a fashion photographer, finding regular work and top pay at Conde Nast magazines such as

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Michael Torosian, *Harlem, Gordon Parks: The Artist’s Annotations on a City Revisited in Two Classic Photographic Essays* (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1997), 16. For more on Parks’s photographs of poverty and unemployment in Washington, D.C., during his tenure at the FSA, see Deborah Willis, “Gordon Parks and the Image of the Capital City,” in Deborah Willis and Jane Lusaka, eds., *Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 173-182.

Glamour and *Vogue*.⁵⁷ Parks later remembered experiencing some ambivalence about his fashion photography. While this work brought the photographer considerable financial success, allowing him to purchase an expensive house in Westchester County and outfit the home with two horses and a pool for his children, its departure from his documentary past left him feeling restless. “For me, fashions were fine,” he recalled, “but they were just a stopover. Documentary work was still foremost in my ambitions. By now I understood its significance as a weapon against poverty and racism.”⁵⁸ The opportunity to transcend poverty in his own life represented an enormous triumph for Parks, yet he strove to use this success to continue his political commitments. “Black people were on the move against racism,” he remembered. “I wanted to move with them. The right forum was uncertain, but neither the chic pages of *Vogue* nor the conservative offices of Standard Oil held the answer. A vast and restless audience was waiting. The problem was to move within range of its understanding.”⁵⁹

Early on, Parks understood that he could reach this audience through the pages of *Life* magazine. Created by Henry Luce in 1936 as a popular news magazine with an emphasis on photographic images, *Life* quickly became a fixture in middle-class American homes, reaching twenty-one percent of the entire population over the age of ten by the late 1940s – this translated to roughly 22.5 million people.⁶⁰ According to advertisers eager to market their products in *Life*’s pages, the magazine also had the

⁵⁷ He found work at these magazines when Stryker connected him to Edward Steichen, who then connected him to Alexander Lieberman at Conde Nast. This occurred after Parks had already been denied work at Harper’s *Bazaar* because the Hearst Corporation refused to hire African Americans, even for janitorial work; see Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 95.

⁵⁸ Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 99.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 111-112. While Parks wrote these words in 2005, with the benefit of hindsight on his long career as a photojournalist, the comment nevertheless provides some perspective on why he was restless as a fashion freelancer in this period and suggests continuity with his social realist and documentary training.

⁶⁰ Erika Doss, “Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America’s Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972,” in Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 3.

highest “pass along factor” of any periodical in the country, resulting in multiple readers for each individual issue.⁶¹ As a number of scholars have demonstrated, this high circulation, along with magazine’s persuasive photo-essay format, made *Life* a powerful force in American culture in the middle part of the twentieth century. Indeed, in this period “*Life* presented itself to its mainly middle-class readership as the visual theater of postwar national identity.”⁶²

Given the magazine’s largely white staff and white middle-class readership, it was hardly a vehicle for progressive messages on race relations when Parks was hired in 1948. As historian Wendy Kozol has shown, throughout its early decades, *Life* favored images of white, nuclear families in photo essays that made whiteness, “traditional” gender roles, and middle-class social status normative.⁶³ Images of African Americans that did appear in the magazine were often stereotypical and degrading, particularly those appearing before World War II. A 1938 photo essay devoted entirely to the subject of “NEGROES,” for example, declared that “The U.S. Also Has a Minority Problem” and suggested that the Negro would never be able to be assimilated into American (i.e., white) society.⁶⁴ Parks thus fought an uphill battle in his determination to use the pages of *Life* as a platform for positive representation of African Americans. As the first

⁶¹ James L. Baughman, “Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America’s Favorite Magazine, in Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine*, 42.

⁶² Doss, “Looking at *Life*,” 13. See also Wendy Kozol, *Life’s America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁶³ Kozol, *Life’s America*. For more on representation of African Americans in *Life* magazine, see Mary Alice Sentman, “Black and White: Disparity in Coverage by *Life* Magazine from 1937 to 1972,” *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (Autumn, 1983): 501-508; and Bill Gaskins, “The World According to *Life*: Racial Stereotyping and American Identity,” *Afterimage* 21 (Summer, 1993): 14-16.

⁶⁴ “NEGROES: The U.S. Also Has a Minority Problem,” *Life*, October 3, 1938. The article offers an interesting mix of viewpoints on race, placing these sorts of degrading stereotypes next to the history of slavery and portraits of high-achieving African Americans. The article received a positive response from black leaders such as George Schuyler and Duke Ellington, who described it as “one of the fairest and most comprehensive articles ever to appear in a national publication.” See their letters to the editors in the October 24, 1938, issue.

African American photojournalist to be employed by *Life*, Parks produced a rich body of work that ranged from fashion to presidential elections to poverty in Latin America. Among the most important work that Parks created for the magazine, however, were photo-essays that examined the realities of black life and offered a visual perspective on the developing civil rights movement. Covering topics ranging from gangs in Harlem to the Black Panthers, these essays carefully interpreted racial politics for an enormous, primarily white audience. To be sure, Parks's coverage of African Americans represented only a fraction of the work he did for *Life*, and he seems to have selected his topics carefully. Parks rarely photographed protests, for example, and seems to have been drawn more to covering the major personalities of the movement. Yet the photo-essays on black politics Parks created for the magazine had an arguably large impact, allowing the photographer an opportunity to launch a visual and, eventually, verbal appeal to white readers in a forum that entered into the homes of middle-class Americans every single week.

From his earliest days as a photographer for *Life*, Parks produced photo essays that both drew on the psychological approach to race relations that increasingly characterized postwar social scientific and popular cultural discourse, and at the same time complicated that approach. The first story he pitched to the magazine was a profile of gang violence in Harlem; while Parks later liked to suggest the idea came to him spontaneously, it in fact stemmed from a project he had worked on in the previous year with Ralph Ellison investigating psychiatric pathology in Harlem.⁶⁵ For the *Life* story, Parks managed to befriend Red Jackson, the leader of a Harlem gang called the Midtowners; gaining his trust, Parks shadowed Red and his friends for a number of

⁶⁵ Torosian, *Harlem, Gordon Parks*, 20.

weeks and documented their lives. Parks then brought the photographs back to the magazine, where he assisted a white writer in crafting the accompanying text.⁶⁶

Together, the photographs and text present a complex perspective on the lives of young black gang members in Harlem, highlighting the socioeconomic conditions that structured their lives at the same time that the article draws attention to the psychological damage experienced by the boys.⁶⁷

The opening spread of “Harlem Gang Leader” immediately set the tone for the article, visualizing for the reader both the inner turmoil of young Red Jackson and the oppressive urban conditions that produced it. Inset in the upper left hand corner is an image of a vigilant but contemplative Red peering out of a jagged, broken window pane, the delicate sunlight highlighting the concern on his face. The photograph is set within a larger bird’s-eye view of Harlem that encompasses both pages of the spread, making it appear as though the gang leader is looking out on the entire neighborhood. While the caption under Red’s image tells us he is “trapped by a rival gang” and “ponders his next move,” the composition suggests it is the ghetto that limits him, a message reinforced by text that draws the reader’s attention to the “crowded tenements and the cluttered dreary streets of Harlem.” Yet the eye is repeatedly drawn back to Red’s face, his vulnerability emphasized by a subtitle declaring that “Red Jackson’s life is one of fear, frustration and violence.” Appearing at a political moment in which anticommunism began to accumulate momentum, the article presents readers with an interesting mix of

⁶⁶ As was the case for the vast majority of *Life* photographers, Parks had very little control over how the magazine editors chose and assembled his images for the final product. Parks later recalled being very pleased with how the photo editor, Bernard Quint, put the piece together; “That’s why you wanted Bernie;” he declared, “you knew he was going to bring something to your story that no one else could.” See Torosian, *Harlem, Gordon Parks*, 28.

⁶⁷ “Harlem Gang Leader,” *Life*, November 1, 1948. For more on the trope of psychological “damage” in the politics of race, see Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

socioeconomic and psychological approaches to racial inequality. While explicitly blaming poverty and a lack of resources for the violence among gangs in Harlem, Parks's first article for *Life* also sought to humanize the boys for white readers in a concerted moral appeal.

The remainder of "Harlem Gang Leader" continues the project of presenting Red as a typical teenager with a big heart while nevertheless explaining his involvement in a gang as a result of his racial and social status. The article draws us through scenes of Red fighting with a fellow gang member in order to preserve his leadership position (this lets us know he's tough), followed by an image of the gang painting bicycles that they "ride all over Manhattan for fun" (but he's just a kid), as well as photographs of Red dancing with his girlfriend (he's like any other adolescent), and holding a ball of yarn for his mother as she knits (he's family oriented). Subsequent images juxtapose these rather domestic scenes with views of the violence of gang life, narrating episodes in which Red and a fellow Midtowner visit the coffin of a friend and are ambushed by a rival gang, as well as a dramatic image of a "night brawl" conducted for vengeance. While this section seeks to convey the gravity of gang violence, the final section of the article returns the reader's attention to the human Red, showing him dressed in a suit to serve as Harlem's "boy mayor" for a day and speak to the neighborhood's young people about ending the violence, an event the article exposes as a publicity stunt. The text suggests that Red desperately wants to transcend his current station by finding a job, but there are no jobs to be had for young black men in Harlem. If the text is not enough to convince a reader that young men like Red are trapped in lives of poverty and violence, Parks's final image says it all. The photograph shows Red in profile from behind, walking home alone after

having been used and ignored in his role as “boy mayor”; taken from a low angle with the city buildings around him fuzzily out of focus, the image reinforces the article’s final line, which claims that, “When all was said and done Red could count the people – white or colored – who were seriously and practically interested in his troubles, on the fingers of one hand.” “Harlem Gang Leader” thus ends as it began, pointing to Red as psychologically damaged as a result of larger socioeconomic circumstances.⁶⁸

Readers responded well to Parks’s first foray into photojournalism at *Life*, expressing appreciation in letters to the editor for both the psychological and sociological angles present in the story. Frank W. Carr of Waukesha, Wisconsin, thanked editors for producing “the best sociological study of your magazine’s career” and expressed special appreciation for the last line of the text, which stressed how few people truly care about the plight of young boys like Red. The article appears to have appealed to hearts of young readers, especially. One “fellow boy,” Thomas Robinson of Pittsburgh, understood the story as not just Red’s, but that of “boys all over the U.S.,” and declared his hope that readers across America would be inspired to “do something about it.” Twenty-year-old Shirley Cohen of New York City pledged to do just that, claiming that she planned to dedicate her energy “to help boys like Red Jackson and members of his gang become somebodies.” By summing up the problem of juvenile delinquency in Harlem in a manner that combined emotional appeal with a wider understanding of

⁶⁸ Maren Stange has taken a different view of this photo-essay, arguing that *Life* presented Red and his fellow gang members as “a social problem of some complexity, but not as complex human beings” and also that it portrayed them as “‘other,’ almost faceless, symbolic victims and social causes”; see Maren Stange, “Gordon Parks: A World of Possibility,” in *Bare Witness: Photographs by Gordon Parks* (Stanford, CA: Skira, 2006), 20-21. The article does offer a sense of Red as a complex individual, however, particularly in those images that emphasized his domestic life. Erika Doss also discusses this photo-essay in “Visualizing Black America: Gordon Parks at *Life*, 1948-1971,” in Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*.

systemic racism, the photo-essay clearly struck a chord with readers. The success of the essay earned Parks a permanent position with the magazine.⁶⁹

As Parks's career at *Life* developed, he continued to produce photo-essays that offered complex visions of race relations, particularly as he was assigned to cover the racial circumstances surrounding the burgeoning civil rights movement in the South. Parks's first photographic assignment for *Life* to deal directly with civil rights appeared in the fall of 1956 as part of a series the magazine produced on southern segregation. Developed as a response to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, *Life*'s editors hoped the series would "give useful perspective to the troubled events of today."⁷⁰ Spread out over five issues, the series took a moderate view of the issue of segregation, emphasizing the importance of slow and deliberate integration in the South. With text by writer Robert Wallace and a mixture of painted illustrations and photographs, the first two installments sought to provide historical perspective on the issue, presenting a relatively progressive account of slavery, the Civil War, and Jim Crow.⁷¹ In an effort at unbiased reporting, the third issue then turned to the "Voices of the White South," profiling the family life and racial views of five southern segregationist white men.⁷² "Thoughtful, pious gentlefolk," these men might use words like "nigger," but they "have long since ceased meaning any harm or insult by it," the text assures us. Humanizing these men by crafting portraits of their families, the article provides excuses for their

⁶⁹ Letters to the editor regarding "Harlem Gang Leader" appear in the November 22, 1948, issue of *Life*.

⁷⁰ See editor's introduction to the series in *Life*, September 3, 1956.

⁷¹ See *Life*, September 3, 1956, and September 10, 1956. The history these articles presented was "progressive" in the sense that it offered a view from the perspective of slaves themselves, and implicated both northern and southern whites in poor treatment of blacks during and after slavery. At the same time, the article uses photographs of contemporary Africans to illustrate discussion of the slave trade, suggesting little change in African culture, and ignores the role of black abolitionists and Reconstruction legislators. It is important to note, however, as one reader did (see letters to the editor in *Life*, October 1, 1956), that much of this was history that few Americans encountered in school.

