

The Cultural Campaigns of the NAACP: 1910-1955

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Abstract

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used a wide range of strategies for securing racial equality. These included some perhaps surprising tactics: it encouraged black writers and artists, published poems and plays, organised an art exhibition, picketed cinemas and dined with Hollywood moguls. This thesis explores the NAACP's involvement with and use of the arts and popular culture between 1910 and 1955. It asks why the NAACP developed a cultural strategy, what this strategy was and how it was implemented, and what it reveals about the NAACP as an organisation during the first half of the twentieth century.

The NAACP believed that racial inequality was caused by racial prejudice. In other words, African Americans suffered political, social and economic discrimination because of the attitudes of white Americans toward the race. These attitudes were formed in large part by the depiction of blacks in American culture. Therefore, the NAACP hoped that if it could change the representation of the race then it could alter white prejudices and achieve racial equality. The NAACP challenged what it considered to be negative cultural representations of African Americans and sought to replace them with positive images. It saw the creation of 'high' culture as a signifier of a group's status and believed the production of fine art and literature could be used to prove that African Americans 'deserved' equal rights. Furthermore, it used culture to instil racial pride and to forge a sense of a collective black identity. The arts were also utilised to change attitudes on specific issues, most notably to encourage anti-lynching sentiment amongst whites. The NAACP believed that culture could be used as a weapon in the fight for racial equality.

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Introduction

“The national mental attitude”: The NAACP, Racism and Culture

In 1926 W.E.B. Du Bois was addressing an audience in Chicago when he rhetorically asked of the NAACP, “how is it that an organization of this kind can turn aside to talk about Art?”¹ That question – if ‘Art’ is considered in its broadest sense to include a wide range of media – is at the heart of this thesis. Why was it that an organisation more commonly associated with courtroom battles and political lobbying should spend time, money and effort encouraging, publishing, challenging, protesting and creating poems, novels, short stories, plays, artwork, exhibitions and films? The answer can be found in the principle that underpinned all the work of the NAACP: racial inequality was a product of what James Weldon Johnson called “the national mental attitude”.² This race prejudice was created, in part, by culture and therefore the NAACP believed it could be defeated by culture.

This thesis seeks to extrapolate from its actions and records the NAACP’s cultural strategy. It asks why the Association followed this tactic, what it hoped to achieve, and how it responded to and used different forms of culture. I examine what these campaigns reveal about the NAACP as an organisation and how it approached questions of assimilation, cultural pluralism, class bias, cultural elitism, censorship and propaganda. Furthermore, consideration is given to the impact of this work on the organisation. I evaluate whether adopting a cultural agenda was an overly cautious

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art”, *The Crisis*, October 1926, 290.

² James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922; repr., New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 9.

and conservative approach to the civil rights struggle or if it was a necessarily pragmatic tactic, given the racial situation in which the NAACP operated.

The NAACP launched a number of cultural campaigns between 1910 and 1955 which included publishing art and literature in its magazine, *The Crisis*, and becoming involved with the Harlem Renaissance; using the arts to change white attitudes towards lynching; and protesting degrading images in film and television and lobbying for more positive depictions. These were not just random excursions followed on a whim or fancy but were driven by a specific strategy. This strategy was to use representations of African Americans in the arts and popular culture to challenge race prejudice. The NAACP believed that racial inequality was caused by the attitudes of white Americans towards blacks. The Association hoped that if it could change those views then it would open the way for greater civil rights. Prejudices were reflected in and reinforced by the stereotypical depictions of African Americans. Therefore, the NAACP believed it needed to challenge these representations, enforce their removal and replace them with more positive images.

This would alter white attitudes about African Americans and deliver a blow to race prejudice. Following this logic, the NAACP hoped that cultural forms could influence opinions about specific issues and be used to bring about political change.

Furthermore, the NAACP argued that, in some cases, the very creation of the arts should be celebrated and that black talent would provide proof of the race's status.

These ideas shaped its attitude towards and involvement with a whole range of cultural media and art forms for almost half a century.

The way in which the NAACP conceived of the race problem is central to its development of a cultural strategy. It believed that racial inequality was the result of

“race prejudice”.³ In other words, African Americans suffered political, social and economic discrimination because of the attitudes of white Americans toward the race. NAACP Secretary James Weldon Johnson summed up this position when he wrote, “The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of the national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions.”⁴ To Johnson and his colleagues at the NAACP, racism existed as an ideology or doctrine rather than in the structures of society. This reflected discourses about race during this period. As early as the 1850s, Frederick Douglass defined racism as the “diseased imagination”.⁵ George Fredrickson traces the historiography of racism and finds that scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century were concerned with “the history of ideas rather than with the social and political applications of prejudiced beliefs and attitudes.” Indeed, the very term “race prejudice” suggests an emphasis on thoughts rather than action.⁶ Nevertheless, the NAACP did recognise the practical and structural implications, and implementations, of racism. It spent the majority of its time fighting educational inequality, segregation in public facilities and housing, disenfranchisement and inequality before the law. However, it saw these problems as manifestations of prejudicial beliefs and argued that if these attitudes could be changed then the practical applications of racism would also end.

In 1910 W.E.B. Du Bois argued that much of race prejudice “is born of ignorance and misapprehension, honest mistake and misguided zeal.” The NAACP would, therefore, “fight the wrong of race prejudice” by “doing away with the excuses

³ During its Third Annual Conference, the Association declared that African Americans are “the victim of race prejudice”. “Report of Third Annual Conference”, *The Crisis*, May 1911, 24-25.

⁴ Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9.

⁵ David W. Blight, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 52.

⁶ Fredrickson notes that “race prejudice” was the favoured term used in early works criticising white supremacy and that “racism” did not come into general use in the United States until the 1960s. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 165, 167. Nevertheless, the term “racism” will be used throughout this study alongside that of “race prejudice”.

for prejudice", by "showing the unreasonableness of prejudice" and by "exposing the evils of prejudice."⁷ The NAACP saw racism as something that could be eradicated through exposure, education and persuasion. It wanted to show whites the true nature and real achievements of African Americans and hoped that this would convince them to treat blacks as equal citizens. The NAACP needed to change the way white America thought about blacks. As Moorfield Storey said, "We want to make race prejudice ... as unfashionable as it is now fashionable."⁸ If racism existed in the minds of white America then public opinion would be a key tool in the NAACP's battle for civil rights.⁹

Racism as an ideology did not fully emerge in America until the nineteenth century. It was not until abolitionists began their sustained attack on slavery that whites needed a coherent argument to defend America's 'peculiar institution'.¹⁰ The process of defining blackness (and therefore whiteness) in the United States began with slavery but accelerated in the post-Civil War era. Race became the "crucial means of ordering the newly enlarged meaning of America."¹¹ White supremacy was an ideology which grew in strength as blacks won greater freedoms and threatened whites' way of life and their sense of identity. Anti-black prejudice varied in degree but most racist whites shared common ground. The central tenet was that blacks were physically, intellectually and morally different to whites. Furthermore, they were

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Editorial", *The Crisis*, December 1910, 16.

⁸ Quoted in Robert L. Zangrando, "The Organized Negro": The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Civil Rights" in *The Black Experience in America: Selected Essays*, ed. James C. Curtis and Lewis L. Gould (Austin: University of Texas, 1970), 149.

⁹ At the beginning of the twentieth century the concept of 'public opinion' as something that could be manipulated was gaining currency. Walter Lippmann's influential book, *Public Opinion*, was published in 1922.

¹⁰ See George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Chapter One. See also Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 7.

inherently inferior to whites. The differences between the races were either permanent or would only change very slowly and therefore an integrated society was virtually impossible.¹²

The ideology of racism was perpetuated and reinforced through American culture and more specifically through the representation of African Americans within that culture. There is a long history of derogatory depictions of blacks in America, which began in the antebellum period but which persisted and developed after the Civil War, as racism grew in strength. African Americans were depicted in art and literature, in songs and on sheet music, in cartoons, in advertising, as collectibles and on household goods, on stage and in films. Their white creators followed a prescribed pattern of looks, speech, actions and traits. Some of the stereotypes had names – ‘Sambo’, ‘Mammy’, ‘Uncle Tom’, ‘Aunt Jemima’, ‘Jim Crow’ and ‘Zip Coon’ – others were nameless caricatures.¹³ These cultural representations provided a way for whites to work through issues about race and to enforce the ideology of racism. For example, images of contented slaves and loyal ex-slaves, which were so common in early twentieth-century American culture, absolved the South of blame for slavery and the North of any responsibility for America’s blacks. African Americans also appeared in more threatening guises as the black beast, which showed the black man freed from the restraints of slavery and reverting to his ‘natural’ savagery. Such

¹² Frederickson, *Black Image*, 321.

¹³ A review of the literature on images of blacks in American culture is beyond the scope of this Introduction. In addition to those works referenced throughout this study, see, for example, Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William L. Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985); Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

depictions were used to justify the repressive treatment of African Americans, particularly through mob violence. Cultural products could spread the message of black inferiority to a wide audience. In those areas where there was little contact between the races, cultural representations shaped people's opinions about blacks. In others, like the South, they not only confirmed existing prejudices they also increased hostility. Deriding and mocking the race helped to keep blacks in their place. American culture thus taught both whites and blacks the 'acceptable' boundaries of behaviour and interaction.

The NAACP believed that the way in which African Americans were represented culturally affected how they were treated socially and politically. Race prejudice worked by suggesting that African Americans were as dim-witted, docile or depraved as their cultural image and therefore that white America was correct to treat them as such (never mind that such depictions often contradicted each other): blacks were stupid and so could not be trusted with the franchise; they were lazy therefore education would make no difference; they were content with their lives so philanthropy was misguided; they were immoral and violent so they must be segregated from white society; and they were licentious and needed to be controlled. The NAACP was convinced that it had to change this perception of African Americans in order to open the door for such advancements as the franchise, desegregated education and, ultimately, full civil rights. It sought to remove these damaging images from the culture; to encourage the introduction of what it considered 'positive' depictions of African Americans and black life; and to educate Americans about black talent and achievements. It believed that if it could alter the cultural representation of African Americans then it would be one step closer to eradicating racism.

The NAACP's cultural strategy worked in a number of ways. It wanted to change the way African Americans were portrayed in a wide range of media, from literature and art through advertisements to songs and greetings cards. It focused particular attention on images of blacks in visual mass culture: first motion pictures and then television. At times, it was concerned with simply removing the offending images or preventing their distribution, which led it to advocate the controversial and limiting tactic of censorship. At others, the Association lobbied for the inclusion of what it considered to be positive images. The NAACP's cultural strategy also involved the development and promotion of black literary and artistic talent. The Association encouraged black authors, poets, painters, playwrights and other creative individuals. These artists were to be shining examples of what the race could achieve and would prove to whites that African Americans were 'civilized' and therefore deserved equal rights. This emphasis on cultural attainment began with the formation of its official magazine, *The Crisis*, in 1910 and led to the Association's involvement in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. It also used the arts to change public opinion on specific issues, most notably lynching. It hoped to turn public apathy and approval of mob violence into condemnation by exposing the true nature of lynching. Furthermore, it wanted to challenge the white story of lynching – the way in which lynching was remembered and explained – and the arts allowed African Americans to create an alternative to the dominant white narrative. This reflects its broader desire to challenge America's historical memory, an issue which took on great significance when it came to the Civil War and Reconstruction. The NAACP's objection to such films as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was based, in part, on its depiction of this important period of American, and black, history. The final element of the NAACP's cultural strategy focused not on white attitudes but on those of African Americans.

The creation of black culture and the projection of positive black images was intended to raise black pride and to forge a sense of collective African American identity. This self-esteem and collectivism were crucial in the struggle for civil rights. These different strands can be seen weaving their way throughout all the NAACP's cultural campaigns during its first forty-five years. Underpinning them all was the principle that the arts and popular culture could be used to shape opinions about African Americans.

During the course of its cultural campaigns, the NAACP used a wide range of cultural forms. It was involved with what could be termed both 'high' and 'low' culture. To borrow Herbert Gans' definition of the German 'Kultur', high culture is "art, music, literature, and other symbolic products that were preferred by the well-educated elite". While 'low', or 'popular', cultures are those forms which had a mass appeal and a wide audience.¹⁴ Lawrence Levine, among many others, has warned against such adjectives like 'high', 'low' and 'popular' and the values which are attached to them. They are problematic because what is 'high' could also be 'popular'.¹⁵ Nevertheless a cultural hierarchy existed within the Association's work and whilst it did not necessarily use such terms as 'high' and 'low' it did treat different cultural forms and their creators in different ways.

One reason the NAACP celebrated the creation of 'high' culture was that it believed such forms as fine art and literature were admired by middle-class whites. These were the people whose opinion it thought there was the best chance of changing. Moreover, they were the influential opinion-leaders who could help grant African Americans their civil rights. This belief is seen in the promotion of black

¹⁴ Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 10.

¹⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

artists in the Harlem Renaissance and the use of theatre, literature and fine art in the anti-lynching campaign. It is also reflected in the NAACP's push for the inclusion of respectable, middle-class images of blacks in both the arts and popular culture. It wanted to prove to the white middle classes that blacks were the same as them, in order to secure their sympathy and support. It hoped that African Americans would either recognise or aspire to the images of their race in American culture. An exploration of its cultural campaigns thus supports the claim that the NAACP was an organisation that reflected and appealed to the interests of the bourgeoisie, although it targeted the *white* middle classes as much as the black with its use of the arts.

Cultural elitism explains the exclusion of certain forms of culture from the NAACP's work and therefore from this study. Music was largely absent. As discussed in Chapter Three, jazz – a key component of the Harlem Renaissance – was ignored by the Association. It wanted to distance itself from the stereotypes of 'natural' black musicality and the black entertainer. African Americans such as Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson were classical singers and therefore acceptable to the NAACP and the Association celebrated their careers.¹⁶ However, popular music was, in the NAACP's elitist mindset, associated with the working classes and therefore did not project the right message. Moreover, a peculiar deafness seemed to be at play in the NAACP's cultural campaigns; there was an inability to recognise either the potential advantage or harm of aural representations of African Americans. There was little mention of radio, which was an important medium for African Americans in the first half of the century because it was one to which they had relatively easy access.¹⁷

¹⁶ Walter White, the Executive Secretary, helped to organise Anderson's famous Lincoln Memorial concert in 1939. See Kenneth Janken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 246-49; also Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 180-85.

¹⁷ On African Americans and radio see William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio,*

Indeed, Walter White had his own radio show. However, although there were sporadic protests about the use of racial epithets or derogatory comments on programmes, the NAACP looked on radio more as a medium for sharing information rather than shaping public opinions through the fictional representation of black life.¹⁸ As will be seen in the discussion of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, it was not until it transferred from radio to television that the Association took issue with its stereotypes.¹⁹

The NAACP's approach to fighting racial inequality reflected its origins and the ideologies of its founding members. The Association's immediate beginnings lay in the horrified reaction of liberal whites to the violence meted out against African Americans. On 14 August 1908 in the town of Springfield, Illinois, the hometown of Lincoln, a race riot broke out during which six African Americans were shot, two were lynched, over fifty were wounded and thousands fled from their homes. The following month, William English Walling, a wealthy Southerner, reformer and socialist, published a scathing report on events in *The Independent*. "Race War in the North" warned of dire consequences if America let such violence pass without action. Summoning the spirit of abolitionism, Walling called for action to assist America's black populace, asking, "what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to their aid?"²⁰ Mary White Ovington, a settlement house worker already interested in the plight of African Americans, responded to Walling's call. Along with the

War and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

¹⁸ See its files on broadcasting. Papers of the NAACP at the Library of Congress, followed by group, series and box [hereafter NAACP/LC]: II A 156-158.

¹⁹ The word 'stereotype' is, unless stated otherwise, used as a pejorative term, to mean a derogative stereotype rather than one which is laudatory. This was how the NAACP viewed stereotypes, as harmful to the advancement of the race.

²⁰ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 389.

journalist Charles Edward Russell and Dr Henry Moskowitz, a social worker, they vowed to form such a body. Their first meeting was held at Walling's New York apartment in January 1909. The group soon expanded to include, amongst others, Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley, who were both leading settlement house workers, and two black ministers, Bishop Alexander Walters and Reverend William Brooks. They issued a call for a conference, "for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty."²¹

The National Negro Conference was held in New York on 31 May and 1 June 1909 and was attended by three hundred men and women of both races. During the keynote speech William Hayes Ward, editor of *The Independent*, declared that the purpose of the new organisation was "to re-emphasize in word, and so far as possible, in act, the principle that equal justice should be done to man as man, and particularly to the Negro, without regard to race, color or previous condition of servitude."²² The delegates called for a campaign to educate America about the achievements of the race, for a legal bureau, and for a political and civil rights bureau to secure the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. A Committee of Forty to establish a permanent organisation was chosen and the group passed a series of resolutions demanding equal civil and educational rights, the right to work and protection against violence, murder and intimidation.²³ The Second Annual Conference was held a year later, again in New York. After some wrangling the organisation adopted its new name and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed.

²¹ Mary White Ovington, *Black and White Sat Down Together: The Reminiscences of an NAACP Founder* (New York: Feminist Press, 1995), 57.

²² Charles Flint Kellogg, *NAACP: A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Volume 1, 1909-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

The founders of the new Association were products of the Progressive era. Its white members “fit the Progressive profile perfectly”: they were affluent and college-educated, ‘old stock’ Americans, Protestants, Republicans and Socialists and they lived in the big cities of New York, Boston and Philadelphia.²⁴ They shared the reformist mentality: they believed in “investigation and exposure” and the “importance of laws and of the state as a guarantor of social order”.²⁵ They brought the tactics of Progressivism to the NAACP: they carried out investigations and circulated their findings, held rallies and conferences, lobbied and litigated.²⁶ Like the Progressives, the Association did not call for a radical overhaul of society. It believed that the Constitution, if properly applied, would grant African Americans full equality. It wanted the promises of Emancipation to be fulfilled. The original goal of the NAACP was “securing the basic citizenship rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution.”²⁷ It advocated “gradualism rather than revolution” and all its objectives “could be achieved without disturbing much of the underlying structure of American life.”²⁸

In its earliest years the NAACP’s leadership positions were dominated by whites. To begin with the Association could not afford to pay most of its leaders and therefore relied on the pro bono services of wealthy whites.²⁹ Moorfield Storey, a Boston lawyer, was the first President and Walling became Chairman of the Board of Directors. Joel E. Spingarn, a wealthy professor of literature, held both these position in the following decades. His brother, Arthur Spingarn, was responsible for much of

²⁴ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 69. There were also a number of Jews amongst the NAACP’s founders.

²⁵ August Meier and John Bracey Jr., “The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: ‘To Reach the Conscience of America’”, *Journal of Southern History*, 59, no. 1 (February 1993): 6.

²⁶ Zangrando, “Organized Negro”, 153-54.

²⁷ Meier and Bracey, “NAACP as a Reform Movement”, 4.

²⁸ Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 6-7.

²⁹ Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 18.

the NAACP's early legal work. Ovington held a number of positions during the many years of her involvement including Secretary and Chairman. Another woman, May Childs Nerney, was Executive Secretary from 1912 until 1916. Villard was Chairman and Treasurer. Initially the exception to this white dominance was W.E.B. Du Bois, who was appointed Director of Publicity and Research. He was the only African American in a salaried position until James Weldon Johnson became first Field Secretary and then replaced John Shillady as Executive Secretary in 1920. By the time Johnson was replaced by Walter White in 1931 blacks had taken control of much of the day-to-day running of the Association. Jessie Fauset was Du Bois's assistant editor, and Robert Bagnall, who became Director of Branches, and William Pickens, Field Secretary, did a good deal to increase the NAACP's presence in black communities throughout the country. The Board of Directors was almost evenly split along race lines. Perhaps most significantly, by 1919 it was estimated that nine-tenths of the NAACP's members were black.³⁰

It was W.E.B. Du Bois who was the most influential of the NAACP's black members during its first decade. In fact, his influence spread far beyond that of the Association's head office in New York. Adam Fairclough says of him, "It is hard to do justice to the sparkling brilliance, profound originality, passionate humanity, incredible versatility, and sheer industry of a life that spanned almost one hundred years of American history." He wrote works of black history and sociology, alongside novels and autobiographies, he was a "brilliant polemicist" and a "dazzlingly effective propagandist".³¹ He was, of course, not without his flaws. He was arrogant, strong-willed and impatient and his relationships could be strained. He often came to blows with rest of the NAACP's Board. As editor of *The Crisis* he frequently treated the

³⁰ Kellogg, *NAACP*, 137.

³¹ Fairclough, *Better Day*, 73.

magazine as his own mouthpiece rather than the Association's official organ. Nevertheless, he was one of the NAACP's greatest assets.

Four years before the NAACP began, Du Bois, along with *Boston Guardian* editor William Monroe Trotter, had formed a civil rights organisation, known as the Niagara Movement. They had lost patience with the accommodationist principles of Booker T. Washington. In his famous "Atlanta Compromise" speech of 1896, Washington called for economic cooperation between the races and asked for fair treatment from whites. In return, he promised that blacks were not interested in social equality. Du Bois and his colleagues at Niagara rejected this gradualist approach. They issued an assertive and unapologetic cry of protest and demanded change. "We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro American assents to inferiority", read their Declaration of Principles. They demanded that "the voice of protest of ten million Americans must never cease to assail the ears of their fellows, so long as America is unjust."³² The Movement achieved little and by the end of the decade it was on the wane, stifled by Washington's Tuskegee machine, hampered by lack of funds and inadequate organisation and divided by internal rivalries. Nevertheless, it was symbolically important for challenging Washington and for offering an alternative and, given the context, more militant approach to civil rights. Du Bois carried these ideas with him into the newly formed NAACP.

James Weldon Johnson's career was perhaps even more diverse than that of Du Bois. He was, at times to great acclaim, a school principal, a lawyer, a lyricist, a U.S. consul and a novelist. He joined the Association in 1916 as Field Secretary and in 1920 he became Executive Secretary. Walter White was born in Atlanta, Georgia. He worked as an insurance salesman before he was asked to join the national office as

³² Lewis, *Biography of a Race*, 321.

an assistant secretary in 1918. Eleven years later he became Acting executive Secretary whilst Johnson was on leave, a position which was made permanent in 1931. Although in later years his ailing health meant he had to relinquish some administrative duties, White remained in this post until his death in 1955. Du Bois, Johnson and White had very different personalities and contrasting ideas and methods. Nevertheless, their “strengths meshed together so as to diminish each individual’s weaknesses.” Johnson, in particular, was a steadying influence between the clashing egos of Du Bois and White.³³ These three men developed and instigated much of the NAACP’s work during its first forty years and they were especially influential when it came to its cultural work.