⁷² See *Life*, September 17, 1956.

attitudes. This gave traction to southern resistance to integration, whether or not this was the magazine's original intent.⁷³

Life assigned Parks to work on the fourth installment of the series, which attempted to counter the viewpoint of southern white segregationists by profiling a black family in order to show the "restraints" of African American life in the South. Sent to Mobile, Alabama, to document the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton and their grown children and grandchildren, the Causeys and Tanners, Parks risked personal harm in order to create images that attempted to visualize racial oppression much like those he took of Ella Watson and her family had. He remembered being struck by the Causeys' isolation: "The smallest radio wasn't there to put them in touch with the Black voices who were rallying against the bigotry and poverty that had ensnared them," he wrote. "The Causeys were hopelessly trapped in a wilderness where Klansmen burned crosses, where fear and hunger were the way of life."⁷⁴ Attempting to expose these conditions on film, Parks narrowly escaped a group of local white citizens who got wind of his project and pursued him. The Causeys were not so lucky; having lost their home and possessions to an angry mob, the family relocated with the assistance of *Life* after the issue was published.⁷⁵

The photo-essay that resulted from Parks's foray into the heart of segregated Alabama wove the photographer's images together with text by Robert Wallace to produce an intimate portrait of the lived experience of southern blacks.⁷⁶ Not unlike Parks's portrait of Red Jackson, the article uses the Thorntons' extended family

⁷³ For a far more in-depth look at the politics of the entire series, see Wendy Kozol, "Gazing at Race in the Pages of *Life*: Picturing Segregation through Theory and History," in Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*.

⁷⁴ Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 173.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See *Life*, September 24, 1956.

metonymically; their stories stand in for the experiences of all African Americans in the South and symbolize a variety of aspects of southern segregation.⁷⁷ Typical of the *Life* photo-essay, this strategy allowed the magazine to appeal emotionally to a reader who might identify with the individuals depicted, while making real for readers how larger social structures inhibit their lives. The essay begins with a bold, full-page photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton, neatly dressed and sitting on their sofa underneath a composite photograph of the two of them as young people. The Thorntons stare directly at the viewer in a manner that echoes the look of Ella Watson in “American Gothic”; proud of the strength and longevity of their relationship despite the considerable odds they have faced, their straight-faced gaze directly implicates and challenges the white, middle-class reader. Immediately struck by this initial image, the reader then learns of the “Restrains: Open and Hidden” that have governed their lives and those of their family and views images of family solidarity despite poor, segregated conditions. Much like *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the essay thus draws on the powerful postwar trope of the family in order to place African Americans within the larger social structure.

While the portrait of the Thorntons stresses how little has changed in their long life, the essay moves to a look at the family of their daughter, Allie Lee Causey, who lives in a shack and teaches in the dilapidated Negro school while trying to help support five children. Allie’s husband, Willie, makes a living as a woodcutter, but is unable to expand his business due to pressure from local whites. Studded with photographs of Willie hard at work in the woods, Allie toiling over an iron pot of laundry, and a barren

⁷⁷ Wendy Kozol points out quite rightly that this emphasis on individual families had the effect of downplaying communal ties and group political power, see her “Gazing at Race in the Pages of *Life*.” At the same time, however, the strategy did serve to connect larger social forces with individual lives in order to make them real for readers.

classroom in the substandard school, this section of the article presents a vision of a hard-working family who simply cannot rise out of poverty due to unequal educational and economic opportunities. Lest the reader lose focus on the larger “restraints” that structure their lives, the article quotes Allie as declaring that “integration is the only way through which Negroes will receive justice. We cannot get it as a separate people. If we can get justice on jobs, and equal pay, then we’ll be able to afford better homes and good education.” The text and images in this section thus work together to convey the ways in which racist educational and economic practices and pressures affected these individuals’ lives.

While the segment on the Causeys emphasized “the frustration of a teacher’s family,” the next section examines the effects of segregation in housing and consumer culture on southern African Americans. The two-page spread profiles Virgie Lee Tanner, the Thorntons’ granddaughter, and her family, who are forced to live in a home with peeling walls and no plumbing despite Henry Tanner’s \$80 per week salary as a mechanic at Brookley Air Force Base. Two of Parks’s most powerful images in the series appear in this section, highlighting how the family – and in particular the children – remain excluded from full participation in public life and consumer culture. In one photograph, young Ondria Tanner gazes longingly with her grandmother at a display of gingham dresses on white mannequins in a shop window, her hands raised and touching the glass as if desperate to have a piece of this world of fashion that shuts her out due to her race and class position. In another, six black children stand hemmed in by a chainlink fence that separates them from the well-equipped segregated white playground, which is complete with a miniature ferris wheel. Placing the viewer directly behind the children in

both of these images, the viewer is invited to share their gaze and experience the psychological experience of such exclusion. The text further emphasizes the heart-wrenching effects of segregation on African American children, explaining to the reader that “the children do not grasp the logic of [“separate but equal”] and view the white playground as a special, wonderful place from which they are being deliberately excluded.” The article thus referred to *Brown v. Board*, which was decided on the idea that segregation was psychologically damaging to black children. Indeed, Parks’s photographs directly illustrate this philosophy in no uncertain terms.⁷⁸ The photo-essay then ended with a profile of Professor E.J. Thornton, a son who achieved success as a college professor at an all-black university, but who nevertheless remains disconnected to whites in his field and is forced to wait in the Colored section of the bus station. Thornton’s experience brings the story to a close by portraying the segregation that southern blacks faced regardless of their success.

While Parks and Wallace’s photo-essay on the Thornton clan offered a powerful indictment of segregation by combining a psychological appeal with an implication of the larger social and economic forces at work restraining their lives, its ultimate effect within the larger series remains difficult to gauge. The article was sandwiched between the previous week’s installment that legitimized the attitudes of segregationist southern whites and the final piece in the series, which gathered together a roundtable of southern white ministers and asked them to discuss segregation as a moral issue; this article ultimately drew attention away from the African Americans who were actually involved in the movement and posed the issue as one requiring white moral leadership. Some

⁷⁸ For more on imagery of segregation, see Elizabeth Abel, “Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow’s Racial Symbolic,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (Spring, 1999): 435-481.

readers found in the series further justification for their racist views; George W. Clark of North Kansas City, Missouri, for example, informed the magazine that “your articles regarding the integration mess...have been a splendid work of propaganda. I am now a confirmed segregationist.” Others expressed admiration for Parks’s installment; John Ponciano of Limestone, Maine, called it “your finest attempt – and greatest achievement,” while teacher Isaac Clarke of Chicago reported using the series in his all-black classroom for educational purposes.⁷⁹ Tackling a controversial issue, Parks’s images garnered a mixed response. Yet if anything, they required readers to take a moment to consider the experiences of black southerners as they grappled with the social and economic realities of segregation.

While Parks’s profile of the extended Thornton family issued a subtle challenge to systemic racism in the South, his work for *Life* became more direct as civil rights activists grew increasingly militant in the 1960s. Following the early phase of the movement, the Thornton piece had stressed dismantling legal segregation in order to open up opportunity to African Americans, yet by the early 60s, many African Americans came to realize that removing legal restraints did little to bring true racial equality. As Parks’s fame as a photojournalist grew in this period, *Life* began to allow him to write text to accompany his photographs, particularly for stories related to civil rights activism and black politics. He later remembered a shift in his work for the magazine during this period, noting that “the nature of my work at *Life* would change drastically during the early 1960s.... For years I had waited for the moment when I could use my camera, heart, and eyes for what they had been trained for.”⁸⁰ Assigned to stories that relied on his identity as an African

⁷⁹ Letters to the editor in *Life*, October 15, 1956.

⁸⁰ Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 127.

American to gain “insider” status, Parks ultimately created a set of photo-essays for *Life* in which he served as both the eye and the voice of black America, making visible the rising challenge to white privilege that characterized this phase of the movement.⁸¹

In many ways, Parks felt deeply his marginal status as both an insider and an outsider in African American communities. As he covered the rise of black nationalism and Black Power for the magazine, he sensed the degree to which such groups saw him as a traitor. “The Muslims and the Panthers regarded the magazine as an enemy,” he wrote, “and I was working inside the enemy’s camp.” When faced with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad’s hostility, Parks told him that “it’s like spying inside enemy territory.” While Parks’s rejoinder was clearly strategic, the conversation affected him deeply: “Elijah Muhammad’s angry words held a special meaning. Without subtlety they were reminding me of the great distance between life in Black ghettos, and life in Henry Luce’s privileged empire. In one I had nearly become a stranger. In the other I was a social oddity.”⁸² Parks thus forged a career straddling this boundary between worlds, serving as an outlet for groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers in their concerted efforts to spread their image widely. Despite their hostility to his position within mainstream culture, they welcomed the opportunity to channel their message through Parks in the pages of *Life*.⁸³

⁸¹ James Hall describes this disillusionment within 1960s African American culture as a form of “antimodernism”; see his *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸² Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 214-216.

⁸³ For more on civil rights groups’ active public relations efforts, see Leigh Renee Raiford, “‘Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare’: History, Memory, and the Photography of Twentieth Century African American Social Movements,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2003; Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).

Parks's coverage of black militancy in the 1960s offered a complex picture that both made a spectacle of black anger and threats of violent resistance and provided an intimate view of militant groups that humanized them and gave credence to their demands. An article on the Black Muslims, for example, began with shots of well-dressed Black Muslim men with their fists raised high in a self-defense class at the mosque, emphasizing the group's militant stance. Yet this spread was followed by photographs that emphasized the strong family values and religious reverence that characterized the sect, demonstrating for white, middle-class readers the degree to which the Nation of Islam conformed to dominant gender norms. Carefully placed after the grouping of self-defense images, these photographs serve to reduce the threat of Black Muslim militance by showing that these men were, in fact, defending their right to a disciplined nuclear family and a peaceful life of piety.

Lending further legitimacy to the Nation of Islam's political program is an account written by Parks himself on "'What Their Cry Means to Me': A Negro's Own Evaluation." Here Parks narrates his encounter with Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad and considered the reasons why the Nation of Islam's nationalist message was so appealing to African Americans. He mentions educational segregation and economic inequality in the North and South as the legitimate cause of their anger and lauds them for giving voice to the impatience of "Negro slum dwellers and suburbanites alike." Parks ends by expressing his faith that the day will come when prejudice will be destroyed, and assures his readership that "nobody can speed this day any quicker than the White American."⁸⁴ The piece thus echoed postwar liberal racial discourse in his suggestion that the solution was a shift in white attitudes. Yet his words and images also gave

⁸⁴ *Life*, May 31, 1963.

credence to the Nation of Islam's demands that whites relinquish their privilege in American society.

Another photo-essay, which appeared in the magazine three months later as a promotion for the photographer's coming novel, *The Learning Tree*, continued Parks's efforts to use the pages of *Life* as a medium through which to explain the African American experience to a white readership. The title of the essay described Parks as a "talented Negro" who "tells in fiction, fact and photograph How It Feels To Be Black."⁸⁵ The first section of the article combines passages from the novel with dreamy color photographs that Parks took on a return trip to Kansas to illustrate the scenes drawn from his childhood. While this portion of the article points to the artfulness and emotional power of Parks's novel, a following section entitled "The Long Search for Pride" draws connections between the semi-fictional struggles against racial oppression in the book and the burgeoning civil rights movement in "real life." Here *Life* pairs images Parks took at a street corner rally in Harlem with another personal account written by Parks that interpreted black activism. As if to convey their truthfulness, these photographs appear in black and white. In the largest image, Parks captures an elderly woman in the midst of an impassioned soapbox speech, her eyes closed and mouth open as though her political passions explode out of her. Along the left-hand side of the spread are positioned close-up photographs of the faces of three separate members of the crowd that gathers around her, their faces set in serious determination. One woman stares almost directly at the camera with a challenging glare, her hands raised almost as though she is ready to box. The text narrates Parks's encounter with this rally, declaring that he left it "moved by the black temper of our times," and exhilarated "that history had caught up with us." In this

⁸⁵ *Life*, August 16, 1963.

way, the article connects the prevalence of contemporary black activism with the hardships of Parks's early life as told through his novel.

As a direct celebration of civil rights activism, Parks's piece challenges white readers to consider and accept the movement, while illuminating the reasons why African American citizens were rising up to claim their rights. In his essay, Parks returns to the effects of segregation, racial violence, and prejudice on his own psyche as a young boy. He then turns to a further explanation of "how it feels to be black" in 1963: "All our lives we have cloaked our feelings, bided our time, waited for the year, the month, the day and the hour when we could do without fear, at last, what we are doing just now – looking our white oppressors squarely in the eye and telling them exactly what we think, what we want, what we intend to get. And all this without fear." Published on the eve of the March on Washington, the photo-essay was a clear attempt at moral suasion of white readers, as it visualized and narrated the psychological experience of racism. Yet, much like his profile of the Nation of Islam, it also created space within the national media for African Americans to make demands for true equality.

Parks's profile of Stokely Carmichael, published in *Life* not long after the SNCC leader issued his call for "Black Power," offered an even more sympathetic view of African American militancy than his piece on the Nation of Islam had.⁸⁶ Parks followed Carmichael for four months and got to know him well. Just as he did with Red Jackson, Parks humanizes Carmichael in the article by situating him within his family and showing him being served salad by his mother at his sister's wedding reception. The piece also displays him as a conscientious and skillful political organizer, however, as Parks expresses his admiration in the text for the young man's ability to reach out to and

⁸⁶ Gordon Parks, "Whip of Black Power," *Life*, May 19, 1967.

speak the language of a wide range of African Americans, from rural Alabamians to northern urban hipsters to elite intellectuals. Parks's piece thus legitimizes Carmichael as a civil rights leader, offering him a chance not only to set the record straight on the real meaning of "Black Power" but also to promote his image as the future of the movement.

As the civil rights movement grew increasingly characterized by black nationalism and urban uprisings through the course of the 1960s, Parks responded by embarking on another project in which he documented the lives of an African American family in order to expose their experience to white readers. Parks recalled being asked by a number of *Life* staffers, including managing editor Philip Kunhardt, why so many black neighborhoods were rioting across the country; he responded to Kunhardt, "I can live with a black family in Harlem for a month and show you why."⁸⁷ Published in March of 1968, the photo-essay that resulted from this experiment, more than any other piece Parks produced for *Life*, worked to give readers direct access into the damaged psychology of poor African Americans.⁸⁸ Appearing as part of a "special section on race and poverty" that included four additional articles, Parks's essay on the Fontenelle family echoed his treatment of Red Jackson two decades earlier; the greatest difference, however, is that Parks's portrait of the Fontenelles included a far more direct emotional appeal.

The impact of Parks's essay begins with the issue's cover, which shows a striking close-up of five-year-old Ellen Fontenelle's face. Her eyes clenched shut and her mouth open in a cry of agony, the young girl's despair is captured in a single tear just emerging from her dark eyelashes. The dark background and the soft light on her face further draws attention to her pain. While viewers can identify with the child as an individual,

⁸⁷ Torosian, *Harlem, Gordon Parks*, 34.

⁸⁸ *Life*, March 8, 1968. Well entrenched at the magazine by this time, Parks had more autonomy in developing this essay than he had with previous ones; see Torosian, *Harlem, Gordon Parks*, 44.

the caption helps us to understand that she is meant to stand in for “the Negro” in “the Cities”; this cry is not only her cry but that of young black children across America, and it is a “Cry That Will Be Heard.” From the reader’s first encounter with the magazine, then, Parks appeals to his or her emotions in his attempt to “show what [poverty] was like, the real, vivid horror of it.”⁸⁹ The photo-essay itself continues this appeal, beginning with a close-up of Norman Fontenelle’s face staring directly at the reader with a weary, pained expression and the title: “What I want, What I am, What you force me to be, is what you are.” This is followed by text Parks wrote in Norman’s voice, pleading with readers to “try to understand my struggle against your racism.” Norman is, in some ways, Red Jackson grown up, and yet Parks’s aesthetic and textual treatment of the beginning of this essay addresses the reader directly and virtually ignores the socioeconomic realities that create poverty. While Red Jackson looks out over Harlem, Norman Fontenelle looks directly into the reader’s heart.

The remainder of the photo-essay draws the reader further into the lived experience of the family, again emphasizing the despair and domestic violence that characterizes their lives. Here Parks gestures to the larger systemic forces that keep the Fontenelles poor, describing poor housing conditions and discussing Norman’s difficulties in finding work. One image shows Bessie Fontenelle visiting the welfare office only to receive little assistance; the image conveys her hopelessness as we view her and four of her children from behind the social worker’s desk. The images in the rest of the essay follow suit, offering numerous close-ups of sad faces and damaged bodies. Once again volunteering for the job of explaining the inner lives and motivations of his people in the magazine, Parks clearly placed great faith in the power of his words and

⁸⁹ Gordon Parks on the intent behind his story, quoted on the table of contents page of the same issue.

images to sway the emotions of white readers. At the same time, the piece sought to counter the hostility many whites felt towards African American urban unrest and the dominant tendency to blame the poor for their own poverty. By drawing attention to the futility of the Fontenelle's efforts to transcend their condition, Parks refocused the debate over ghetto rebellions on the economic conditions that produced them.

Readers responded to the story with great enthusiasm, sending "hundreds" of letters and offers to help the Fontenelle family. Nancy Carter of Jamestown, New York, was especially struck by the photographs, writing to the magazine that she hoped that "the incredible sensitivity of the photographs may rip into the innards of each American who has recently smiled from one of the 'quiet' cities and said, 'Well, we don't have a problem here.'" Virginia Winslow of Fort Thomas, Kentucky, inquired, "How many [readers] wept tears of frustration as I did? Where does one begin? How does one begin?" Reader responses were, of course, mixed, however; Mrs. F.W. Fessendorf of East Dundee, Illinois, chided Norman Fontenelle for spending money on alcohol instead of providing for his family, while the lesson Lester Meyers of Fort Wayne, Indiana, drew from the story was the need to "control indiscriminate breeding, first by persuasion and eventually by decree." Nevertheless, the balance of the letters pledged sympathy and support for the Fontenelles, asking what individuals can do to help them and others trapped in poverty. Interestingly, Parks's response encouraged white readers to change the way they treat African Americans on a daily basis, to pay attention to "the casual little *happenings* you create for me that continuously nourish my anger and dismay."⁹⁰ Such a suggestion returned the issue of racial inequality to a matter of prejudice and everyday

⁹⁰ Letters to the editor in *Life*, March 29, 1968.

interactions, rather than directly asking white readers to abandon their privilege and fight for economic justice for families like the Fontenelles.

Parks's final *Life* photo-essay on black politics, however, issued a direct challenge to white power through a profile of the Black Panthers.⁹¹ The piece continued the strategy of combining Parks's photographs with a personal account of his encounter with the Panthers, further emphasizing his role as the interpreter of black frustration for the white American public. Parks discusses traveling to Algiers to meet with Eldridge Cleaver, the exiled Minister of Information for the Panthers, highlighting the tensions he felt in this conversation between identifying with Cleaver's message and wanting to remain the neutral reporter. Cleaver invited Parks to join the Panthers, suggesting that "we need you more than the Establishment does," to which Parks responded that in working for the Panthers, he would "lose objectivity....I have things I want to report to as big an audience as possible." The photographer was ambivalent about the Panthers' politics, feeling an affinity for the group's goals but discomfort with their means. On his meeting with Cleaver, for example, he later wrote that "both of us were caught up in the truth of the black man's ordeal. Both of us were possessed by that truth which we defined through separate experiences. How we chose to act it out was the only difference....He was thirty-five at the time. I was fifty-seven. We had met over a deep chasm of time, the events of which forged different weapons for us."⁹²

This ambivalence comes through in the photo-essay, distinguishing it from Parks's previous work on African American life and politics. While the text attempts to humanize Cleaver and his fellow Panthers by describing their social programs in the

⁹¹ *Life*, February 6, 1970.

⁹² Gordon Parks, *To Smile In Autumn*, 211.

black community of San Francisco and emphasizing their ultimate wish for peace, justice, and “racial solidarity,” the majority of the photographs counteract this message by presenting threatening visions of defiant and violent black men. An image of Cleaver, for example, places the leader staring angrily at the viewer, seated directly under a picture of Black Panther founder Huey P. Newton that surrounds his proudly raised head in a revolutionary star like a halo. Perched next to Cleaver is his wife Kathleen, whose aggressive gaze at the camera, framed by her Afro hairstyle, echoes that of her husband. Much like this photograph, the final image of the photo-essay further pushes the viewer away rather than drawing him or her in to identify with the Panthers’ struggle. Here Parks places the viewer at a Black Panthers planning meeting; the five men’s menacingly angry gaze does not make us feel welcome at this table, however. The caption then transforms the men in the picture from victims of the viewer’s intrusion into threats to the viewer’s safety by emphasizing the fact that what they are planning is a social revolution, one that will consist of a “sweeping and violent...change.” Parks thus presented the defiant image of the Panthers that they themselves sought to project. While he assured Cleaver that his role was to remain “objective,” he nevertheless offered the Panthers an opportunity to issue a direct challenge to white dominance by placing their combative stance directly into white, middle-class living rooms across America.

Gordon Parks’s long tenure with *Life* magazine provided him with an opportunity to use his camera as a weapon – a metaphor he himself used throughout his career – in

the struggle for racial equality. Not unlike Roy DeCarava, he carried the lessons he learned from the left-oriented social realist art world of the 1930s and 40s with him, continuing to produce images that would visualize the black freedom struggle for a wide audience. Working as a photojournalist, Parks was able to realize the dream of reaching the masses with this art to a far greater degree than visual artists who attempted to circulate prints, for example, or even those who placed illustrations and cartoons in political magazines and pamphlets.

Yet as both the political and artistic climate shifted in the 1950s, both men developed new and distinct artist-activist identities that were more in keeping with the tenor of the times. DeCarava strove self-consciously to carve out a space for himself as a fine artist, developing a style that drew on the subjective individualism emphasized by fine art photographers at the same time that it offered subtle commentary on racial inequality. His commitment to modernist fine art was such that he would not have identified himself as an activist as such, yet the antiracist politics of his work is undeniable. The limited acceptance into the mainstream art world DeCarava experienced in this period depended on his maintaining a careful balance between politics and subjectivity in his work. For example, Edward Steichen rejected one of DeCarava's images, "Graduation," from *The Family of Man* exhibition because its political statement was "too strong" and "not in harmony with this bright, cheery, wonderful world of this family of man working, singing and dancing together," as DeCarava later explained it.⁹³ In this photograph, DeCarava juxtaposes the figure of an African American girl dressed formally in an all-white gown with the filth of the abandoned Harlem lot through which she walks. Apparently too aggressive in the attention it drew to the disjuncture between

⁹³ *Conversations with Roy DeCarava*, video.

young black people's aspirations and the realities of their lives, Steichen disparaged the image and thus delineated for DeCarava the acceptable limits of social commentary in his work.

Yet DeCarava's aesthetic choices also reflected his own dissatisfaction with the documentary style, as he increasingly rejected the distance from his subject that such an approach required. Much like the painter Norman Lewis, DeCarava grew impatient with direct political appeals, following instead a larger cultural trend toward introspection. Yet his work remained deeply social in its intent, challenging popular conceptions of the damaged black family and providing an alternative vision of civil rights activism that stressed emotion and abstract visions of oppression. Indeed, he made use of the shift toward the personal and the emotional in fine art photography to forge a unique and subtly powerful politics of resistance.

Reflecting on the place of African Americans in the world of photography in a 1988 interview, DeCarava took care to distinguish himself from Gordon Parks. He criticized his fellow photographer's immersion in the dominant white culture, imagining Parks's response as: "I'm going to join it – that's how I will overcome it. I will be as much like that as I can, and then maybe it won't be so bad."⁹⁴ DeCarava viewed this worldview as delusional, offering men like Parks false comfort despite their inability to fully escape racism and prejudice. Yet DeCarava failed to understand that Parks's photographs, while not pitched as fine art, undertook a similar project to his own work; both men sought in their own way to interpret black subjectivity for a wider audience in an effort to make the experience of living as an oppressed racial minority in America

⁹⁴ Ivor Miller, "'If It Hasn't Been One of Color': An Interview With Roy DeCarava," *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (Autumn, 1990), 856.

visible. Parks did so on the opposite side of the postwar photographic divide, however, making use of his position as an “objective” visual reporter to present racial oppression as visible truth.

If Parks and DeCarava emerged from the very same social and aesthetic circles as politically engaged artists such as Charles White, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Elizabeth Catlett, what was it about these men and their work that allowed them to weather the storm of the Cold War and even thrive in this period? Reflecting on the influence of the Communist Party on the South Side of Chicago in the late 30s and early 40s, Parks suggested his immunity to anticommunist persecution was a result of his own political independence:

The messages and doctrines handed down neither turned me toward socialism or away from it. I just sat there and listened. Nothing was ever said that I as a black man, living in a racist country, hadn't known all along. The reason I didn't join the party is simply because I'm not much of a joiner – of anything. That trait, perhaps more than anything, kept me off Joe McCarthy's list. I had fought so hard and so long by myself that I had grown comfortable with fighting alone.⁹⁵

Undoubtedly, the fact that Parks could not be traced to the Popular Front organizations that damned so many others kept him safe from anticommunism in the 1950s and 60s. Yet much of Parks and DeCarava's success in this period can be attributed to their ability to develop new and perhaps more subtle form of visual activism, one that made use of the assumed truth-telling capabilities of the medium of photography to illuminate a range of ideas about race and civil rights. Indeed, both DeCarava's art and Parks's photojournalism served as active mediators of the complex political ideas of the post-war period, envisioning for wide audiences African Americans' hopes for equality on the

⁹⁵ Parks, *To Smile In Autumn*, 34.

heels of *Brown v. Board*, participating in efforts to sway white American hearts away from racial prejudice, and giving voice and image to the demands of black nationalism and Black Power. Because of their placement within mainstream culture, the images DeCarava and Parks produced succeeded in spreading these ideas and raising them for public debate far more than the murals, cartoons, prints, and drawings of the previous two decades.

Indeed, the success of both Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks helped to effect a shift in focus among civil rights activists interested in making use of the visual image as a political tool. Scholars are only beginning to explore in depth the enormous role photojournalism played in the postwar civil rights movement, as activists became increasingly aware of the power of carefully placed news photographs to sway public opinion and garner support for the movement.⁹⁶ As historian Leigh Renee Raiford has demonstrated, photography offered activists “a democratic and versatile medium through which they could visually reference, reframe or reject dominant political categories and limitations.”⁹⁷ Both Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava were pathbreakers for African American photographers interested in documenting and participating in civil rights activism. Several young black civil rights photographers later recalled how struck they had been by *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* upon encountering it as children, many crediting the book for beginning them on the path of a photographic career. Roland Freeman, a

⁹⁶ See Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985); Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996); Leigh Renee Raiford, “Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare”; and Deborah Willis, “Visualizing the Political Struggle: Civil Rights-Era Photography,” in David Holloway and John Beck, eds., *American Visual Cultures* (London: Continuum, 2005). For accounts of individual photographers, see Michael S. Durham, *Powerful Days: The Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991); and Danny Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

⁹⁷ Leigh Renee Raiford, “Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare,” 17.

photographer who worked as a part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Poor People's Campaign in Mississippi, claimed that *Sweet Flypaper* "became like a bible to me."⁹⁸ Photographers Beuford Smith and Robert Sengstacke likewise cited the book as a major inspiration, as did writer and Black Arts Movement founder Larry Neal.⁹⁹ Demonstrating the power of the visual image as a tool in the black freedom struggle, Parks and DeCarava set the stage for a new generation of photographers determined to reach the American masses with their art.