The Association’s cultural campaigns were shaped by the ideas, preferences and talents of these leaders. It is significant that, even during the early years of white domination, the Association’s black personnel led this work. Du Bois and his literary editor Jessie Fauset set the cultural agenda for *The Crisis* and James Weldon Johnson and Walter White were heavily involved with the Harlem Renaissance. White also spearheaded the work in Hollywood.³⁴ There were, of course, disagreements regarding aspects of the cultural campaigns. References in this project to the NAACP’s beliefs, ideas and principles are shorthand for those which dominated the organisation and its leadership. It is not meant to suggest that all its members and staff had the same opinions but that its actions were either guided by a consensus or were enforced by one of its leaders. The focus of this thesis is on work undertaken by the NAACP’s national office in New York City. This is because most of the cultural projects were initiated and implemented by national staff members. There were very

³³ Mark Robert Schneider, *We Return Fighting: Civil Rights in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 46.

³⁴ The exception to this rule was the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* which was led in the national office by white secretary May Child Nerney. However, much of the initial impetus came from African Americans in the local branches.

few national campaigns which required assistance from local branches. The main exception to this was the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* during which much of the work was done by city and state chapters.

Historians have examined many areas of the NAACP's work, from its fight against lynching and segregation, to its battles in the court and lobbying of Congress, to the struggle for black enfranchisement.³⁵ There are, however, no full length studies which focus solely on the NAACP's cultural work.³⁶ A number of studies do explore *specific* aspects of the NAACP's cultural work. Biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Walter White examine their involvement with the Harlem Renaissance, *The Crisis* magazine and their own artistic endeavours.³⁷ Furthermore, there are many works on the Renaissance which make at least passing reference to the NAACP. The most useful concerning the Association's role in the movement are those by David Levering Lewis, George Hutchinson and Nathan Huggins. Mark Schneider's book on the NAACP in the 1920s includes a brief chapter on the "Poems and Novels" of the Renaissance.³⁸ Most scholars agree that the Association and its

³⁵ See for example, Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Kenneth W. Goings, *The NAACP Comes Of Age: The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom*. A number of studies focus on the NAACP at state level, see Robert Christopher Reed, *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Richard C. Cortner, *A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Lee Sartain, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

³⁶ The one exception is Leonard C. Arthur, *Black Images in the American Theatre. NAACP Protest Campaigns – Stage, Screen, Radio and Television* (New York: Pageant-Poseidon, 1973). However the book is greatly limited because Arthur did not have access to the NAACP's extensive papers in his research.

³⁷ Lewis, *Biography of a Race*; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000); Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Janken, *Walter White*; Edward Waldron, *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Kennihat Press, 1978). See Chapter Two for further references.

³⁸ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981; repr., New York: Penguin, 1997); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press,

magazine played an important role in facilitating the outpouring of black culture during these decades. Justin T. Lorts' doctoral thesis examines the role of black comedians in the civil rights movement and the ways in which organisations such as the NAACP were engaged in debates about black comedy (including *Amos 'n' Andy*). He finds that activists saw political and social implications in cultural representations. I share this conclusion but whereas Lorts argues that this principle emerged in post-Second World War America, I believe the NAACP followed it from its earliest days.³⁹ In recent years there has been new interest in how lynching is portrayed in American culture and as a result some of the NAACP's anti-lynching activities have been explored. Dora Apel's *Imagery of Lynching* is particularly useful, as are a number of articles on anti-lynching plays by black women and the NAACP's 1935 art exhibition.⁴⁰ In relation to the NAACP and film the most frequent references are to the NAACP's fight against *The Birth of a Nation*. Most scholars agree that this campaign was largely a failure but that there were some benefits for the NAACP.⁴¹ Film historian Thomas Cripps has written most extensively on the NAACP's involvement with motion pictures during the first half of the century.⁴² Many of these scholars recognise that the NAACP was involved in cultural activities during the first half of the century but no previous attempt has been made to place this aspect of its

1995); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (1971; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Schneider, *We Return Fighting*.

³⁹ Justin T. Lorts, "Black Laughter/ Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934 – 1968" (PhD diss. Rutgers University, 2008).

⁴⁰ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004). See Chapter Four for details of articles about anti-lynching plays and the exhibition.

⁴¹ Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth Of A Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See Chapter One for further references.

⁴² Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

work at the centre of the research, nor do any of the existing studies compare the Association's treatment of different cultural forms.

The Papers of the NAACP provide a vast record of its work and are the main primary source for this thesis.⁴³ The materials of the Board of Directors, which include minutes from meetings, correspondence and reports, indicate the aims of the Association, how it went about its work and what individual members' views were on important issues. The Personal Correspondence file (1919–1939) is particularly useful for charting James Weldon Johnson and Walter White's involvement with the Harlem Renaissance. The Anti-Lynching Publicity files record the formation of the Writers' League Against Lynching and the organisation of *An Art Commentary on Lynching*. The Special Subject Files (1912–1939 and 1940–1955) cover a range of material from 'Publicity Protests' to 'Films'. The NAACP's long fight against *The Birth of a Nation* is documented, as are its reactions to other cinema releases and its correspondence with film studios. In addition, the Walter White Papers within the collection provide added detail about his trips to Hollywood in the 1940s. The second invaluable source is *The Crisis*, which is available on microfilm. Extant full copies allow a detailed study of the literature and art published on its pages before and during the Harlem Renaissance. It also provided a forum for debates about the representation of African Americans through these years. The magazine is a useful source of information on a range of other topics and of particular interest are Du Bois's editorials, film reviews and articles about the arts.

This study of the NAACP's cultural campaigns is led by the Association's own concerns, priorities and interests and this has meant that not all forms of black

⁴³ They are held in part on microfilm at the British Library and in full at the Library of Congress. I have used both sources, as indicated in the references.

culture are considered.⁴⁴ It begins with the Association's fight against *The Birth of a Nation*, a struggle which established many of the key principles of the NAACP's cultural strategy. Chapters Two and Three consider how, between 1910 and 1934, the NAACP used African American art and literature to advance the race. Chapter Two examines its involvement with the Harlem Renaissance and attempts to establish the NAACP's model of African American culture. Chapter Three looks at the Association's magazine, *The Crisis*. During the twenty-four years of his editorship, Du Bois used African Americans' creative work to challenge stereotypes, encourage racial pride and forge a sense of black collective identity. In Chapter Four, I evaluate the NAACP's strategy of using the arts to change opinions about a specific example of racial discrimination: lynching. The deployment of plays, poems and paintings with an overt political message in the anti-lynching fight provides one of the clearest examples of the NAACP fusing art and propaganda. Chapter Five assesses Walter White's attempts to change the portrayal of blacks in motion pictures during the Second World War. Chapter Six investigates the NAACP's cultural strategy between 1945 and 1955. It considers the signs of improvement in movies at the same time that a new medium – television – forced the Association to resort to former tactics.

The six chapters cover the period from 1910 until 1955. The NAACP's cultural campaign began in 1910 with the creation of its magazine, *The Crisis*. 1955 marked an important watershed for both the NAACP and the wider civil rights movement. Post-*Brown*, civil rights activism began to change and there was a move away from the NAACP's gradualist approach. Of equal importance for the purposes of this project was the death of Walter White, the man who had been the driving force

⁴⁴ The NAACP undertook sporadic protests about a whole range of media including advertisements and greetings cards, which are not discussed. This was partly an issue of space but also reflects the fact that there is insufficient material within the Association record to discover whether they were successful or to draw firm conclusions about a strategy for such representations.

behind much of its cultural work especially during the second half of the period. Stretching the project over almost half a century allows a comparison between different contexts, attitudes and media, and enables an examination of the claim that the NAACP had an overarching cultural strategy.

Chapter One

The Birth of a Cultural Strategy

This study begins, perhaps inevitably given the nature and scale of the struggle, with the NAACP's fight against *The Birth of a Nation*. The campaign against D.W. Griffith's film remains the best known and most widely discussed of all the examples of the NAACP's attempts to challenge offensive depictions of the race in popular culture.¹ It marks the first time that the Association spent considerable amounts of time and effort on such a cause. The campaign tells us much about the NAACP's attitude towards culture as it established paradigms central to the ways in which the organisation would try to influence the depiction of African Americans. The NAACP's response to stereotyped representations of blacks, the tactics it used to challenge the film and the issues it encountered in this campaign would all be repeated during the NAACP's first forty-five years. This chapter asks why the NAACP spent so much time and effort fighting this particular film. It examines the tactics the Association developed, including the controversial call for censorship, as

¹ The literature on *The Birth of a Nation* is vast. The most useful studies of the NAACP's campaign are Stokes, and Cripps, *Slow Fade*. For a detailed description of the censorship of *Birth* see Nickieann Fleener-Marzec, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: Controversy, Suppression, and the First Amendment as it applies to Filmic Expression, 1915-1973* (New York: Arno Press, 1980). Studies which include a close consideration of the place of race and racism in the film include Janet Staiger, "The Birth of a Nation: Reconsidering its Reception", 195-213 and Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*", 250-93, both in *The Birth of a Nation*, Robert Lang, ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Vincent Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2000); Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973); Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Clyde Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema" in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, Daniel Bernadri, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 15-37; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in America Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Brian Gallagher, "Racist Ideology and Black Abnormality in *The Birth of a Nation*", *Phylon* 43, No. 1 (1982): 68-76; Richard Dyer, "Into the Light: The Whiteness of the South in *The Birth of a Nation*" in *Dixie Debates: Perspective on Southern Cultures*, ed. Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (London: Pluto, 1996), 165-76.

well as alternative approaches to challenging the film. It assesses the effectiveness of the NAACP's campaign against *Birth* and asks whether there were any positive effects on the organisation and whether it learnt any lessons from its decades-long struggle.

D.W. Griffith's film ran across twelve reels and lasted three hours. It remains one of the most popular, profitable and certainly "most controversial" motion pictures of all time.² It was largely based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), which had previously appeared as a stage play. It is an historical epic, told through the lives of the northern Stoneman and southern Cameron families. It incorporates plantation nostalgia and the reconciliatory narrative of the Civil War as a conflict in which North and South fought with a shared heroism and pain. The film paints Reconstruction as a time when blacks ran wild and only the formation of the Ku Klux Klan could restore order. The NAACP was extremely worried about the effect the portrayal of the race in *Birth* would have on white people's attitude towards African Americans.³ It believed negative images of the race confirmed and reinforced white people's negative perceptions. The images in *The Birth of a Nation* went beyond 'negative': they reinforced every prejudice white America held against blacks. Du Bois complained that the film represented the Negro as an "ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal and unscrupulous politician, or a faithful but doddering idiot."⁴ The NAACP feared that it would inflame racial hatred. In a letter to the Mayor of New York, the NAACP's Board of Directors protested, "One only has to watch the emotional effect upon the audience and to listen to their comments to realize what the

² Stokes, 3,7.

³ African Americans were not the only section of society to be concerned about their representation in popular culture. Groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, formed in 1913, protested about offensive portrayals of Jews in motion pictures.

⁴ Du Bois, "Editorial", *The Crisis*, May 1915, 33.

ultimate effect of this must be upon the masses.” According to the letter, a “prominent Southern woman who saw the play yesterday said that on leaving the theatre the young man who accompanied her remarked, ‘I should like to kill every nigger I know.’”⁵ The story, probably apocryphal but often recounted in NAACP correspondence, highlights campaigners’ fears that *Birth* would lead to racial violence or, at the very least, be used to justify it.