⁹⁸ C. Gerald Fraser, "How the March on Washington Shaped a Man's Life," *New York Times*, April 18, 1981.

⁹⁹ A.D. Coleman, "He Records the Texture of Black Life," *New York Times*, July 2, 1972; Mel Tapley, "Photog Bob Sengstacke Lets Camera Do the Talking," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 25, 1986; Larry Neal, "To Harlem With Love," *New York Times*, October 5, 1969.

EPILOGUE

In 1970, Jacob Lawrence sat down with his friend and fellow artist Elton Fax to discuss Lawrence's life experiences for a book Fax was writing on seventeen black artists. Reflecting on the African American art world of 1930s Harlem, Lawrence recalled the ways in which his and Fax's generation of artists explored the politics of race in their work. "Young black people today talk as though the black experience is something new that they, alone, have discovered," he observed to Fax. "Actually, what is happening now is an extension of what was happening then."¹ In commenting on "what is happening now," Lawrence referred to the Black Arts Movement, a resurgence of overtly politicized black culture that emerged in the late 1960s and early 70s as the cultural arm of the Black Power movement. Alongside militant playwrights and poets such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, young African American visual artists in this period took inspiration from the black nationalist cry and worked to develop a distinct "black aesthetic" that would instill pride in the hearts of African Americans. Yet, as Lawrence suggested, the Black Arts Movement viewed itself as a relatively new invention, drawn from and improving upon the example of the Harlem Renaissance, as though the intervening decades were a dark age for black art. This historical amnesia has remained in the scholarly community, as well, as few have uncovered the fruitful exchange between the older generation of black artists, including Lawrence and Fax, and those coming of age in the late 1960s.

¹ Jacob Lawrence quoted in Elton C. Fax, *Seventeen Black Artists* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1971), 152.

Indeed, without fully recognizing it, the Black Arts Movement drew on a long history of cultural activism in African American political and artistic communities. Much like the social realists of the 1930s and 40s, Black Arts Movement artists sought to employ their work directly in service of civil rights goals. In several written declarations, Black Arts Movement theorist Larry Neal articulated the ways in which affiliated black artists hoped to make art useful in the community and reach the masses. In words that could have been penned by Charles White, Neal asserted that “the Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”² Much like the social realist artists active in the cultural front of the 1930s and 40s, participants in the Black Arts Movement worked specifically to “link, in a highly conscious manner, art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of Black people.”³ For both generations, culture could and should serve as a tool in bringing an end to racial inequality. As Neal so eloquently articulated it, “art alone will not liberate us... But a cultureless revolution is a bullcrap tip.”⁴

Yet important differences existed between the goals of the 1930s generation of artists and those of the Black Arts Movement, as well. Most prominent among these is the elder generation’s commitment to interracial activism around issues of class, which younger artists did not share. While the Black Power movement’s call for black nationalism could mean a variety of things to a variety of movement participants, in every case the emphasis was on forging a separate and self-reliant African American

² Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer, 1968): 29.

³ Larry Neal, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” *Ebony*, August, 1969, 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

community.⁵ A central aspect of the Black Power movement was the effort to achieve not only economic and political independence, but also psychological independence; liberating the minds of African Americans – teaching them to take pride in their blackness and African ancestry, encouraging them to divest themselves of the self-hating worldview white culture imposed upon them – was the first step towards revolution. Black Arts Movement artists therefore called for a “radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” and the development of “a separate [black] symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” in order to bring about “self-determination and nationhood.”⁶ For many, this psychological reorientation took the form of donning dashikis, wearing one’s hair natural, celebrating Kwanzaa, or advocating for Black Studies departments on college campuses. For artists, it meant developing a black aesthetic that could liberate the minds of black viewers. Black Arts Movement artists thus differed greatly from their elders in their ultimate goals; whereas African American artists who came of age during the Depression sought to unite with whites to create art that would reach and inspire the interracial working-class masses, the black political artists of the late 1960s and early 70s drew on the Cold War civil rights movement’s orientation toward psychology in seeking to transform the consciousness of the black masses alone.

Despite these philosophical differences, particularly intriguing is the fact that several African American artists coming out of the Popular Front were deeply involved both in the Black Arts Movement and the larger civil rights movement, acting as teachers, collaborators, and inspiration to young black nationalist visual artists in the late 60s and

⁵ For an excellent explication of the complexities of Black Power and the role of culture in the movement, see William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 29.

early 70s. Many of the elder artists themselves found inspiration in the ideas of the younger generation, participating actively in the effort to develop a “black aesthetic” and transforming their own work in service of the movement. Young artists of the Black Arts Movement may not have recognized that their work was, in Lawrence’s words, “an extension of what was happening then,” but among them walked individuals who had long participated in efforts to galvanize culture in service of the African American liberation struggle. Tracing the threads between these two generations therefore illuminates the degree to which this is a story of continuity over the middle part of the twentieth century.

One can find evidence of the early rumblings of the Black Arts Movement in the return visit of Elizabeth Catlett to the United States in 1961, for example. Reentering her native country after over a decade living in Mexico, Catlett gave an address at Howard University to the first gathering of the National Conference of Negro Artists, a group organized by Margaret Goss Burroughs. Catlett’s speech was nothing less than a call to arms, an admonition to her fellow black artists, old and young, to reapply themselves to the politics of racial equality. She reminded them of the history of politicized black art, speaking of the Harlem Renaissance and the WPA years as distinct moments in which visual artists directly served the black community. Chiding African American artists for attempting to divest themselves of their race and integrate into the apolitical mainstream art world, Catlett challenged them not to be “narrow”: “Let us be as unselfish as the Mississippi students who were jailed for sitting down in a public library,” she intoned. “Let us do something for ourselves for a change and...initiate a third really great period

of Negro art in America.”⁷ Offering her perspective as an African American artist living outside of the United States, she also presaged the Black Arts Movement’s understanding of blacks as a colonized people having much in common with third-world peoples across the globe, particularly in Latin America. “A third great art movement can move beyond the Rio Grande to the rest of the hemisphere,” she argued.⁸ Acting as an outside observer with strong emotional and political ties to the civil rights movement, Catlett thus urged her fellow black artists to return to their activist roots.⁹

Because Catlett lived outside of the United States during the Cold War, she could afford to speak of politicized art in ways that other African American artists could not. Catlett later recalled that several black artist friends refused to meet with her when she visited New York during her trip to the United States, presumably scared off by her radical politics.¹⁰ Yet despite some artists’ wariness of associating with her publicly, Catlett’s speech was highly influential. Besides reaching those assembled at Howard, the speech was also published in the inaugural issue of the civil rights journal *Freedomways*, giving it a much wider audience of African American artists and activists. Indeed, Romare Bearden remembered that her ideas struck a chord with black artists everywhere and were widely discussed.¹¹ Catlett returned to Mexico and followed her own advice, creating a number of prints, such as *Negro es Bello* (fig. 6.1), that directly supported the Black Power movement. As Melanie Herzog has argued, Catlett became “one of the

⁷ Elizabeth Catlett Mora, “The Negro People and American Art,” *Freedomways* 1 (1961), 76-77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹ For more on American expatriate cultural workers who forged a “culture of critical resistance” from Mexico during the Cold War, see Rebecca M. Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U.S. Dissidents and the Culture of Critical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Fax, *Seventeen Black Artists*, 29. Catlett listed Ernest Crichlow as the one exception. She did not name the artists who shunned her, but told Fax that these individuals also did not attend the Howard meeting.

¹¹ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 425.

primary women's voices in the Black Arts Movement, the visual manifestation of Black Power ideology" by the end of the 1960s.¹²

Catlett was not alone among her generation of African American artists in her interest in exploring how black artists could get involved in the developing civil rights movement. Perhaps inspired by Catlett's call to arms, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, James Yeargans, and Hale Woodruff gathered together a group of black artists, young and old, in a meeting at Bearden's studio in New York City in July of 1963 "for the purpose of discussing the commitment of the Negro artist in the present struggle for civil liberties, and as a discussion group to consider common aesthetic problems."¹³ Dubbing themselves Spiral, suggesting their commitment to continual upward progress, the group modeled itself on the 306 group and the Harlem Artists Guild, meeting regularly to discuss politics, aesthetics, and the challenges facing black artists. Alston, who had led 306 in the 1930s, recalled that "we felt that this kind of thing had disappeared and there was a great need for it."¹⁴ The founding members of Spiral thus drew on their long history of visual activism in their effort to revive the politically engaged community of black artists in New York City of which they had been a part in earlier days. In particular, they hoped to harness the energy of civil rights activism that was mounting that summer of the March on Washington and explore how an intergenerational group of African American artists might participate in the movement.

¹² Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 133. Catlett saw herself as both African American and Mexican; see "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples," *Ebony*, January, 1970, 94-101.

¹³ Passage quoted from Bearden's meeting notes in Bearden and Henderson, *History of African-American Artists*, 400. Other members included Felrath Hines, Alvin Hollingsworth, Merton Simpson, Earl Miller, William Majors, Reginald Gammon, Perry Ferguson, Calvin Douglass, and one woman, Emma Amos.

¹⁴ Charles Alston, oral history interview with Al Murray, October 19, 1968, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art (AAA), Washington, DC.

“This was the height of King’s involvement in the South,” Lewis remembered, “and we wanted to do something.”¹⁵

Spiral was fraught from the beginning with tensions between artists interested in including overt political content in their work and those who resisted this strategy. As such, the group spent most of their meeting time debating whether or not there was such thing as a “black aesthetic” and, much like the Black Arts Movement that would emerge in the following years, working to “eliminate traditional Western ideas from their minds” through discussions of the writings of African theorists Cheik Anta Diop and Leopold Senghor and lectures on African art.¹⁶ Despite their differences, Spiral was able to produce one group exhibition in the spring of 1964. Hoping to address and participate in black political activism, some members of the group wanted to call the show “Mississippi, 1964” in direct reference to civil rights politics, while others rejected the title as too “pointedly ‘social protest.’”¹⁷ The group settled on the more subtle theme of “Black and White,” alluding to interracial harmony through art that used only black and white tones. While the show was a success, Spiral’s aesthetic divisions ultimately proved too deep to keep the group together; it dissolved when the lease ran out on their Christopher Street meeting space in 1965. As Jeanne Siegel, who interviewed and reported on Spiral the following year, suggested, Spiral “shared the discovery that, in general, the attempt to express their feelings as Negroes through an art of ‘social protest’ was ineffective if not impossible.”¹⁸ In the end, Alston, Bearden, Woodruff, and Lewis’s

¹⁵ Norman Lewis, oral history interview with Camille Billops, August 29, 1974, in *Artist and Influence* 18 (1999), 83. Incidentally, Spiral was not the only intergenerational group of black artists in New York City at the time: Roy DeCarava also founded a group for African American photographers, the Kamoinge Workshop. The group was less geared towards participation in the civil rights movement, however.

¹⁶ Jeanne Siegel, “Why Spiral?” *ArtNews* 65 (Sept., 1966), 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

attempts to revive a unified community of politicized black artists in New York ultimately failed.

Despite its brief existence, however, Spiral had an enormous effect on its members, young and old. Indeed, the artists from the Depression generation who had begun the group were those who had largely abandoned their social realist roots in an effort to pursue abstraction; due to their participation in Spiral, all four of them shifted their aesthetic orientation to explore civil rights themes in their work once again. Romare Bearden, in particular, found himself inspired by the idea of forging an aesthetic that communicated the black experience in a manner that would advance the cause of civil rights, beginning a long and fruitful period of collage work.¹⁹ More than any other Spiral member, Bearden articulated the central philosophies that would drive the soon-to-emerge Black Arts Movement, arguing that “Western society, and particularly that of America, is gravely ill and a major symptom is the American treatment of the Negro... It is the right of everyone now to re-examine history to see if Western culture offers the only solutions to man’s purpose on this earth.”²⁰ Hale Woodruff likewise left behind the emphasis on abstraction that had characterized his work during the 1950s to participate in creating art that would assist the “revolution,” as he told an interviewer in 1968. “It’s kind of late in life, maybe,” he claimed, “but it’s the thing I’ve got to do. Otherwise I just can’t look myself in the face.”²¹ Even Norman Lewis, the stalwart abstract expressionist who eschewed overt politics in art, infused his paintings with the spirit of the civil rights

¹⁹ On the influence of Spiral on Bearden’s art, see Sharon Pruitt, “The Spiral Group: Defining African American Art During the Civil Rights Movement,” in James L. Conyers, ed., *Engines of the Black Power Movement: Essays on the Influence of Civil Rights Actions, Arts, and Islam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2007): 5-20.

²⁰ Bearden quoted in Siegel, “Why Spiral?”, 49.

²¹ Hale Woodruff, oral history interview with Al Murray, November 18, 1968, AAA.

movement. His 1964 painting, *Processional*, for example, which he included in the “Black and White” exhibition, retained the artist’s commitment to abstraction while commenting directly on the civil rights marches of the early 1960s.²² Beyond exploring civil rights themes in his art, Lewis also joined Bearden and Jacob Lawrence in devoting his time and skills to the movement itself, working as part of the Artists’ Committee of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).²³

The dissolution of Spiral was hardly a death knell for intergenerational African American visual activism in New York in the 1960s. By the late 60s, black New York artists old and young shifted their focus from the southern civil rights movement to advancing a movement of their own, protesting their exclusion from the mainstream art world just as the Harlem Artists Guild had done three decades earlier. Frustrated with the continued difficulties they faced in getting their work into major museums, they assisted in the founding of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1968 in order to provide an alternative space to showcase African American art. Inspired by the Black Power movement, black artists affiliated with the Studio Museum also actively protested exhibitions at major New York art museums beginning in 1968 to draw attention to their exclusion and demand greater representation. The first of these was an exhibition of Depression-era American art at the Whitney Museum, a show that included not a single work by an African American artist. In protest, the Studio Museum assembled a competing exhibition entitled, “Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 30s.”²⁴ In this

²² For more on Lewis’s engagement with civil rights politics, see Ann Eden Gibson, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” and David Craven, “Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist,” both in *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998).