The Association’s objections to the film were summarised in a letter from the Los Angeles branch to the city council. They claimed the film “serves to revive the differences and the causes of differences between the North and the South which led to the Civil War”. The “Negro is made to look hideous and is invested with most repulsive habits and depraved passions”. They objected in particular to the “questionable scene suggesting illicit relations” between northern congressman Austin Stoneman and his mulatto housekeeper, Lydia, claiming it was “unfit for a public performance”. The conflict between the Cameron’s eldest son, Ben, and “the Negro soldiery” is “calculated to inspire bitterness and to suggest the solution of violence for the petty differences which might arise between members of the opposite races”, whilst the meeting between Cameron and Silas Lynch, Stoneman’s mulatto protégé, is a “diabolical piece of art” that is “calculated to excite feelings of animosity between the races.” They concluded that the production is “historically inaccurate” and claimed that “with subtle genius” it was “designed to palliate and excuse the lynching and other deeds of violence committed against the Negro” and “to make him in the public mind a hideous monster.”⁶ The NAACP objected to the film because it painted the race in not only an unflattering and historically inaccurate light, but also in a way that was provocative and dangerous. It worried about the effect of this depiction on

⁵ Letter Board of Directors to Mayor Mitchel, 19 March 1915. Papers of the NAACP on microfilm [hereafter NAACP/MF]: Part 11A Reel 32.

⁶ Letter from NAACP LA Branch to City Council, 2 February 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

race relations and argued it would be used to excuse violence and discrimination against African Americans. The NAACP knew it could not let such a depiction go unchallenged.

According to Thomas Cripps, African Americans “saw no art” in the film. They “would have none of the compelling beauty, painterly composition, or complex visual imagery.”⁷ Anna Everett challenges Cripps’ interpretation and argues that in fact black critics “understood only too well that the film’s artistic merits could function to sublate and obfuscate its more wrenching sociopolitical agenda of fomenting racial discord.”⁸ The members of the LA branch recognised that the film displayed “some artistic qualities” and E. Ceruti, the branch secretary, admitted that Griffith’s film “is a masterpiece of his art and, from an artistic point of view, the finest thing of its kind I have ever witnessed.”⁹ Furthermore, Walter White wrote that “‘The Birth of a Nation’, by its very excellence of photography and staging ... make it to my mind a most vicious and dangerous thing.”¹⁰ The NAACP recognised that Griffith’s skill as a filmmaker only made his film’s message all the more powerful. It attracted not only critical adoration but also huge audience numbers.¹¹

From the opening scene to the closing image, Griffith used his “subtle genius” to create what might still remain the most virulently anti-black film ever made. The film is a white supremacist tract that demonises African Americans. Much of its racist ideology came from the source material and its creator, Thomas Dixon, but Griffith also added his own prejudices to the mix. Their views, however, were not anomalies;

⁷ Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 42, 52.

⁸ Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 71. I agree with Everett’s assertion that blacks were aware of both the film’s artistic merit and the added difficulties this produced. However, Cripps is also aware of this, see for example Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 53.

⁹ Letter E. Burton Ceruti to May Childs Nerney [hereafter MCN], 3 February 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

¹⁰ Letter Walter White [hereafter WW] to Howard Butler, 2 September 1930. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 34.

¹¹ It was estimated that by 1946 over 200 million people had seen Griffith’s film. Russell Merritt, “Dixon, Griffith and the Southern Legend”, *Cinema Journal* 12, No.1 (Autumn, 1972): 27.

they reflected the prevailing racial attitudes of their time. As Dixon boasted, *Birth* “expresses the passionate faith of the entire white population of the South. If I am wrong, they are wrong.”¹² The racist imagery which filled the screen was not simply the creation of Dixon and Griffith. They drew on at least a hundred years of American culture for their inspiration. Throughout the film African Americans are portrayed in a derogatory manner, using almost every stereotype of the race in American culture. There are happy, loyal slaves (complete with ‘Mammy’ and ‘uncle tom’); foolish comics; watermelon-eating, banjo-playing ‘darkies’; over-sexed, lustful and power-hungry mulattos (male and female); dandified, ridiculous upstarts; and vicious and savage black brutes. These images have their precedent in decades of American culture, from minstrel shows through popular literature and song to the earliest films (including those made by Griffith himself ¹³). The power of *Birth* came from its ability reflect a racist imagery which was widely accepted by the American public. The circulation of these images and ideas in the broader culture facilitated *Birth*’s production and created the circumstances for its popular reception. The NAACP was all too aware that Griffith’s film drew on a century’s worth of cultural representation of African Americans. Indeed, it targeted *Birth* as an example, a symbol, of this cultural hegemony. It believed that in attacking *Birth* it could strike a blow against the racist culture and racist ideology which it elucidated and reinforced.

Griffith’s film incorporated a range of offensive stereotypes of African Americans, all of which were of concern for the NAACP. In the antebellum section of the film the slaves are shown as content and conditions are almost idyllic with what the intertitle describes as the “two-hour interval given for dinner, out of their working day from six till six.” When the Camerons show the visiting Stonemans around the

¹² Quoted in Staiger, “*The Birth of a Nation*”, 202.

¹³ On Griffith’s earlier films see Daniel Bernardi, “The Voice of Whiteness: D.W. Griffith’s Biograph Films (1908-1913)”, in *The Birth of Whiteness*, ed. Bernardi, 103-28.

plantation, the slaves perform for their masters and guests. They dance and clap, bow and scrape with the grin of the 'happy darkie' on their faces. Even during the war and in its aftermath the slaves stay loyal to their masters, as represented by the Camerons' faithful servants, which include an overweight, headscarf-wearing Mammy. The film makes a clear distinction between these good, loyal blacks and the others. After the war when Austin Stoneman visits the Cameron household, Mammy refuses to take the bags from his black servant. She grumbles, "Yo' northern low down black trash, don't try no airs on me" and kicks him up the rear for good measure. She later exclaims, "Dem free-niggers f'um de N'of am sho' crazy." Griffith and Dixon cited the loyal servant characters in defence of their racial attitudes (they could not be anti-Negro when they created such 'positive' images). They are a classic example of the 'Plantation Myth' in action: the slaves were so content with their position they remain with their masters rather than choose freedom. This is presented as absolving the South of blame for the institution of slavery and both the North and the South for their neglect of the race after the war.

Blacks provide comic relief throughout the film. In an early scene some black children, 'pickanninies', fall from the back of a wagon. Later, an old black man registering to vote says, "Ef I doan' get my franchise to fill mah bucket, I doan' want it nohow." Such scenes present blacks as non-threatening and childlike. They reflect a more paternalistic attitude, a sense of white southerners needing to 'care' for their black charges. Griffith said the claim he was anti-Negro "is like saying I am against children, as they were our children, whom we loved and cared for all our lives."¹⁴ There is a more serious message behind a scene such as the one above: if the black voter is so foolish he does not know what to do with his vote, then his race cannot be

¹⁴ Notice the past tense. Quoted in Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 64.

trusted with the franchise. The NAACP was aware that such depictions undermined its fight for black voting rights; yet another reason why it was convinced that fighting this film was crucial in its broader struggle for civil rights.

It is no coincidence that two of the most important, named black characters in *Birth* are mulattos, a figure common in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture. Lydia, Stoneman's housekeeper, and Silas Lynch, Stoneman's henchman, reflect a white distaste for and fear of racial-mixing. They incorporate many of the supposed qualities of the mulatto: fiery temper, lasciviousness and driven by a desire for power. Lydia is introduced in a scene which shows her reacting to a white senator slighting her by throwing herself to the ground, grabbing her breast, staring wild-eyed and, in an overtly sexual gesture, licking the back of her hand. The impression is animalistic, sexual and wild. Lynch has more of a veneer of respectability but from the outset it is obvious that he is driven by both his lust for power and his lust for white women, more specifically for Stoneman's daughter, Elsie. Towards the end of the film Lynch has kept Elsie captive in his room and proposes marriage. When Lynch shows her the scene of black triumph on the street outside, Griffith equates black freedom and power with what he considers the real desire of black men: to 'marry' white women.

The Lynch and Elsie storyline betrays one of the great obsessions of both Griffith and Dixon, as well as many white southerners: interracial sex. Southerners were convinced that African American men wanted to use any new found freedom or power to instigate sexual relations with white women, and American culture from this period was full of examples to prove it. In a scene from *Birth* showing an election rally, a white carpetbagger is holding a sign which reads, "Equality: Equal rights. Equal politics. Equal marriage." In another, the black-controlled South Carolina

House of Representatives celebrates the passage of a bill “providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites.” The film’s creators used fear of racial intermixing to attack the NAACP. Dixon claimed the “Negro Intermarriage Society”, as he dubbed the organisation, “hates ‘The Birth of a Nation’ for one reason only – it opposes marriage of blacks to whites.”¹⁵ Griffith, in a letter to a newspaper defending his film, launched an astonishing attack against “this prointermarriage organization”, in which he pointed out the ways in which they had attacked “anti-intermarriage legislation”. Incredulous, he clarified for his readers what this meant: “they successfully opposed bills which were framed to prohibit the marriage of Negroes to whites.”¹⁶

The intertitle immediately after the scene in the House of Representatives reads, “Later. The grim reaping begins” and there are the first shots of Gus, Flora Cameron’s attacker, lurking in the shadows. Griffith makes a direct link between black political equality and black rape of white women. Gus is a ‘black brute’, the freed black man who has regressed to his primitive, savage state and is driven by his lust for white women. This figure became increasingly common in later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, reflecting white fears about a ‘New’ Negro unleashed from the controls of slavery. The black brute was used to justify the lynching of black men, under the premise of protecting white women from assault. Dixon and Griffith certainly make this link (between the freed black man, rape of whites and lynching) explicit in their story. Gus chases Flora, declaring his desire to ‘marry’. Here again, marriage is synonymous with rape. This must partly be a matter of early twentieth-century sensibilities; an overt rape scene would not have been appropriate for the audience or the censors. It also undermined the efforts of

¹⁵ Quoted in Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’”, 279.

¹⁶ D.W. Griffith, letter to *New York Globe*, 10 April 1915. In *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Lang, 168-69.

organisations like the NAACP who challenged legal restrictions on black freedom (including who they could marry), by suggesting that black men did not want to marry white women but rather wanted to have sexual relations with them. (It was always this way round in the discourse – there was no mention of white men and black women.) Flora is the picture of innocence, whereas Gus is sinister and wild-eyed. He chases her to the edge of a cliff, where she jumps off rather than submit to his advances.

In the film, black men cannot be permitted to get away with such transgressions and the consequence for Gus, as for many African Americans in society in general (including, as was often the case, those not guilty of rape), is lynching. Ben Cameron, supposed founder of the Ku Klux Klan, takes the pillowcase from under his dead sister's head to use as a disguise. Gus is hunted down and put on "trial" before the Klan. According to Seymour Stern, the original film included a castration scene, an act common in actual lynchings.¹⁷ The remaining scene fades out as the Klan move to inflict their judgment on Gus. His dead body is dumped on the steps of Lynch's house, as, according to the intertitle, an "answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers." *The Birth of a Nation* offers a visual representation of the justification of lynching so common in white discourses about the phenomenon. The NAACP was particularly disturbed by this element of the film as it was in the midst of fighting a campaign against mob violence, which centred around trying to turn white Americans against the phenomenon. The denunciation of Griffith's glorification of lynching featured heavily in its arguments against the film. Thus the NAACP's fight against *The Birth of a Nation* can also be seen as part of its wider anti-lynching struggle.¹⁸

Freed blacks were not only consumed by their desire for white women in Griffith's narrative, they also abused their power in other ways. A scene in the first

¹⁷ Quoted in Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision", 278.