²³ Craven, “Norman Lewis as Political Activist.”

²⁴ “Blacks Talk Back to the Whitney Museum,” Studio Museum of Harlem press release, dated November 14, 1968, in Hale Woodruff Papers, AAA.

way, younger artists involved with the Studio Museum showed their allegiance to the generation of black artists that had come before them by picketing the exhibition while chanting, “ignored in the thirties, ignored in the sixties.”²⁵

Following their slight by the Whitney, New York’s African American artists responded with rage at the failure of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to consult with them in the planning for the multimedia show, “Harlem on My Mind,” or include their work in the exhibition. Artist Benny Andrews quickly brought together a group of African American artists that called themselves the Black Emergency Cultural Council and organized pickets outside of the museum, drawing a great deal of media attention to the controversy. Leading the picket lines was Roy DeCarava, who wore a sandwich board proclaiming, rather obscurely, that “THE FOREIGNERS REVEAL THE REAL NITTY GRITTY.” Speaking of the white curators of the exhibition to a reporter for *Popular Photography*, DeCarava declared that “they have no great love or understanding for Harlem, black people, or history.”²⁶ The museum’s attempt to modernize itself with an exhibition portraying black life and culture thus backfired, drawing the ire of a now united intergenerational group of African American artists in New York City.²⁷ As historian Mary Ellen Lennon has demonstrated, these protests constituted a major portion of the Black Arts Movement in New York, demanding “nothing short of a revolutionary reappraisal of the meaning and function of the art museum in the United States.”²⁸

²⁵ Mary Ellen Lennon, “A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968-1971,” in Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 103.

²⁶ David Vestal, “Can Whitey Do a Beautiful Black Picture Show?” *Popular Photography* 64, no. 5 (May, 1969), 122.

²⁷ For more on the politics of “Harlem on My Mind,” see chapter one of Steven G. Dubin, *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Lennon, “A Question of Relevancy,” 93.

As even this cursory look at the eruption of Black Arts Movement activism in late 1960s New York demonstrates, the call for black cultural rights that was sounded at this moment did not arise solely from a young generation of radical artists. Instead, it was the product of intergenerational activism and aesthetic exchange that drew deeply on the knowledge and experience of older black artists, even when those ties were not entirely understood by younger artists. Nowhere is the historical amnesia of New York's radical young artists more clear than in the transcript of a symposium on "The Black Artist in America" held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 in order to smooth over tensions remaining after the "Harlem on My Mind" debacle. The panel brought together a markedly male group of African American artists, including senior artists such as Bearden, Lawrence, and Woodruff, and younger artists such as Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Tom Lloyd, and William Williams, to discuss the issues facing contemporary black artists. While the discussion brought out a range of opinions on whether or not there was such a thing as black art, the conversation was especially marked by tensions between the impatient younger men, who argued that African American artists had never been active in their communities, and the elder artists, who begged to differ. Tom Lloyd, for example, complained that "there's never been any real unity amongst the Black artists," to which Lawrence snapped, "Oh sure there's been, man, you don't know your history." Later, Lloyd exclaimed, "I think our role as Black artists is right up there in the front line and we haven't been there, we haven't even been heard of." Exasperated, Lawrence told Lloyd to "speak for yourself – I've been here thirty years, you know."²⁹ Young activist artists like Lloyd thus invested their work with a sense of urgency by suggesting that the

²⁹ "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (Jan., 1969): 245-261.

links they forged between art and politics were unprecedented and therefore deeply necessary. Yet, as Lawrence continually reminded Lloyd throughout the symposium, radical artists of the Black Arts Movement generation in fact drew on a long history of visual activism, whether they cared to admit it or not. Indeed, the Metropolitan symposium was simply yet another arena in which African American artists in New York City exchanged ideas and compared experiences across the generational divide.

While New York, as the center of the American art world, was an important site of intergenerational African American artistic activism in this period, it was not the only one. As scholars have demonstrated, the Black Arts Movement was not a single, unified cultural effort occurring in a single geographical location, but rather a widely dispersed constellation of groups and individuals across the United States who were guided by a similar mission of tying culture to Black Power. Chicago, too, witnessed a flowering of African American cultural nationalism that drew on the South Side community's legacy of activist art. Much of this renewed effort toward cultural pride centered around the DuSable Museum of African American History, which, like the Studio Museum in Harlem, sought to create a separate institution celebrating black history, art, and culture. The museum was founded in the late 1950s by artist and activist Margaret Goss Burroughs, who played an active role in the creation and administration of the South Side Community Art Center, and the progressive Jewish historian Eugene Feldman.³⁰ Meant as a companion institution to the South Side Community Art Center, the museum collected African and African American art and artifacts and engaged in an active educational program, offering courses in black history to local teachers and school

³⁰ John E. Fleming and Margaret T. Burroughs, "Dr. Margaret T. Burroughs, Artist, Teacher, Administrator, Writer, Political Activist, and Museum Founder," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 1999): 31-55.

children. As the civil rights movement heated up in the 1960s, Burroughs kept herself and her museum within the orbit of cultural activism; she co-founded the cultural civil rights journal *Freedomways* in 1961, for example.

African American artists in Chicago also drew inspiration from the Depression-era generation beyond the formal, institutional walls of the museum world. Indeed, what many consider to be one of the seminal events inaugurating the Black Arts Movement – the creation of the *Wall of Respect* mural on the side of a building in a tough section of the South Side of Chicago in 1967 – followed directly on the example of the elder generation’s use of art as a weapon. The mural was the creation of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a group of African American artists and intellectuals in Chicago that sought, much like Spiral in New York, to consider the ways in which black artists could contribute to the civil rights movement. The group’s emergence was hardly a coincidence, however; one of OBAC’s founders, Jeff Donaldson, was an artist and a doctoral student in art history at Northwestern University who was writing a dissertation on the history and visual activism of the 306 group in 1930s Harlem.³¹ As a group, OBAC proved far more politically motivated than Spiral; as Donaldson later remembered, “the group decided early on that the essential function of art for a people destined to change the world is not to promote aesthetic dogma, but to build self-esteem and to stimulate revolutionary action.”³² OBAC thus came together to build on the 306

³¹ Jeff Donaldson, “Generation ‘306,’ Harlem, New York,” Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1975. The group’s other founders included Hoyt W. Fuller, an editor at *Negro Digest*, and Gerald McWorter, a doctoral student in sociology at Northwestern. The OBAC Visual Arts Workshop included painters and printmakers Sylvia Abernathy, Elliot Hunter, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones, Carolyn Lawrence, Norman Parish, William Walker, and Myrna Weaver; photographers Billy Abernathy, Darrell Cowherd, Roy Lewis, and Robert Sengstacke; and mixed-media artist Edward Christmas.

³² Jeff Donaldson and Geneva Smitherman Donaldson, “Upside the Wall: An Artist’s Retrospective Look at the Original ‘Wall of Respect,’” in *The People’s Art: Black Murals, 1967-1978* (Philadelphia: African American Historical and Cultural Museum, 1986).

generation's example of cultural activism, leaving aside conflicts over aesthetic issues in order to develop art that could advance the cause of Black Power.

In considering how to combine their efforts for this purpose, the group quickly settled on creating a "guerrilla mural" celebrating a series of African American heroes on the exterior wall of a building in the heart of the ghetto. The communal painting would draw on what Donaldson described as the "glorious legacy" of historical murals created by African American artists in the past; instead of remaining hidden in the interior space of a building, however, the *Wall of Respect* was painted on the side of a store owned by an absentee white owner without his permission. Members of OBAC carefully canvassed the neighborhood to assemble a list of heroes that represented those most admired by locals, gained the trust and approval of local community members and gang leaders, and commenced work on the mural in August of 1967. In this way, the artists collaborating on the *Wall of Respect* sought to improve upon the methods used by the previous generation for bringing politically motivating art directly to the people, literally taking art to the streets much like the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s drew the struggle into public spaces. By including a large number of black nationalist political and cultural heroes such as Muhammad Ali, Nina Simone, Amiri Baraka, Stokely Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown, the *Wall of Respect* transformed the mural medium to fit a new political moment, serving as a visual pantheon of the Black Power movement and encouraging viewers to take pride in their race.

Despite OBAC's concerted local political goals, the *Wall of Respect's* influence stretched far beyond the boundaries of Chicago, drawing the attention of the local and national press and quickly becoming, in the words of Donaldson, "an instantaneous

shrine to Black creativity, a rallying point for revolutionary rhetoric and calls to action, and a national symbol of the heroic Black struggle for liberation in America.”³³ Much of this attention stemmed from an article featuring the mural that was published in the December, 1967, issue of *Ebony* magazine. Stressing the collaborative spirit of the artists creating the work, the magazine suggested that “in the era of the ‘happening,’ The Wall just might be called a ‘black-hap.’”³⁴ Appearing in the year SNCC executive secretary James Foreman described as “the high tide of Black resistance,” the *Wall of Respect* functioned as a visual symbol of the enormous sea-change occurring in African American activism in this historical moment and as testimony to African American cultural unity and pride.³⁵

While tensions related to promotion of the mural ultimately brought the demise of OBAC, Donaldson and a number of other members continued to insert themselves and their work into the Black Power movement. Out of the dissolution of OBAC came the creation of the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists (COBRA), a group that later renamed itself the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AFRI-COBRA) to reflect its commitment to radical black nationalism. Much like the groups of African American artists from the 1930s that so inspired Donaldson, members of AFRI-COBRA developed group exhibitions and circulated portfolios of prints that celebrated black heroes and thus spoke directly to the struggle for African American liberation. Developing ties with the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Wall of Respect,” *Ebony*, December, 1967, 49.

³⁵ The *Wall of Respect* ultimately inspired an urban street mural movement in cities throughout the United States, including works that celebrated a number of different ethnic cultures and communicated social protest on a variety of issues; see Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), and James Prigoff and Robin J. Dunitz, *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2000). For more on the role of the *Wall of Respect* in the Black Arts Movement, see Margo Natalie Crawford, “Black Light on the *Wall of Respect*: The Chicago Black Arts Movement,” in Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*.

Studio Museum in Harlem, the group quickly became a central node of the Black Arts Movement. Unlike Depression-era artists, their art focused on asserting a common African cultural heritage rather than exposing the poor conditions faced by African Americans and the wider working class. Despite these differences, however, the group serves as yet another example of the continuity of African American visual activism across the twentieth century.³⁶

Alongside New York and Chicago, Los Angeles also became a key site for the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s, and here, too, one can find links between the elder generation of African American activist artists and younger black artists engaged in cultural nationalist efforts. Despite his having left behind the stifling anticommunist atmosphere of mid-1950s New York to breathe more freely in L.A., Charles White never relinquished his commitment to racial politics in his work. In the late 50s, White's work explored the politically safe themes of religious imagery, musicians, and drawings for film and theater commissions. By the mid-1960s, however, the artist returned to overt commentary on the civil rights movement in his work. The drawing *Birmingham Totem*, for example, expressed White's anger over the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed four young black girls (fig. 6.2). As art historian Andrea Barnwell points out, a totem is usually an object of pride, celebrating family or tribal history; "White's totem, in contrast, is a visual record of destruction, violence, and immeasurable loss."³⁷ By the end of the decade, White had returned fully to infusing his work with protest, creating in particular a powerful series of

³⁶ For more on COBRA/AFRI-COBRA, see Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985).

³⁷ Andrea Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2002), 77.

“Wanted” posters that referred to slavery while illuminating contemporary racial inequality.

Much like Bearden, Lawrence, and Lewis, Charles White contributed work to the major political organizations involved in the civil rights struggle, as well. A drawing he created of a young black woman studying graced the cover of the brochure advertising SNCC’s “Nitty Gritty Freedom Schools,” grassroots institutions that educated rural southern African Americans in history, economics, literacy, the arts, and political activism. SNCC also used the drawing in the newsletter they circulated nationally.³⁸ White also contributed “Dawn of Life,” a drawing from the portfolio he had created through *Masses and Mainstream* in the early 1950s, for use on the poster for the production of Langston Hughes’s politically activist song-play, “Jerico-Jim Crow.” The play’s production was jointly sponsored by the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and SNCC. The image, which depicted a young African American woman with her hands raised, having just released a dove into flight, clearly pleased the playwright; Hughes sent a copy of the poster to White, on which he scrawled the message, “Happy Holidays to the creator of this lovely visualization of our hopes!”³⁹

White’s role in the civil rights movement extended far beyond activism in his own artwork, however; as a teacher at the Otis Art Institute beginning in 1965, White instructed an entire generation of young black artists on the potential political impact of visual culture. White’s students at Otis included a number of important, politically motivated young black artists associated with the Black Arts Movement, including Betye Saar, Suzanne Jackson, and David Hammons. White quickly became an elder member of

³⁸ See letter from Dana E. Maloney, of the SNCC *Student Voice*, to Charles White, dated July 5, 1967, in Charles White Papers, AAA. White’s papers also contain a copy of the brochure.