¹⁸ See Chapter Four on the anti-lynching campaign.

half of the film shows black soldiers attacking the peaceful town of Piedmont, assaulting and killing whites and looting their houses. It provides “one of the most vivid examples of black destructiveness” and at the same time “insists on their inferior intelligence by showing their dependence on white leaders.”¹⁹ The scenes in the South Carolina House of Representatives show the “negro party in control”. One of the politicians is eating chicken, another sits drinking and a further man takes his shoes off and puts his feet on the desk. The picture is one of black incompetence and was designed to send a chill through the heart of watching whites. Indeed, the whole film is calculated to inspire hatred of African Americans. Griffith brought white fears to life; he made them real. *The Birth of a Nation* is a horror story of black freedom and power. It is only through violence, in the form of the Ku Klux Klan, that order (racial, social and political) is restored. The NAACP believed that such images would indeed inspire hatred of the race. It was convinced that the way in which African Americans were represented in American culture would affect how they were treated in American society.

In January 1915 the LA branch initiated what turned out to be a decades-long campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* by the NAACP. Using tactics that would be adopted by branches all over the country, it first tried to get the city censor board to ban the movie. When that failed, it appealed to the mayor and chief of police but both claimed they were “without authority to stop the pictures”, that they were “powerless”.²⁰ When his attempts failed, branch secretary, E. Ceruti, suggested to national secretary May Childs Nerney that she put pressure on the National Board of Censorship (which was based in New York). He argued that “as this is a larger

¹⁹ Rocchio, *Reel Racism*, 34.

²⁰ Letter E. Burton Ceruti to MCN, 3 February 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

question and concerns the whole country” this tactic “would seem to have great advantage over the waging of local fights wherever the ‘Clansman’ is introduced.”²¹

An important first step in the NAACP’s national fight would be to try to persuade the National Board of Censorship to revoke its earlier approval of the film. Nerney approached its chairman, Frederic Howe, who called a special screening at the beginning of March. Howe managed to convince himself and the NAACP that the Board had changed its mind and now condemned the film. However, after a subsequent meeting with the film’s producers, during which they promised to make cuts to their picture, the Board voted to approve the film. Again, the NAACP switched tactics and appealed to the mayor of New York. Over five hundred people were present at the hearing to listen to speakers including Howe, Du Bois and Oswald Villard of the NAACP, Fred Moore, editor of the *New York Age*, and president of the Brooklyn Citizens’ Club, George Wibecan. The NAACP, as this meeting suggests, was not the only organisation concerned about the vicious representation of African Americans in *Birth*. The example of New York, however, demonstrates that not all was the picture of cooperation. Indeed, the delegation was surprised to learn that the week before their meeting Charles W. Anderson, a close associate of Booker T. Washington, had already spoken to Mayor John Mitchel who, on Anderson’s advice, had seen the film and decided that there should be cuts. Some small cuts were made but the most offensive scenes, including the Gus chase scene and Lynch’s attempt to force marriage on Elsie Stoneman, remained.²²

The next site of NAACP protest was Boston and, again, activists appealed to the mayor for action on the film. At the hearing before Mayor James Curley, on 7 April, speakers included the NAACP’s Mary White Ovington and Moorfield Storey

²¹ *Ibid.* In the end, the NAACP had to resort to these local fights.

²² *Ibid.*, 134-40.

(whose evidence was dismissed because, amazingly, he had not seen the film) and William Monroe Trotter, the editor of the *Boston Guardian*. Trotter was an outspoken and, from the NAACP's perspective unpredictable and potentially embarrassing, ally in the fight. Trotter reminded Curley that, as mayor, he needed black political support and warned him that black voters would be paying attention to how he responded to the film. Despite these warnings, the mayor claimed he had no power to stop the motion picture in his city. The few cuts he promised did little to appease the campaigners and on 17 April, a week after the film opened in Boston, Trotter led a group of African Americans to the Tremont Theater. They were denied tickets to see *Birth* and when the group refused to leave the lobby they were removed by police. Trotter and ten others were arrested and charged with disturbing the peace. This was the first example of direct action against the film and it provides a contrast with the NAACP's approach of lobbying and persuasion at this time. These were the tactics with which the NAACP felt most comfortable. Although it too would later organise direct action against theatres, it remained wary of any form of mass public protest.

Instead the NAACP took its protest to Governor David Walsh. He promised prosecution of the Tremont Theater for showing the film but, yet again, the pledge came to nothing but a few cuts. More promising was the introduction of a censorship bill by the state legislature. The NAACP helped put together a bipartisan coalition and when it had secured enough support, it lobbied members of the legislature to support its amendment that the new board of censorship only needed a majority decision rather than unanimity. The act was signed into law on 21 May but the new censorship board voted to approve the film. This incident shows how political pressure in certain constituencies could prove effective, particularly when African Americans worked together, as they did in Boston. It also shows the limits of this approach as the

NAACP was instrumental in establishing a censorship board but then could do nothing to control its decisions.²³

As events in Boston demonstrated, opponents to the film faced a formidable foe, not least because *The Birth of a Nation*'s producers and backers were at least as active in supporting their film as the activists were in campaigning against it. They challenged every attempt to have the film cut or banned. In Chicago, Mayor William Thompson, after an appeal by the local NAACP, was persuaded to rescind the licence for the film. Immediately lawyers for *The Birth of a Nation* got an injunction passed which overturned the mayor's decision.²⁴ Chicago was just one of many instances of the film's supporters securing injunctions to stop mayors from acting against their interests. This is not to say that the NAACP campaign was entirely without success. In Ohio, the Cleveland branch, with the support of Nerney and the national office, successfully used pressure from allies in high places, including the governor, to persuade the censorship board to reject the film in the state. It was banned, albeit usually only temporarily, in a host of cities, including Gary, Indiana; St. Louis, Missouri; Atlantic City, New Jersey; New Haven, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; Springfield, Massachusetts and Minneapolis, Minnesota.²⁵

The fact that in some places, even if the measures were only temporary and had little effect on the popularity of the film, campaigners were able to exert pressure on mayors, governors and other elected officials reflects the growing number and political significance of African Americans in the North. This period saw the beginning of the 'Great Migration' of African Americans from southern rural areas to

²³ On the fight in Boston see Stokes, 142-48 and "Fighting a Vicious Film – Protest against The Birth of a Nation", pamphlet published by the Boston Branch of the NAACP, 1915.

²⁴ Stokes, 150-52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

the cities of the North and Mid-West.²⁶ The NAACP benefited from these demographic changes in a number of ways. Its own membership grew as African Americans poured into urban areas, where it was strongest. Furthermore, it attempted to use the presence of increasing numbers of African Americans in cities to convince officials to ban *The Birth of a Nation*. It deliberately played on the concerns of the civic authorities about racial tension, warning that screenings could lead to race riots and civil unrest. It also pointed out the increasing importance of the black vote to many of these elected officials. It warned them that African American voters would use their response to the film as a measure of their concern for the race.²⁷ Thus the campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* was also a mechanism for rallying the black community and for bringing the concerns of African Americans to the attention of the public and politicians. NAACP leaders quickly realised it could have beneficial consequences for their organisation and for their wider struggle for equality. It mobilised African Americans behind a common cause and provided a national issue that raised the profile of the NAACP and the black community more generally.

By May 1915 the NAACP had developed a strategy for fighting *The Birth of a Nation*. Most of these campaigns were carried out at a state level, with support and coordination from the national office; this meant that most of those carrying out the day-to-day work against the film were African Americans but that it was led by white officers at the top. Replying to a query about challenging the film in Indianapolis, May Childs Nerney suggested asking a lawyer to see whether an ordinance already existed in the city which could be interpreted in order to keep it out (this was usually

²⁶ Over one million people, 10% of the black population, left the South between 1910 and 1930. Over 400,000 left between 1910 and 1920. Carole Marks, "Black Workers and the Great Migration North", *Phylon* 46, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1985): 148. See also, for example, Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1991).

²⁷ This course of action was not available in the South, where there was virtually nothing African Americans could do to stop the film. They had no political power and, to make matters worse, the film was, predictably, even more popular than it was in the North. Stokes, 160-62.

one which invoked concerns about public disorder). If so, she argued, "it will probably be easy to suppress the picture under that authority." If not then "two courses are open"; these were "to get an ordinance introduced into the Common Council which will cover it, or to build up such public opinion that the play cannot be shown." In Nerney's opinion the "first procedure will be very difficult. The second's practical but means hard work ... you should immediately interest the local clergy, colored and white, civic organisations, welfare societies, secret societies, women's clubs etc." Letters from these groups and individuals "should be sent to the Police Commissioner, License Commissioner and Mayor protesting against the play on the ground that it endangers public morals and may lead to a breach of the peace."²⁸ Nerney's letter set out the limited options open to opponents of the film. Their only real chance was to try to persuade the authorities that the film caused unrest.

America's entry into the First World War allowed the NAACP to develop a new angle to its campaign. Although it still involved persuasion, world events allowed it to strengthen its attack. Using a strategy which would be repeated and developed during the Second World War, the Association's leaders argued that the film would be detrimental to morale and could disrupt the war effort.²⁹ John Shillday, who had replaced Nerney as national secretary, warned that at a time "when colored people are performing their full share of patriotic service both in the fighting forces of the nation in the battle fields of Europe and at home, and when national unity and not race antagonisms should be accentuated, it is important to the national morale that all diverse influence be subordinated to the common good."³⁰ The NAACP summoned arguments of black patriotism to challenge the racist premise of the film. It had some

²⁸ Letter MCN to Mrs Henderson, Indianapolis, 24 May 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

²⁹ See Chapter Three for more on African Americans and World War One and Chapter Four on film and the Second World War.

³⁰ Letter John Shillady, 10 October 1918. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 33.

success with this approach as, for example, *Birth* was banned in West Virginia for the duration of the war. In October 1918 the NAACP launched a nationwide campaign to persuade state governors and state councils of defense to ban the film; the governors of Oregon, Minnesota and Rhode Island promised the film would not be shown in their states.³¹

After a few years of relative inactivity with regards to *The Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP sprang into action once again in 1921. In one of the few examples of the Association using tactics of direct action during this period, it challenged the film's screening in New York by protesting to the civic authorities and by organising a demonstration outside the Capitol Theater. The protest outside the cinema was carried out by "colored veterans of the world war and others" in order "to register a peaceable protest against what is planning propaganda for the Ku Klux Klan."³² According to the NAACP press releases five people were arrested and convicted for distributing leaflets.³³ The symbolism of African Americans who had fought for their country was stressed by the NAACP. Equally important was that the Association had begun to combine its fight against *The Birth of a Nation* with the fight against the Ku Klux Klan. It made the link again when protesting a new run of the film in Boston the same year and this time, unlike in New York, the organisation and William Trotter were successful in getting the film banned.³⁴

When it heard about a showing in Kansas two years later, the NAACP sent a telegram to the governor reminding him that "[t]his dangerous film in its deliberate distortion of known historical facts and its glorification of the infamous KKK has caused numerous racial clashes and is largely responsible for [the] present day revival

³¹ Stokes, 227-31.