³⁹ Flyer in Charles White Papers, AAA.

a community of activist black artists in Los Angeles by the end of the decade, participating along with former and current students in groups such as the Black Art Council, which worked to protest lack of African American representation in mainstream art museums in the Los Angeles area.⁴⁰ Interviewed in 1971, White reflected on the satisfaction he derived from passing on his wisdom to the younger generation, describing his teaching as “rewarding.” “I feel I need the contact with the young people,” he remarked, “I need a dialogue, I need a rap session with the young people.”⁴¹ Perhaps because of this dedication to teaching the next generation of black artists, White’s influence on the “young people” moved beyond simply his circle of students in L.A., as well. Benny Andrews, one of the founders of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in New York, recalled how struck he had been by White’s art as a child: “Long before I knew his name or was even inclined to look it up, I remember his drawings as being for me the ultimate symbols of Black people,” Andrews wrote upon White’s death.⁴² Likewise, the Black Panther Party’s chief artist and Minister for Culture, Emory Douglas, cited Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett as important role models.⁴³

Indeed, by the early to mid-1960s, political winds had changed such that the art of Charles White received some of the attention it deserved on a national level. Ironically, the very government that had persecuted the artist a decade earlier sent a request to White in 1963 to inquire whether the United States Information Agency might be allowed to

⁴⁰ For more on the Los Angeles Black Arts Movement, see Kellie Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” in Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. See also Daniel Widener, “Something Else: Creative Community and Black Liberation in Postwar Los Angeles,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2003.

⁴¹ Charles White oral history interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch, December 29, 1971, audiotape in Hatch-Billops Collection, New York City.

⁴² Benny Andrews, “Charles White was a Drawer,” *Freedomways* 20, no. 3 (1980), 145.

⁴³ Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 148.

circulate a “picture story” about his work in the press overseas that they would entitle, “From These Roots.”⁴⁴ White’s art became most visible to a national audience in the pages of *Ebony* magazine, however, which underwent a major editorial shift in the late 1960s, moving from an emphasis on happy, black middle-class success stories to serving as an organ for the Black Power movement. The appearance of White’s drawing, “J’Accuse! No. 10,” on the cover of the August, 1966, issue of the magazine, for example, was pathbreaking not only for its overt political message but also because it departed from *Ebony*’s tendency to feature a color photograph on the cover. *Ebony* also featured a story on White the following summer, reproducing a number of drawings from the artist’s recently published book, *Images of Dignity*, and highlighting how White’s work conveyed “the unique beauty of Negritude.” The story thus placed White as a fixture within the Black Arts Movement for a national readership, despite the fact that his emphasis on creating art for the masses had never changed. As had been the case since his days at the South Side Community Art Center, White’s goal remained “getting my work before more and more masses of people.”⁴⁵

Tracing these threads between the generation of artists active in the Popular Front civil rights movement and the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s thus offers an important shift in perspective on twentieth-century African American cultural activism, allowing us to see continuities in the challenges and issues facing both generations of artists. Both Depression-era black artists and those active in the Black Arts Movement struggled with tensions between the idea of creating art for the people, or art for politics’ sake, and fighting for the rights of African American artists to create art for art’s sake.

⁴⁴ See letter from Ruth Hopkins of the USIA to White, dated August 28, 1963, in Charles White Papers, AAA.

⁴⁵ Louie Robinson, “Charles White, Portrayer of Black Dignity,” *Ebony*, July, 1967, 25-36.

These competing goals were present among the elder generation throughout their careers; most proved capable of reconciling them by seizing on the Popular Front emphasis on labor and understanding themselves as workers with very particular needs. The infusion of political themes into their work thus advanced their cause as artist-workers at the same time that it protested racial and economic inequalities faced by the larger African American working class.

The tension between efforts to carve out a space for black artists in the mainstream art world and the commitment to politically activist art grew stronger as a result of the Cold War aesthetic shift to abstraction, however. Aside from photographers such as DeCarava and Parks, by the late 1950s African American artists had little choice but to divest their work of overt political content in order to pursue a successful career in the world of mainstream American art. It is no wonder, then, that these tensions wracked and ultimately destroyed groups like Spiral in the mid-1960s; while the political pressures of the early Cold War had eased by this time, anticommunist repression had done much to tear apart the connections between art and politics that had allowed activist black artists to function as part of the Popular Front. One can also see these competing goals in the differences between groups like the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which fought for the rights of African American artists to have equal representation within powerful cultural institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum, and OBAC, which reached out to the people through the production of collective street art that did not attach the names of individual artists to the work. The legacy of the Cold War separation of art and politics is thus visible in the chasm between those members of the Black Arts Movement who imbibed the idea of the artist as an

inspired individual and staked a claim for black artists to be able to take on that identity regardless of their race, and those who emphasized the need for racially identified, politically active black art. Indeed, this separation had an enormous impact on the inability of the Black Arts Movement to come together as a unified whole.

Alongside these disagreements ran a related discussion of the existence of a “black aesthetic,” an issue that stemmed back at least as far as the Harlem Renaissance, even if the Black Arts Movement experienced it as a new idea. Committed to leftist politics, the Depression generation largely rejected Harlem Renaissance efforts to uncover an essential connection to the African “ancestral” arts, instead emphasizing the possibilities of art created by African American artists to visually demonstrate and fight against social, economic, and political inequality. For the most part, this pragmatic approach remained with the elder generation of artists into the 1960s; as Norman Lewis articulated it in the mid-1970s, “when that period comes around in America where black women and black men cease to be hustled, harassed, raped, it won’t be because of an aesthetic, but just the fact that they belong to the human race.”⁴⁶ Always quick to denounce the political power of art, Lewis was an extreme among his generation in his rejection of efforts to conjure up African aesthetic roots in order to unify black communities. Yet his statement reflects the attitudes of many of his contemporaries, who were wary of the idea that defining a common blackness would decolonize the minds of African Americans. Instead, the goal was to demonstrate the degree to which black people did belong to the human race – to proclaim their dignity and demand their rights as human beings. For Lewis, and for others who had come of age as artists in the Popular Front, the issue was not a psychological one, but rather a matter of transforming the very

⁴⁶ Lewis-Billops interview, *Artist and Influence*, 87.

economic, social, and political structures that kept African Americans in a position where they continued to be hustled, harassed, and raped.

In taking this long view, we can see the degree to which the story of visual activism around the politics of race is not one punctuated by isolated moments such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, but rather marked by continuity over the course of the twentieth century. To be sure, the rise of anticommunism in the height of the Cold War marks a moment of rupture, when the momentum of politically active visual art ebbed significantly. The result was a shift in what was politically possible for activist artists in the post-war civil rights movement, due in some ways to an amnesia about this legacy. Unfortunately, it is an amnesia that has also characterized historical scholarship on both African American art and the long civil rights movement, limiting our understanding of the myriad ways in which progressive artists have put images to work in service of the black freedom struggle over the course of the twentieth century. Yet these artists' stories have much to teach us about the potentialities of the visual image for illuminating injustice and fighting for an alternative.

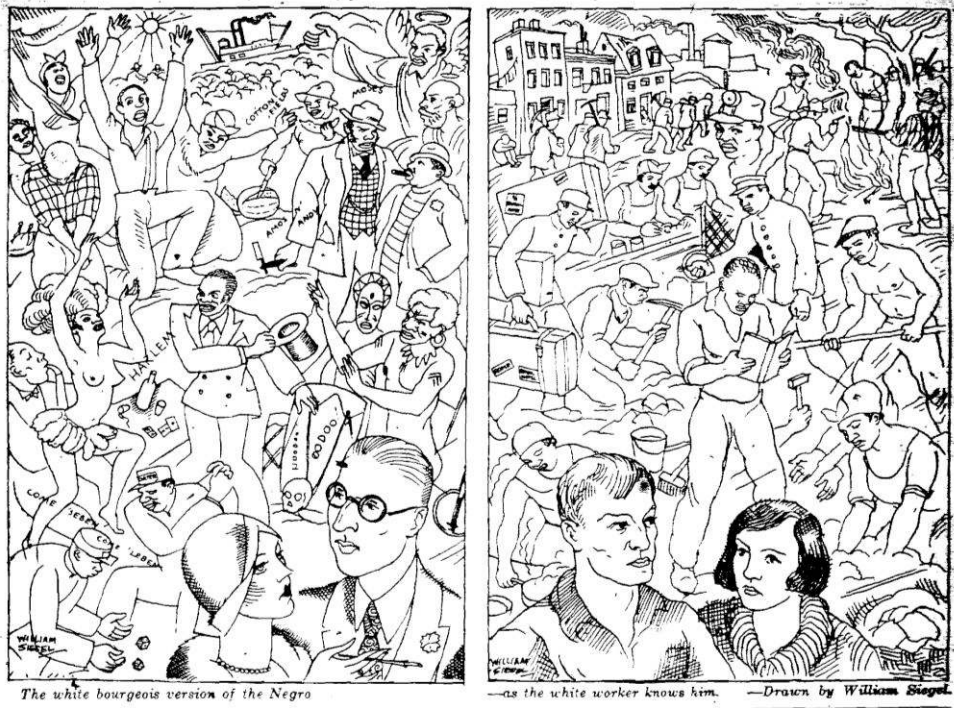


Fig. 1.1: William Siegel cartoon, *New Masses*, May, 1930

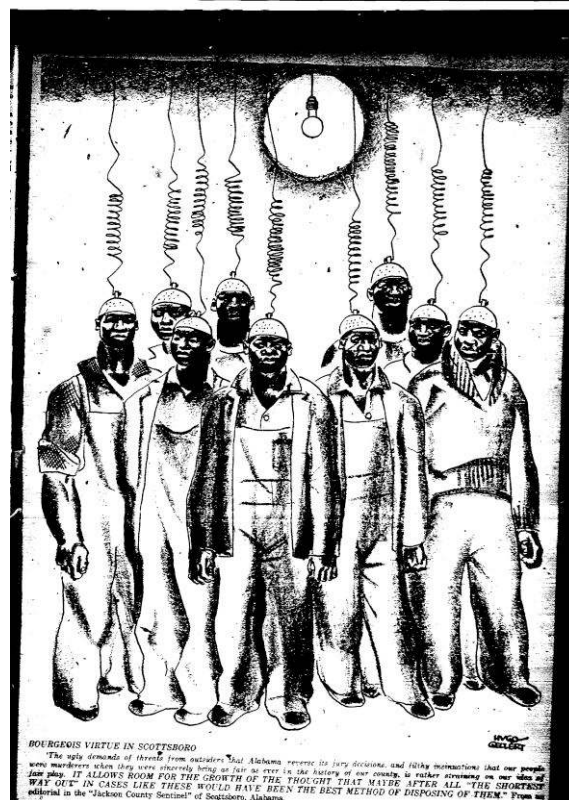


Fig. 1.2: Hugo Gellert drawing, *New Masses*, June, 1931



Fig. 1.3: AP photograph of the Scottsboro Boys



ON March 25, 1931, a freight train running through Jackson County, Alabama, carried many "passengers," most of them being jobless Negro workers bound for Memphis and other places in search of jobs on the river boats.

Among these "passengers" were the nine young Negro boys. They had jumped on the train at various places. Most of them had never seen each other before. They travelled in different parts of the train.

There were also on the freight train seven white men and two girls dressed in men's clothing—mill girls who had been forced into prostitution by low wages and lack of work.

A white boy moving about the train pushed against a Negro worker, who protested. All of the workers on the freight, white and Negro, would be branded by the bosses as bums. But so rigid is the system of Jim Crowism in the South, that even on freight trains "niggers" must "keep in their place." In the fight that followed between some of the white boys and some of the Negroes, the Negroes got the better of the scrap and the whites jumped off the train.



Fig. 1.4: Anton Refregier, from "They Shall Not Die!," 1932



Fig. 1.5: Walter Quirt cartoon, *Daily Worker*, July 11, 1930

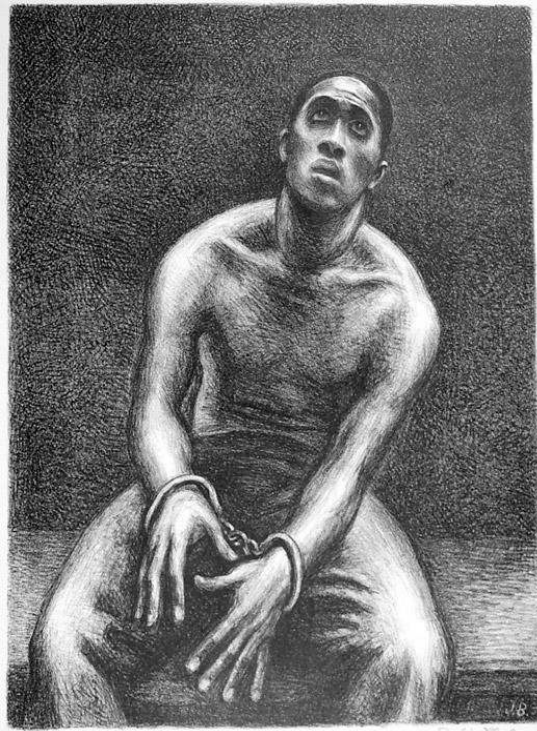


Fig. 1.6: Julius Bloch, *The Prisoner*, 1934 (courtesy Columbus Museum of Art)