³² NAACP Press Release, 7 May 1921. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 33.

³³ NAACP Press Release, November 1921. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 33.

³⁴ Stokes, 237-38.

of Klan.”³⁵ Walter White’s suggestions to the chairman of the Kansas City branch of the NAACP for ways to fight the film included the “political angle”. He pointed out that Governor Davis would know he might antagonise black voters and “[w]ith anything like a close election, Negroes can swing any election in the state.” White also suggested getting Catholic, Jewish and labour groups on board.³⁶ Stokes suggests that the NAACP’s campaign in the first half of the 1920s was relatively effective. This was largely because it combined an assault on *The Birth of a Nation* with an attack on the revived Ku Klux Klan: that is to say, because “the Klan was no longer just anti-black, the NAACP began to find new allies among those whom the Klan attacked.”³⁷ The NAACP, it seemed, was most successful when it could tap into national discourses (patriotism and unease about the revival of the Klan) and if it could secure allies outside the black community. The NAACP files reveal that these were tactics which the NAACP would repeat both in its fight against racist white culture and in its broader struggle. However this reliance on outside forces serves to highlight the fact that when fighting *The Birth of a Nation* by themselves and on their own terms African Americans were severely limited.

In its fight against *The Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP used a variety of methods but its aim was consistent: to have the film banned outright and if this was not possible then for it to be cut beyond recognition. The goal of censorship proved to be its greatest challenge and, according to some scholars, the underlying reason for its failure. By 1915 censorship was becoming an increasingly contentious issue. As Thomas Cripps notes, “in intellectual circles cinema was beginning to take on serious

³⁵ Telegram to Governor of Kansas, 8 June 1923. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 34.

³⁶ WW to C. Comegor, Chairman Kansas City Branch, 17 December 1923. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 34.

³⁷ Stokes, 235.

aesthetic overtones that precluded the use of censorship as a tactic.”³⁸ These changes had a direct impact on the NAACP because white liberals were caught between their hatred for *The Birth of a Nation* and their hatred for censorship. A Chicago newspaper pointed out that the NAACP’s campaign “must have embarrassed those members of the association who ... have always fought censorship of any kind. Liberals are torn between two desires. They hate injustice to the negro and they hate bureaucratic control of thought.”³⁹ The NAACP leadership was aware that their call for censorship was contentious and that it lost them supporters. They were uneasy about the principle but decided the alternative, to do nothing and let Griffith’s film go unchallenged, was worse. In a letter to the branches, for example, Nerney conceded that “All forms of censorship are dangerous to the free expression of art” but, wherever a censor board existed, “it was our right and our duty to see that this body acted with fairness and justice.” Du Bois later acknowledged that “We are aware now as then that it is dangerous to limit expression”. However, he went on, “without some limitations civilization could not endure.”⁴⁰ Jane Gaines reminds us that “when the call to censor is simultaneously a struggle for social equality and a campaign for racial consciousness and against marginalization, we have to consider how censorship empowers those groups who have no claim on power.”⁴¹ In other words, African Americans had few other options when trying to exert some control over how they were depicted in white culture.

In February 1915, in the case of *Mutual Film Corp v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, the Supreme Court had ruled that motion pictures were a commercial product and not protected speech under the First Amendment. It found that the “exhibition of

³⁸ Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 53.

³⁹ Quoted in Stokes, 133.

⁴⁰ Nerney and Du Bois quoted in Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 58, 67.

⁴¹ Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 223.

motion pictures is a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit like other spectacles".⁴² This, in theory, should have made the NAACP's task easier. At the very least it might have made its fight against a motion picture easier to defend. Furthermore, Louis Menand argues that during the Progressive era rights were actually understood to be inherently conservative. They were invoked by business to claim protection from regulation or public intervention. It was not until the fight for the right to speak out against America's involvement in the First World War that Progressives began to champion the First Amendment. Therefore, it is not as incongruous at it may first appear for a civil rights organisation such as the NAACP to subsume a Constitutional right to an argument about public order.⁴³ In fact, sources from the period suggest that even in 1915 the NAACP was uneasy about championing censorship but saw it as a necessary step to prevent a greater evil.

As might be expected, the film's supporters framed their arguments in terms of free speech. Griffith, for one, was incensed by the Supreme Court ruling. He published a pamphlet, "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech", in which he described cinema as the "laboring man's university" and motion pictures as "the pictorial press". He warned that if people "muzzle the 'movies'" they will "defeat the educational purpose of this graphic art," for "[c]ensorship demands of the picture makers a sugar-coated and false version of life's truths."⁴⁴ The NAACP knew that for many white liberals, and indeed black ones too, the demand for censorship was a slippery slope. If the NAACP wanted to ban pictures that showed African Americans in a negative light, what was to stop people banning films which showed the race in

⁴² Paul McEwan, "Lawyers, Bibliographies, and the Klan: Griffith's Resources in the Censorship Battle over *The Birth of a Nation* in Ohio", *Film History* 20 (2008): 358.

⁴³ Louis Menand, "Do Movies Have Rights?", in *Thomas Dixon and the Birth of Modern America*, ed. Gillespie Michele K. and Randall Hall (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 187-91.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 195.

positive ways? Both Cripps and Stokes identify white liberal uneasiness about censorship as an explanation for the NAACP's failure in its campaign. Cripps goes so far as to argue that "in the final battle censorship was a rearguard action rather than a direct assault on racism in American life."⁴⁵ However, whilst the campaign was reactive rather than proactive, the NAACP still saw it as a "direct assault" on racial prejudice. The film did more than just show racism on the screen, it was racism; it caused it and was an example of it. So to attack the film was to attack racism. Unfortunately for the Association, one of the few ways in which it could attack the film was through censorship. It was to be an issue which would haunt the NAACP's fight against *The Birth of a Nation* for as long as the campaign continued.

Censorship became the main course of action because there were so few others available to the NAACP when *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915. One which did emerge was to produce alternative images on film to counteract the negative impact of Griffith's depiction. This approach would prove to be equally, if not more, fraught than that of censorship. Nickie Fleener lists the difficulties in using films to produce positive images to challenge *The Birth of a Nation*: it "required money, technical expertise, equipment and access to motion picture distribution channels."⁴⁶ For African Americans at the start of the century, all of the above were in short supply. Nevertheless, steps were taken in this direction, with limited success.

A short epilogue, called "The New Era", and since then commonly referred to as the "Hampton Epilogue", was added to *The Birth of a Nation* and first shown at Boston's Tremont Theater on 16 April 1915. Little is known about how precisely this

⁴⁵ Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 64.

⁴⁶ Nickie Fleener, "Answering Film with Film: the Hampton Epilogue, a Positive Alternative to the Negative Stereotypes Presented in *The Birth of a Nation*", *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7, No. 4 (1980): 401.

addition came about or of what exactly it consisted. The intention was to show the 'progress' of blacks since Reconstruction and it was made up of scenes filmed on the campus of the Hampton Institute (a historically black centre of education training).⁴⁷ The epilogue reflects the argument frequently made by the film's producers that *Birth* was a comment on blacks during Reconstruction and was not a reflection of African Americans since that period, used to deflect criticism of the film as racist. The NAACP was highly critical of the epilogue; Nerney said it was simply "adding insult to injury".⁴⁸ From the NAACP's perspective it was a cynical attempt by the filmmakers to get around bans of the film and to legitimise their production.

Around the same time that the Hampton Epilogue made its debut, the NAACP became involved in plans to make its own contribution to the world of motion pictures. The idea for *Lincoln's Dream*, as this production was to be called, seems to have originated with the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Elaine Sterne, a screenwriter with Universal, approached the NAACP about a possible film. According to Mary White Ovington, after seeing *The Birth of a Nation* Sterne felt "impelled" to write a story as an alternative. She wanted to "treat the periods of slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction with dignity and historic accuracy" and to "show the important and often heroic part that the Negro played during these difficult times."⁴⁹ Universal would raise \$150,000 of the capital needed to make the film if the NAACP could raise the remaining \$50,000.⁵⁰ In a letter to raise funds, Nerney reminded supporters that the "effect of this play on the public cannot be overestimated. If it goes unchallenged it will take years to overcome the harm it is doing. The entire country will acquiesce in the Southern program of segregation,

⁴⁷ See *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 412.

⁴⁹ Letter from Mary White Ovington, n.d. circa June 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

⁵⁰ Letter MCN to Dr Charles Bentley, Chicago, 11 May 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

disenfranchisement and lynching." She suggested that "[i]f we do challenge" the film "it must be done in some telling way, that is, by a spectacular photo-play."⁵¹ There were discussions within the national leadership of the NAACP about the content of the proposed film. Ovington wanted a tale of black "suffering and strivings" that would "meet with favor from conservative and radical alike."⁵² The issue of storylines was not the only dilemma for the leadership; they could see the advantages of such a film but they knew that they did not have the resources needed to fund such a venture. Soon, Universal became aware of this too and the idea sank from view.⁵³ The incident serves to show the restrictions that African Americans and their supporters faced in 1915. They did not have the resources to create anything like a viable alternative to Griffith's accomplished and successful production. This is not to say that the NAACP dismissed the idea of creating positive images of the race. Rather, as will be seen in the following two chapters, it realised that this would have to be done elsewhere, using different media.

The Birth of a Nation, from the NAACP's perspective, had such a powerful effect on racial prejudice because of its claims of historical accuracy. It purported to tell the true story of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In this historical narrative slaves were content with their position in the South, the Civil War was fought over states' rights and Reconstruction was a grave mistake that allowed corrupt northerners to exact revenge on the South and gave blacks power which they abused in a wanton display of brutishness and destruction. One of the chief architects of this horror was

⁵¹ Letter from MCN to supporters, 10 June 1915. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 32.

⁵² Thomas Cripps, "The Making of *The Birth of a Race*: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies", in *Birth of Whiteness*, ed. Bernardi, 44.

⁵³ Sterne had also contacted Tuskegee about a possible film but this too came to nothing. Tuskegee was involved in *The Birth of a Race* (1918) but African Americans increasingly lost influence over it and the final film had nothing to do with their original message or ideas. See *Ibid.*

the Radical Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, who appears in the film as Austin Stoneman, complete with club foot and mulatto housekeeper. The film purports to be an accurate 'history' in a number of ways: historical figures, such as Lincoln, or characters closely based on historical figures appear throughout and the central story – that of the Cameron and Stoneman families – is set within the context of historical events.

African American historian John Hope Franklin blames the historical propaganda of *The Birth of a Nation* on Thomas Dixon⁵⁴ and much of the material discussed above comes from Dixon's novels, particularly the second half of the film, which deals with Reconstruction and the rise of the Klan. However, whilst Griffith used Dixon for his inspiration and his interpretation of history, much of the film's claim to historical accuracy was created by the filmmaker and his staging and technique. This, for the NAACP, was part of Griffith's "subtle genius". He quoted from historical sources in the intertitles and created "historical facsimiles", which were scenes introduced by titles which cited published sources and were "staged to produce the effect of a line drawing coming to life".⁵⁵ The film's publicists went to great lengths to emphasise the amount of "research" that went into the "history" depicted in the film, the hope being that this would "legitimate the film for both spectators and critics" and attract a wider middle-class audience.⁵⁶ Both Dixon and Griffith continually defended the film as an accurate portrayal of events. In response to an attack on the film by the *New York Globe*, Griffith claimed his film was "based upon the authenticated history of the period" and told "a story which is based upon

⁵⁴ John Hope Franklin, "The Birth of a Nation: Propaganda as History" in *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988*, John Hope Franklin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989), 10-23.

⁵⁵ Gallagher, "Racist Ideology", p.75. See also Mimi White, "The Birth of a Nation: History as Pretext", in *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Lang, 216-17.

⁵⁶ Stokes, 175, 177.

truth in every vital detail".⁵⁷ The film's producers could demonstrate that it was based on "authenticated history" by citing scholarly writing from the period which shared *Birth's* interpretation of events. An application by the distributors in 1925 to overturn a ban in Ohio included an annotated bibliography that listed eight major sources for its version of Reconstruction along with excerpts from these histories. The sources in the lawyers' application included Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People* (1902), *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (1906-7) by Walter Fleming and James S. Pike's *The Prostrate South: South Carolina under Negro Rule* (1873).⁵⁸

The consensus in academic and popular history at the beginning of the twentieth century was that Reconstruction had been at best a mistake and at worst the cruel and vindictive punishment of the South, during which freed blacks and corrupt northerners exploited the defenceless region (and its women).⁵⁹ Just as it drew on decades of derogatory imagery of blacks in popular culture, so *The Birth of a Nation* drew part of its strength from this historical consensus. The NAACP strongly objected to the film's representation of history and its claims of accuracy because they made its task all the more difficult. In fighting Griffith's film the Association was also fighting a wider discourse on race in American memory. Indeed, this was one of the very reasons it mounted such a campaign against *The Birth of a Nation*; it deliberately wanted to challenge this historical and cultural consensus. *The Birth of a Nation* was a symbolic target for America's acceptance of this interpretation of history.

Moorfield Storey wrote to the editor of the *Boston Herald* to challenge the argument that the film was a presentation of 'history'. He quoted some basic facts of Reconstruction in order to show "how absolutely false is the view of history presented

⁵⁷ D.W. Griffith, letter to *New York Globe*, 10 April 1915 in *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Lang, 168-69.

⁵⁸ McEwan, "Lawyers, Bibliographies", 360.

⁵⁹ The historiography was dominated by the 'Dunningite School' and included works by William A. Dunning, C. William Ramsdell, James G. de Roulhac Hamilton and Walter Lynwood Fleming. See Lewis, *Fight*, 353-55; Stokes, 196-97.

by this play.” Storey explained the motivation for and effect of such a distortion: “It is an effort to mislead the people of this country who are ignorant of these facts, to excite a strong feeling against the colored people already suffering everywhere from race prejudice, and to strengthen the hands of those who would deny them their equal rights as citizens.”⁶⁰ When Griffith offered to give ten thousand dollars to charity if Storey could find a single incident in the film that was not historically accurate, the NAACP president asked whether “it was historic that a lieutenant had held a white woman in a room ... and demanded a forced marriage.” Griffith had no reply and when he went to shake Storey’s hand, the NAACP man refused.⁶¹

Storey and his colleagues knew that history was important, that perceptions of the past shape the way the present is understood, and that whomever controls the historical narrative wields great power. The old cliché that history is written by the victor must have rung painfully true for the NAACP. Dixon and Griffith could protest all they liked that the film was merely a comment on blacks in the last century⁶² but the NAACP knew that it reflected on African Americans in 1915. So-called ‘evidence’ that blacks abused freedom and were corrupted by political power was clearly harmful for a race struggling for full enfranchisement and equality. A similar concern with controlling the narrative can be seen in the NAACP’s anti-lynching work; it challenged the representation and justification of lynching which appeared in white accounts. The NAACP provided an alternative to the dominant, white racist discourse because it believed this shaped people’s attitudes towards lynching.⁶³

⁶⁰ Letter from Moorfield Storey to editor of *Boston Herald*, n.d. in “Fighting a Vicious Film”, 22.

⁶¹ Du Bois, “Fighting Race Calumny”, *The Crisis*, June 1915, 87.

⁶² Dixon argued, “I am not attacking the Negro of today. I am recording faithfully the history of fifty years ago.” Thomas Dixon, letter to *New York Globe*, 10 April 1915 in *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Lang, 166-67.

⁶³ See Chapter Four.

Similarly, the historical narrative influenced how whites thought about African Americans and their place within the nation.

Few people were more acutely aware of the importance of history in the battle for civil rights than Du Bois. Throughout his life he was engaged, in the words of David Blight, in a “struggle for American historical memory”. Du Bois “appreciated the political and social stakes of historical debates; he understood the power of historical images in shaping social policy and human interactions.”⁶⁴ There had been some earlier challenges to the prevailing consensus on the Reconstruction era, including one by Du Bois himself, but the groundbreaking work that dismantled the arguments of Dunningite historians was his *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).⁶⁵ In his book Du Bois challenged the ‘Old South’ myth of slavery as an idyllic and paternalistic institution, he argued that slavery was a central cause of the Civil War and stressed the important role of abolitionists and blacks in the period. He celebrated the achievements of Radical Reconstruction and mourned the dismantling of black gains. As Blight summarises, *Black Reconstruction* “challenged much more than historiography; it challenged the racism and social theory through which most Americans gained any level of historical consciousness.”⁶⁶ It did more than provide an alternative history; it provided an alternative way of thinking about history, and with that, of thinking about race.

Black Reconstruction may not have been a direct answer to Griffith’s film – Du Bois was more concerned with challenging historiography than popular culture – but it certainly stands as one of the best refutations of the film’s historical narrative. It

⁶⁴ Blight, “Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory”, 46.

⁶⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois “Reconstruction and its Benefits”, *American Historical Review* 15 (1910): 781-99; Major John R. Lynch, *The Facts of Reconstruction* (1913); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935).

⁶⁶ Blight, “Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory”, 60.

was not, however, Du Bois's only alternative construction of black history. The motion picture industry was all but closed to African Americans so Du Bois used another medium, one more readily accessible: theatre, or more specifically, historical pageantry. *The Star of Ethiopia*, Du Bois's grand pageant, "was to be the most thoughtful, ambitious response to Dixon and Griffith's racist epic."⁶⁷ Written in 1911 and first performed in 1913, it preceded *The Birth of a Nation* by a number of years. Nevertheless, Du Bois had anticipated the tone and message of the motion picture because *The Birth of a Nation* fitted within a wider discourse which undermined black history and culture. When the film was released Du Bois already had his answer to hand and the 1915 production in Washington must have been staged with *The Birth of a Nation* in mind.

The Star of Ethiopia was an ambitious project carried out on a grand scale. The first production in New York was followed by three more, in Washington DC (1915), Philadelphia (1916) and Los Angeles (1925). According to Du Bois, 350 actors were used in the first production and a thousand appeared when it was performed in Washington.⁶⁸ The pageant, wrote a reviewer in a black newspaper, "covers a period of 10,000 years and more in the mythology, history and development of our race. It vividly tells the story of its work, its suffering, triumphs and hopes as an integral part of the human family."⁶⁹ It consisted of five scenes: "The Gift of Iron"; "The Dream of Egypt", "The Glory of Ethiopia"; "The Valley of Humiliation" and "The Vision Everlasting". Using music, dance and tableau, representations of black history flowed across the stage. The early peoples of Africa were followed by the great civilizations of Ethiopia and Egypt. The horror of slavery, as well as the efforts

⁶⁷ Lewis, *Biography*, 509; see also 460-61.

⁶⁸ David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 89.

⁶⁹ "The Great Pageant", *Washington Bee*, 23 October 1915. Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Reel 87.

of abolitionists and insurrectionists, were shown. Next came the Civil War to free the race from bondage. These freed slaves developed professions and culture but came under attack from discrimination and violence. Despite these setbacks the pageant finished with a message of hope as the gifts of “Knowledge”, “Labor”, “Science”, “Justice” and “Love” were assembled to create the “Tower of Light”.⁷⁰

Du Bois, according to Stokes, had “grown increasingly doubtful of the value of political protest in connection with *Birth*” and so saw his pageant as a “cultural weapon”.⁷¹ Rather than lobbying and boycotting, African Americans could fight culture with culture. This, Du Bois thought, might be a more effective way to challenge the historical narrative. The pageant was created and performed as an explicit contribution to the nation’s historical memory; it made its debut during the “National Emancipation Exposition” in New York to commemorate fifty years since the Emancipation Proclamation.⁷² Du Bois’ pageant reminded its audience that the Civil War was fought over the issue of slavery and that African Americans had played and would continue to play an important role in the nation’s history. Du Bois’s intentions for his work stretched even further. He wrote that the pageant aimed to “get people interested in the development of Negro drama”, to teach “colored people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich emotional life through a new theatre” and “to reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing.”⁷³ Broadly speaking these goals were to shape much of the NAACP’s cultural strategy during the early decades of the twentieth century. During the Harlem Renaissance and through *The Crisis* the NAACP sought to highlight the culture and history of the race and instil racial pride amongst African Americans. At the same time, it hoped to prove

⁷⁰ *The Star of Ethiopia* Script, Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Reel 87.

⁷¹ Stokes, 167.

⁷² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2001), 375-77.

⁷³ Quoted in Krasner, *Beautiful Pageant*, 82.

to whites that blacks were the product of great civilization and the producers of great art and therefore were entitled to full citizenship and equal rights.⁷⁴

The campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1923 brought mixed results for the NAACP. It failed in its efforts to get the film banned in most places for any substantial period of time and although some cuts were made the film's basic message of white supremacy remained intact. Melvyn Stokes concludes that the NAACP campaigns in 1915 and 1916 had "essentially failed". The organisation faced many difficulties, including "widespread indifference" on the part of some blacks and "deep-seated opposition to censorship" on the part of many whites. However, its later campaign in the 1920s was more successful.⁷⁵ Thomas Cripps, who focuses on the earlier period of activism, finds that the black campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* failed because of internal divisions amongst African Americans (for example, the opposing forces of the NAACP, the Tuskegee machine and William Trotter), the lack of a coherent plan and the alienation of potential white allies because of the issue of censorship.⁷⁶

The NAACP not only failed to stop the film, its campaign may even have been counterproductive. The publicity surrounding the many battles only increased the notoriety of the film and therefore the public's interest. In fact, Du Bois recognised that they "probably succeeded in advertising it even beyond its admittedly notable merits".⁷⁷ Every time the NAACP organised a public hearing or staged a boycott or printed an article about *Birth*, it risked raising the profile of the film. Even more

⁷⁴ The pageant demonstrated that it was not always easy to reach a white audience. A review of the performance in Washington commented that "only a very few white persons came to see it." "The Great Pageant", *Washington Bee*, 23 October 1915. Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Reel 87.

⁷⁵ Stokes, 168, 227-41.