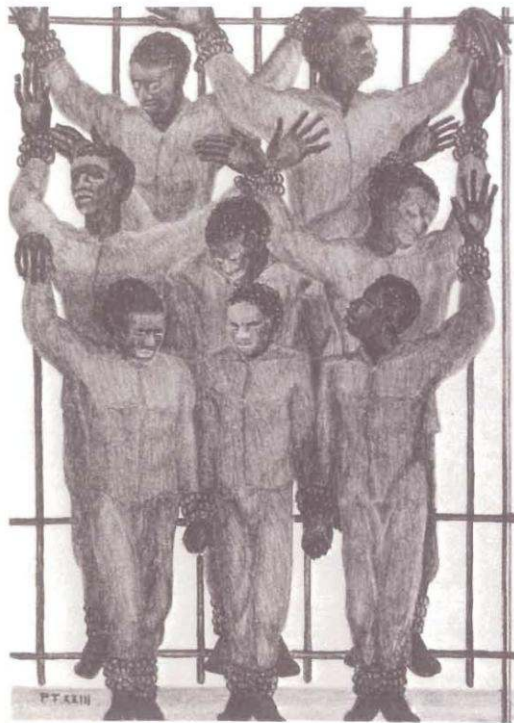


Fig. 1.7: Prentiss Taylor, *8 Black Boys*, 1932 (courtesy University of Arizona Museum of Art)

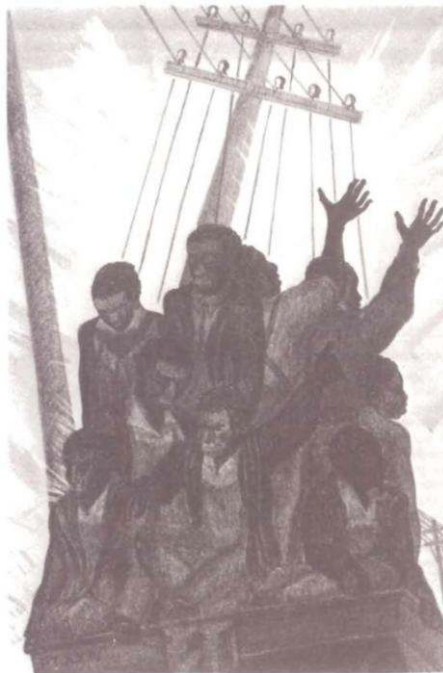


Fig. 1.8: Prentiss Taylor, *Scottsboro Limited*, 1932 (courtesy University of Arizona Museum of Art)

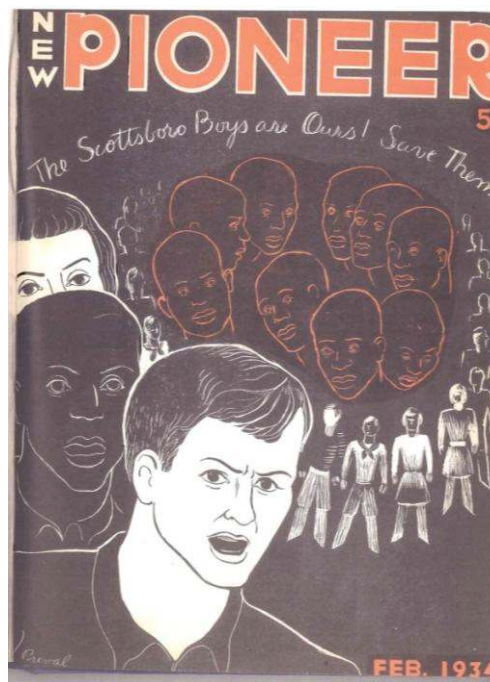


Fig. 1.9: Juanita Preval, cover of *New Pioneer*, February, 1932

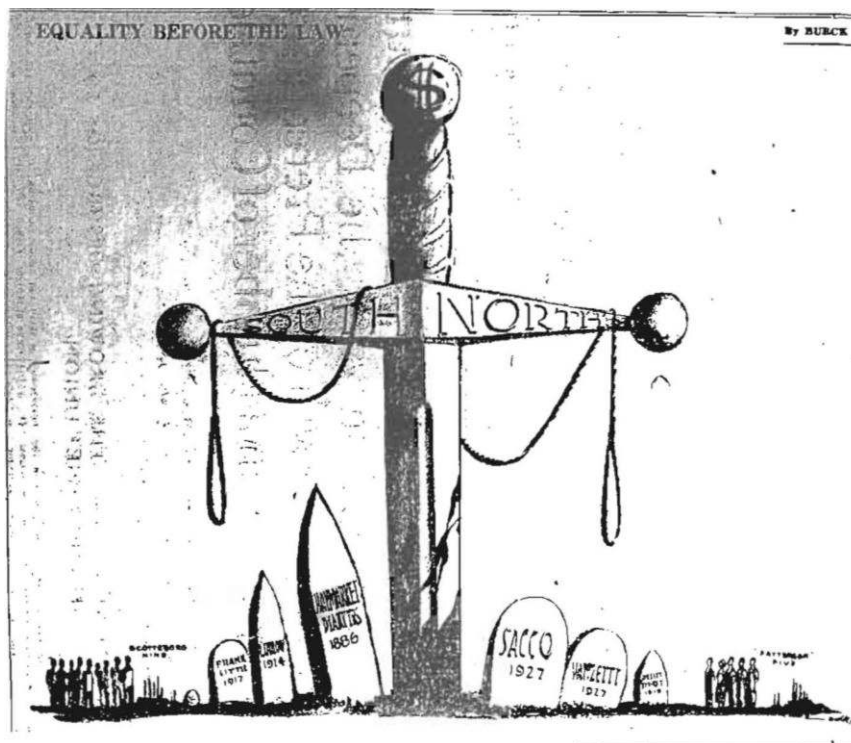


Fig. 1.10: Jacob Burck cartoon, *Daily Worker*, May 16, 1931

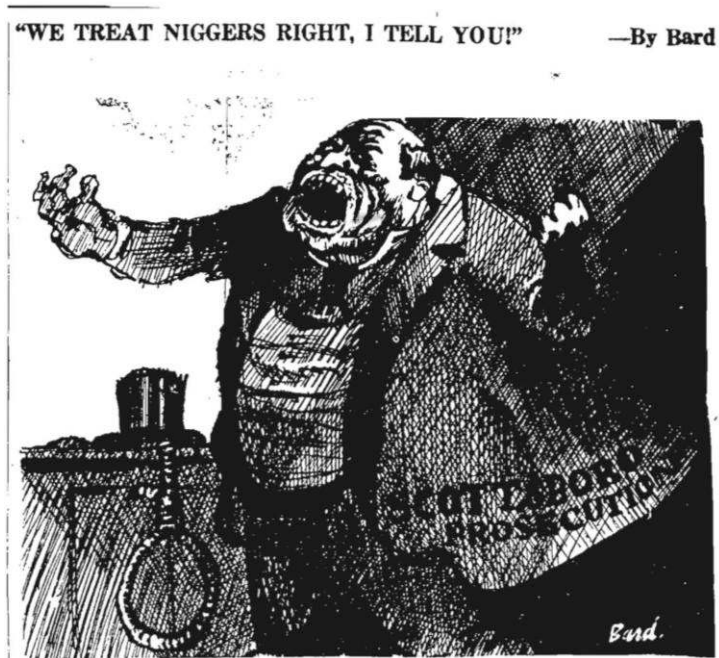


Fig. 1.11: Phil Bard cartoon, *Daily Worker*, March 29, 1933

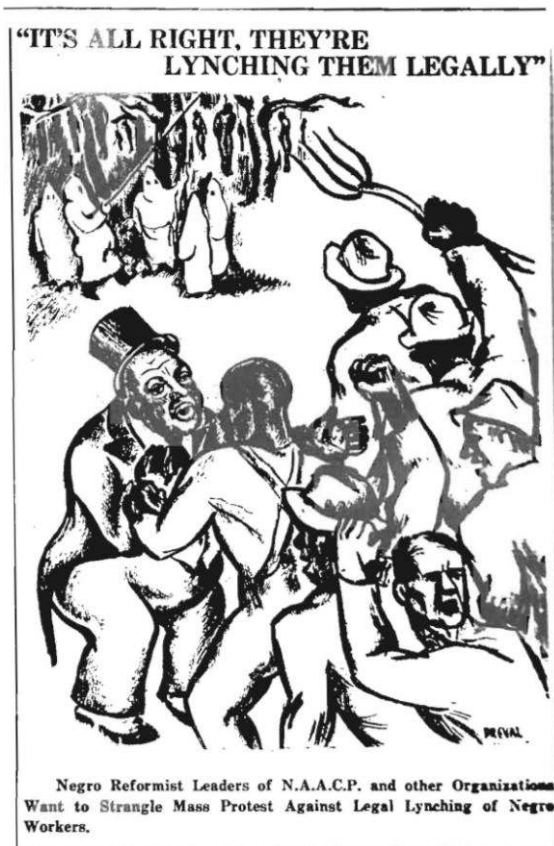


Fig. 1.12: Juanita Preval cartoon, *Liberator*, June 6, 1931

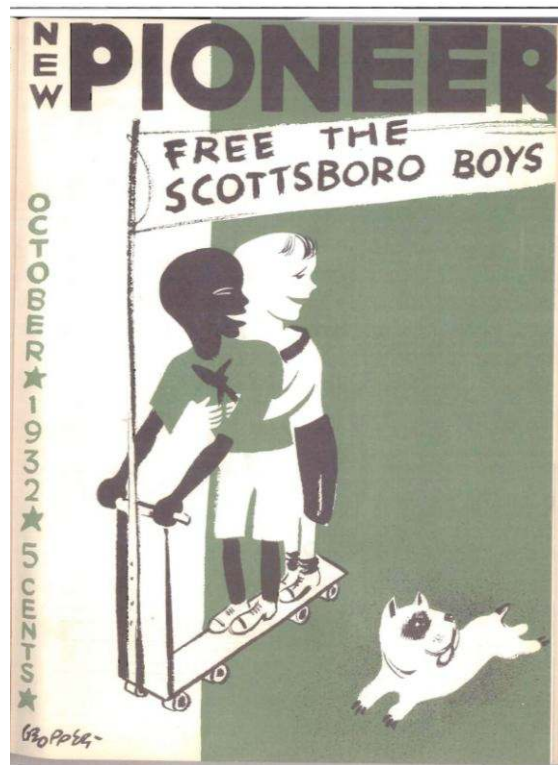


Fig. 1.13: William Gropper, cover of *New Pioneer*, October, 1933

A Vision Or Reality?

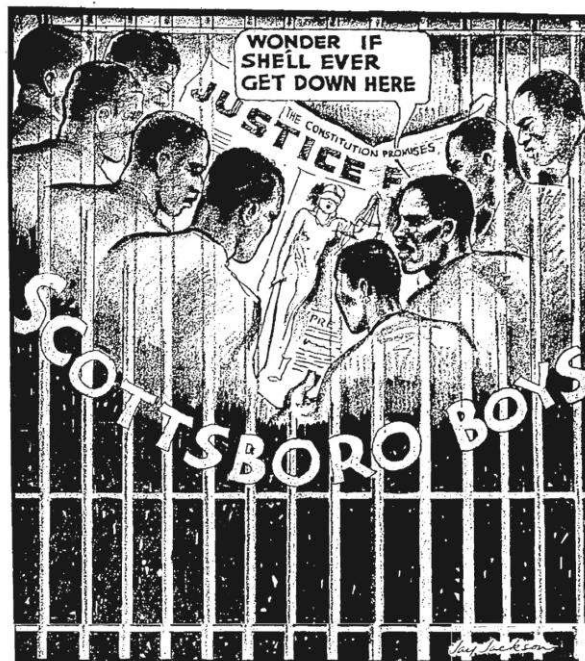


Fig. 1.14: Jay Jackson cartoon, *Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1936

"Under the 'Law'" in Dixie!



Fig. 1.15: L. Rogers cartoon, *Chicago Defender*, August 18, 1934

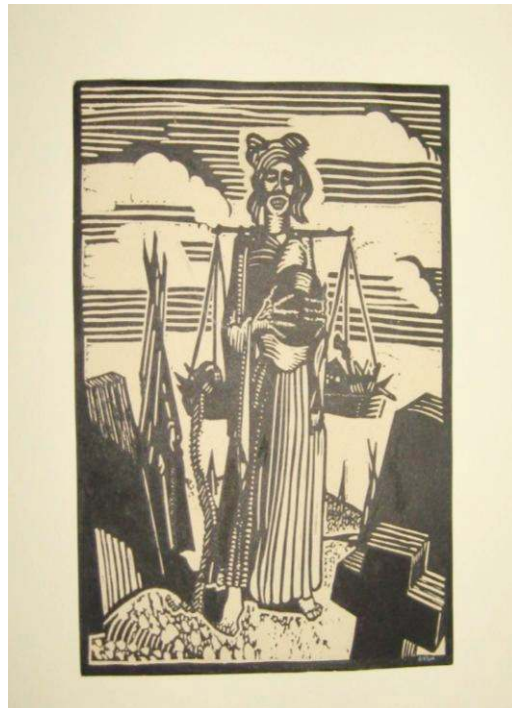


Fig. 2.1: Charles Alston, Untitled (Justice), c. late 1930s



Fig. 2.2: Philip Reisman, *South*, c. late 1930s



Fig. 2.3: Elizabeth Olds, *Harlem WPA Street Scene*, c. late 1930s



Fig. 2.4: Raymond Steth, *I Am An American*, c. late 1930s (Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia)



Fig. 2.5: Michael Gallagher, *Lynching*, c. late 1930s (Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia)



Fig. 2.6: Raymond Steth, *Evolution of Swing*, c. late 1930s (Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia)



Fig. 2.7: Interior view of the South Side Community Art Center, c. 1940 (from Alain Locke Papers, courtesy Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University)

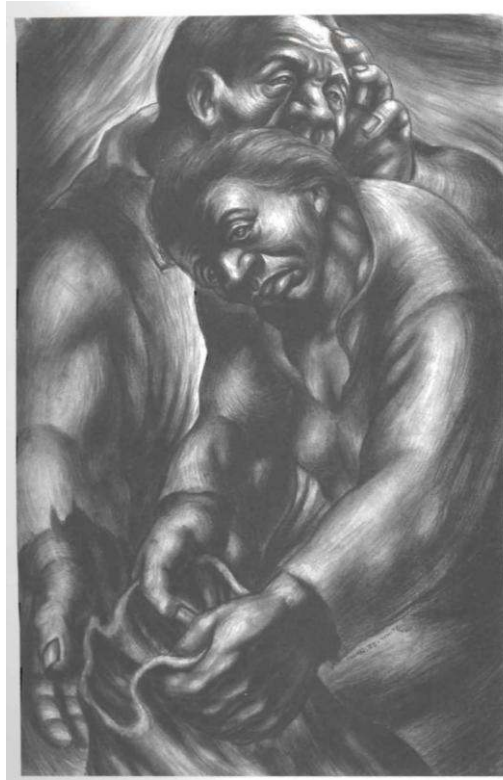


Fig. 2.8: Charles White, *There Were No Crops This Year*, 1940

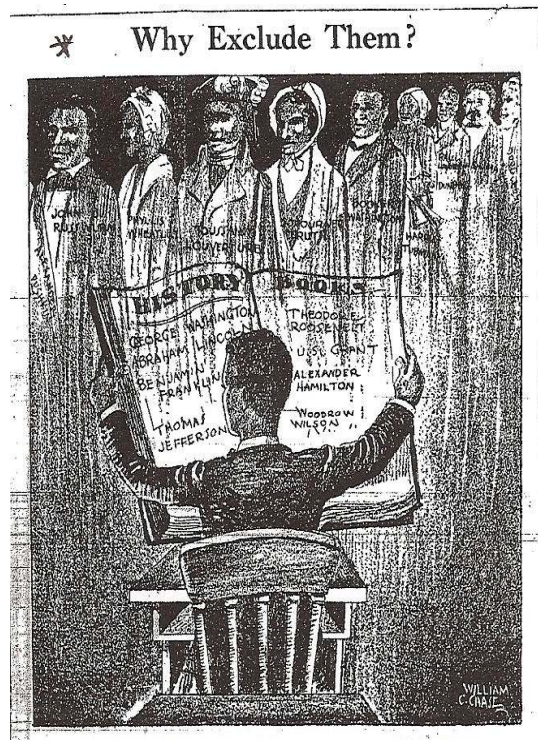


Fig. 3.1: William Chase cartoon, *Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1932



Fig. 3.2: Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943 (courtesy Hampton University's Archival and Museum Collection/Hampton University/Hampton, VA)

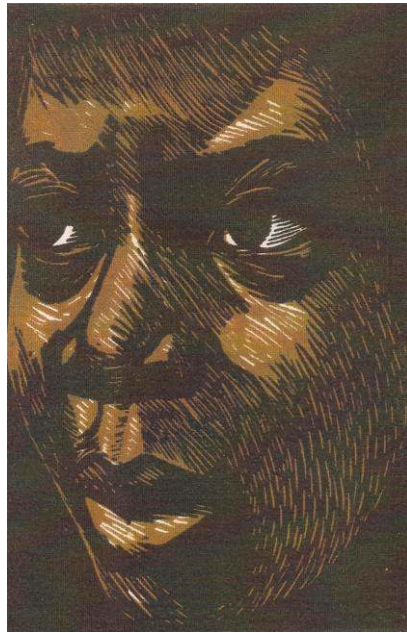


Fig. 3.3: Elizabeth Catlett, *I Am the Negro Woman*, 1946 (© Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)



Fig. 3.4: Elizabeth Catlett, *I Have Given the World My Songs*, 1946
(© Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)



Fig. 3.5: Elizabeth Catlett, *My Role Has Been Important to Organize the Unorganized*, 1946 (© Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)



Fig. 3.6: Elizabeth Catlett, *My Right is a Future of Equality with Other Americans*, 1946 (© Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)



Fig. 3.7: Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston inspecting a cactus in preparation for their murals for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, 1949 (from Charles Alston Papers, courtesy Smithsonian Archives of American Art)



Fig. 3.8: Graphic Art Workshop logo

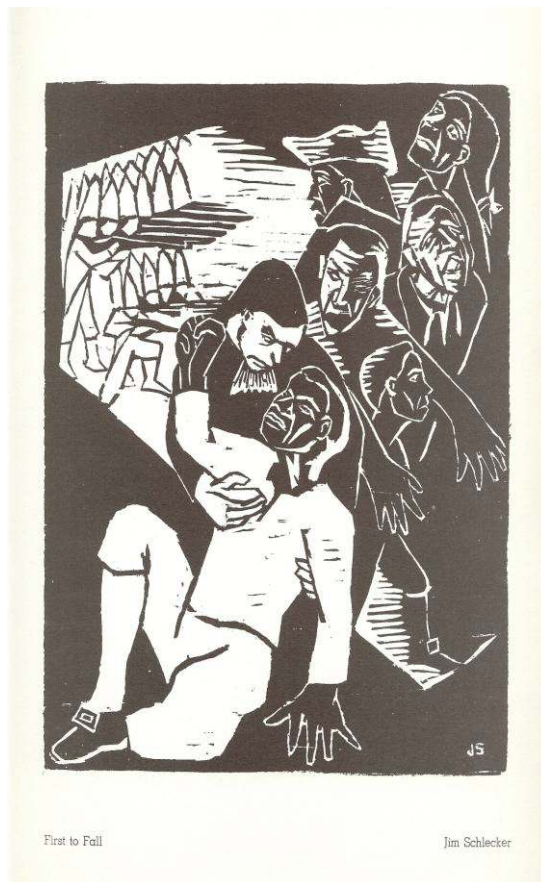


Fig. 3.9: Jim Schlecker, *First To Fall*, from *Negro, U.S.A.*, 1949

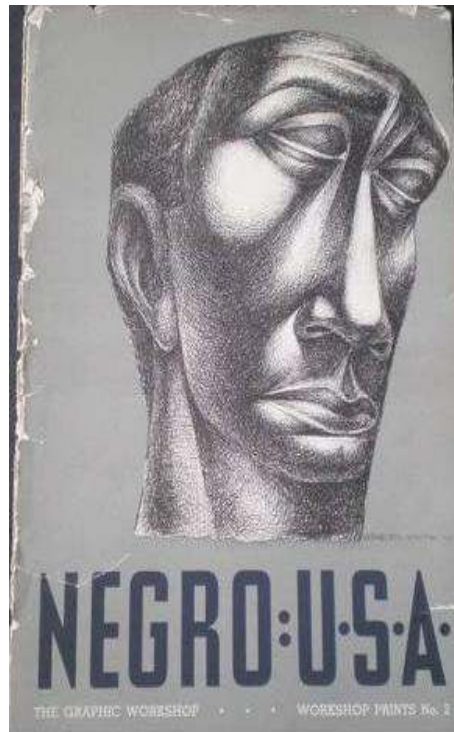


Fig. 3.10: Charles White, cover for *Negro, U.S.A.*, 1949



Fig. 3.11: Antonio Frasconi, *United Labor*, from *Negro, U.S.A.*, 1949

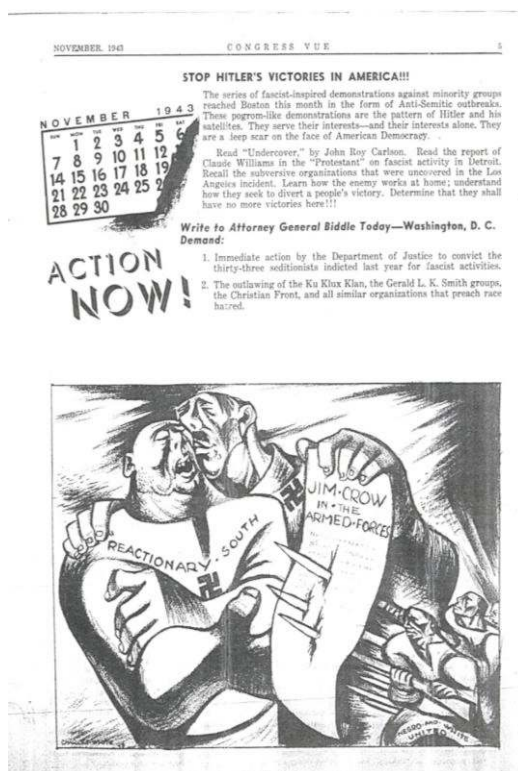


Fig. 4.1: Charles White cartoon, *Congress View*, September, 1943



Fig. 4.2: Ernest Crichlow cartoon, *People's Voice*, 1943

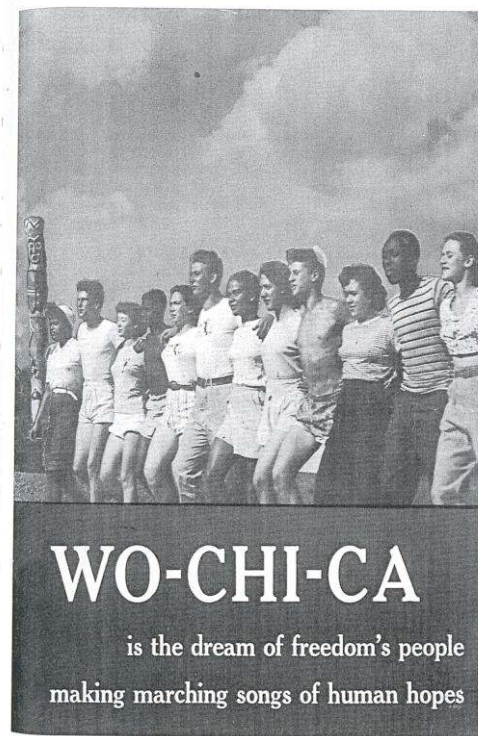


Fig. 4.3: Cover of the 1947 Wo-Chi-Ca yearbook

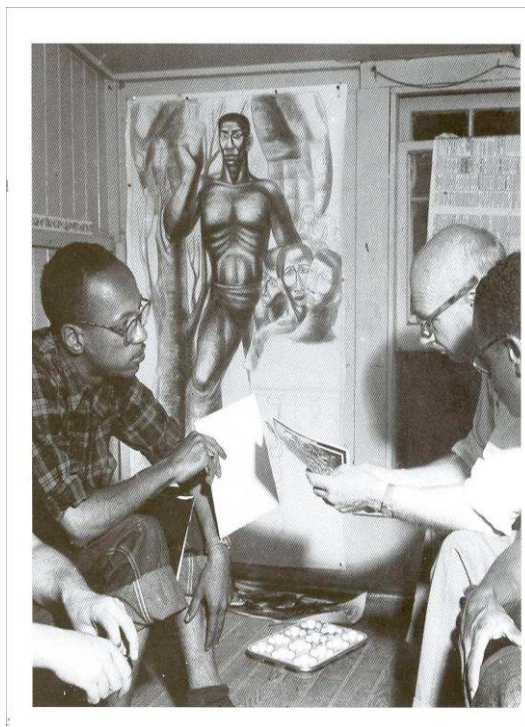


Fig. 4.4: Charles White, Ernest Crichlow, and Rockwell Kent at Wo-Chi-Ca, 1942



Fig. 4.5: Elizabeth Catlett, *Civil Rights Congress* (1949)



Fig. 4.6: Charles White, *The Trenton Six*, 1949



Fig. 4.7: Charles White, *The Ingrams*, 1949



Fig. 4.8: Charles White, *Dawn of Life*, 1953

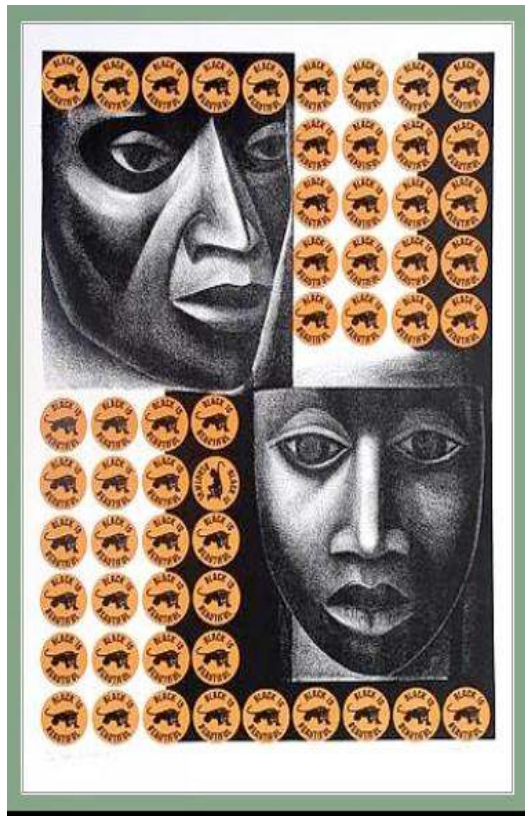


Fig. 6.1: Elizabeth Catlett, *Negro es Bello*, 1969



Fig. 6.2: Charles White, *Birmingham Totem*, 1963

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WPA Federal Art Project Records (Record Group 69)

National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) Records

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library
Clippings File
International Labor Defense Papers
Prints and Paintings Collection
WPA Federal Writers' Project Records

Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY
League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR) vertical file
Clarina Michelson Papers
Wo-Chi-Ca Collection

Microfilmed Organizational Papers
Civil Rights Congress
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Negro Congress

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Files
Graphic Art Workshop
Gwendolyn Bennett
Ernest Crichlow

Charles White
Workers' Children's Camp

Periodicals

Art Front (Artists' Union)
The Crisis (NAACP)
Freedom
Freedomways
Journal of Negro History
Life
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