⁷⁶ Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 57, 64-69.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Stokes, 169.

damaging, according to Jane Gaines, was that the focus on Griffith's film came at the expense of films made by African Americans, such as the work of Oscar Micheaux.⁷⁸ Indeed, the NAACP seemed closed off to the possibilities of black filmmaking and would remain that way for the following four decades. Of greater concern, from the NAACP's perspective, was the conclusion that white film producers suppressed black roles as result of the aggressive campaign against *The Birth of a Nation*. Rather than having to alter roles to fit campaigners' demands or risk a fight, filmmakers began to cut black parts altogether.⁷⁹

The consequences of the fight were not all negative, however. Perhaps most significantly for the NAACP it helped to raise the profile of the organisation. This was the first campaign which really brought the fledgling Association to the nation's attention. The impact can be measured in terms of the NAACP's membership figures. At the beginning of 1915 it had 5,000 members, by early May membership had grown to over 7,000 and by December there were "nearly 10,000".⁸⁰ Not only did the campaign offer publicity to the organisation, it also gave African Americans a cause to rally behind. The Report of the Chairman in January 1916 concluded that "nothing has so helped to unloosen the energy and to stimulate the cooperative support of the colored people of this country as this attack on their character and their place in history."⁸¹ The campaign raised racial consciousness and gave African Americans a voice when they were so often denied one. Furthermore, if the NAACP believed that racial prejudice was the race's worst enemy and that it was shaped by representations in American culture, the campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* provided it with the perfect opportunity to illustrate this to others. Indeed, Gaines finds that "[i]n the end"

⁷⁸ Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 263.

⁷⁹ Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 63.

⁸⁰ Stokes, 169. Of course, other factors, such as black migration into the urban areas which were NAACP strongholds, could explain this growth.

⁸¹ Report of Chairman to Board of Directors, January 1916. NAACP/MF: Part 1 Reel 1.

the NAACP “won the publicity war, evidence of which is the fact that the 1915 public interpretation of the film as viciously racist has remained the dominant interpretation.”⁸² The NAACP might not have been able to convince the public authorities to ban the film in 1915, but it was able to persuade future generations of Americans of the dangerous and offensive message of Griffith’s film.

The campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* tells us much about the NAACP’s approach to culture, both through what it achieved in the fight and through what it failed to accomplish. The basic premise behind all the Association’s cultural campaigns was that inequality was caused by racial prejudice and that this mental attitude was largely shaped by images of African Americans that appeared in the arts and popular culture. Therefore, to alter racial prejudice African Americans and their allies must alter those images. During the campaign against *Birth* this consisted primarily of a negative fight to censor the representation of race in the film. Censorship proved problematic for the NAACP but this tactic was not discarded by the leadership. It would continue to call for *Birth* to be banned in the 1930s and it had the same aim in the battle against *Amos ’n’ Andy* in the 1950s.

Other tactics, in their broader sense, proved both more successful and more appealing. Lobbying and persuasion were often the preferred approach of the NAACP. National and branch leaders had some, albeit often temporary, success when they appealed to city mayors and state governors. Their appeals for action were especially effective when they could invoke the national discourse of patriotism and morale, as they could during the First World War. This was a lesson well learnt and by the Second World War it had become an important tactic. When Walter White went to Hollywood during these years he used the tactics of lobbying and persuasion,

⁸² Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 230.

albeit on a more personal level, and made similar appeals to morality, patriotism and national unity. White and his organisation seemed to have learnt an important lesson by the 1940s: they could not wait until a film had been made (when they could only resort to censorship), they must try and influence the filmmaking process itself.

Another lesson learnt from *Birth* was how to conduct a campaign. Most of the battles against the film were instigated and carried out at a local level, with the national office offering advice and attempting to coordinate these various actions. This piecemeal, branch-led approach ultimately proved ineffective. From then on any cultural campaign was devised and directed by the national office. Even more significantly, the fight against *Birth* marked the first and only time that whites would lead the national office's involvement with art and culture. By the time the NAACP renewed its fight against *Birth* in the 1930s African Americans would be spearheading the campaign to influence how their race appeared in American culture.

The campaign was not just a battle against one film, it was also a struggle over the national cultural and historical consensus. The NAACP deliberately targeted *Birth* because it was a symbol of white culture's excoriation of the race. In the end, focusing on one film was a misguided tactic. The NAACP became obsessed with the film, to the extent that it was blinded to almost all other cultural representations of African Americans during these years. To the Association, stopping *Birth* became an end in itself rather than a means to an end. For a while the film's importance became grossly exaggerated; it lost sight of the fact that this was just one example in a racist culture. Furthermore, after the protracted and ultimately unsuccessful war against *Birth*, the NAACP became disillusioned by its lack of influence on white culture. It continued to engage in tussles with Griffith's film but it would be the end of the 1930s before it felt it could take on the white film industry again.

The NAACP objected to the historical representation of African Americans and its portrayal of the Civil War and Reconstruction era because it understood that this period of history in particular was crucial in shaping people's attitude towards African Americans and their place in the nation. Furthermore, the NAACP knew that control of the historical narrative was important. Similarly, it encouraged, produced and published factual and fictional accounts of lynching which challenged white narratives. Journalists, writers and artists would create an alternative record of lynching, just as Du Bois attempted to create an alternative record of Reconstruction.

The Association recognised the need to create alternative images which showed the race in a more accurate and positive light. Even before the release of *The Birth of a Nation* the NAACP had been engaged with other cultural forms. It realised that there were forms – fine art, poetry, fiction, drama – which, whilst they might not have the popular appeal or reach of film, offered other advantages. African Americans could not only use these forms of 'high' culture to produce positive images of black life, but the very act of creation would also demonstrate their talent and culture: they could instil in African Americans a real pride in their race and forge a sense of black collective identity. If the campaign against *Birth* was reactive and negative, this would be a positive celebration of black life and culture. It began with the first publication of *The Crisis* magazine in 1910 and would come to fruition with the unprecedented cultural outpouring of the Harlem Renaissance. The art exhibitions and book publications, the lauded black artists, the pictures and stories of talented, successful and respectable African Americans: it would all add up to an exuberant black riposte to Griffith's film.

Chapter Two

The NAACP and the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, the artistic and cultural (re)awakening of black America, lasted from around 1919 until the middle of the 1930s.¹ The NAACP's own artistic and cultural awakening actually preceded this by almost ten years, with the launch of its magazine, *The Crisis*. Nevertheless, the Renaissance provides a useful context for examining the NAACP's position on the arts during its first few decades. It was a period when many intellectuals and artists debated what was meant by 'Negro art', argued over what sort of work black artists should produce and discussed how African Americans should be portrayed in art. During the twenties a cultural strategy formed a specific part of the Association's agenda: a press release of the Association's activities for 1925 listed the "Cultural and Artistic development of the Negro", alongside campaigns against segregation, lynching and discrimination.² This chapter extrapolates, from the writing, discussions and actions of NAACP leaders, the Association's model of African American culture. It examines the reasons for adopting a cultural strategy, asks in what ways the NAACP became involved in the Harlem Renaissance and compares the ideas of the Association's leaders with other leading intellectuals and artists.

In the 1920s Harlem, New York, became the centre, psychologically and physically, for an outpouring of African American culture. There were considerable differences between the types, aesthetics and philosophies of work produced during

¹ There exists some difference amongst historians as to the years which mark the perimeters of the Renaissance. For example, Steven Watson's timeline of the Renaissance begins in 1920 and ends in 1930 with the publication of Langston Hughes's novel, *Not Without Laughter*. Whereas, Nathan Huggins begins his study with the triumphant return in 1919 of the all-black 369th Regiment and ends it with the Harlem riot of 1935. Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995); Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*.

² Press Release, 24 January 1925. NAACP/MF: Part 1, Reel 1.

the Harlem Renaissance but what united the participants was the sense of being part of a movement. Moreover, many of the artists and intellectuals, including those from the NAACP, shared a belief that the arts could improve race relations. Black intellectuals, such as professor of Philosophy at Howard University, Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson, Director of Research at the National Urban League and editor of its magazine, *Opportunity*, saw the creation of art as important for the black race. The NAACP's view of racism – that inequality was a product of prejudice – was shared by others. According to Nathan Huggins, Harlem intellectuals believed racial problems were “social aberrations due to moral corruption, fear, or ignorance” and so, to challenge this ignorance, a “doubting and sceptical world had to be shown evidence of Negro ability, especially achievements in the arts and literature”.³ The arts were thus seen as a tool in the fight for racial equality. Alain Locke, in his introduction to a key text of the Renaissance, the anthology *The New Negro* (1925), wrote that the “immediate hope” for the race “rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective.”⁴ Black intellectuals such as Locke, Charles Johnson, Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, “espied small cracks in the wall of racism that could, over time, be widened” through the production of racial images. The Renaissance was to be a “display of artistic talent and discipline calculated to make it increasingly harder for influential whites to deny full social and civil rights to blacks.”⁵

The strategy towards black culture which was developed by the NAACP during the 1920s followed this basic premise. The Association hoped that the production of art and literature by African Americans would change white attitudes

³ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 27.

⁴ Alain Locke, “The New Negro”, in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1997), 15.

⁵ Lewis, *Fight for Equality*, 156.

towards the race and undermine the prejudice which underpinned racial inequality. It encouraged and celebrated black artists as examples of black achievement and proof of 'civilization'. These artists were to create the forms of 'high' culture which the NAACP believed middle-class white Americans valued and admired. The hope was that this demonstration of culture would convince whites that African Americans deserved and were capable of achieving full equality. The creation of culture was thus a political act. Furthermore, there were those within the NAACP who believed that the content of that culture should be political, that art and literature could advance the race by showing positive images of African Americans which challenged racist white assumptions. In addition, this 'Negro' culture would be both 'black' and 'American': it would celebrate distinctive racial characteristics at the same time that it was integrated into a wider American culture.

Not everyone involved with the Renaissance accepted the NAACP's concept of culture, however, particularly the notion that art was political. There was much debate about the type of work produced and the reasons for its production. Du Bois's outspoken calls for 'propaganda' put him at odds with many of the artists of the Renaissance, particularly with what was considered the 'younger' generation such as Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman. Nathan Huggins describes the split thus: the "old guard wanted to see literature that was uplifting" whereas the younger artists adopted an "art-for-art's sake position". However, he goes on, neither of these groups would "be comfortable with what the war had taught men to call 'propaganda'."⁶ During the First World War, propaganda became associated with state deception of the public, through manipulation of the media and culture. For the NAACP,

⁶ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 201.

propaganda was culture with a message which would help in the fight for equality; it was art and literature which showed the race in a favourable light.

The NAACP's engagement with black culture was oriented towards the print media. The Harlem Renaissance, of course, encompassed much more than this limited focus would suggest: dance, theatre and music existed alongside and interlinked with literature and art. In fact, members of the NAACP, especially Du Bois, were involved with theatre. He established the Krigwa players, a small company which entered competitions and performed his work. As discussed in the previous chapter, Du Bois wrote and staged pageants and in Chapter Four the NAACP's commission and staging of anti-lynching plays will be examined. Even more notable by its absence in a chapter on the Harlem Renaissance is popular music and more specifically jazz. Both this and the subsequent chapter follow the Association's lead and concentrate on the written word and the printed image.

The NAACP believed that the arts could have an ameliorating effect on racial prejudice. James Weldon Johnson wrote to Walter White, "It has long been a cherished belief of mine that the development of Negro Art in the United States will not only mean a great deal for the Negro himself, but will provide the easiest and most effective approach to that whole question called the race question. It is the approach that offers the least friction."⁷ The use of the arts was a gradualist approach towards the struggle for civil rights, one which has been criticised for being too conservative and too narrow. It reflected a type of top-down approach to civil rights in which advancement at the 'top' of the race, through culture and the arts, would work its way down to the rest of black America. The "striving for literary and intellectual accomplishment", according to August Meier, was "connected with the idea that it

⁷ James Weldon Johnson [hereafter JWJ] to WW, 13 April 1923. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 7.

would be the intellectuals” who would “lead the race into achieving higher culture and civilization.”⁸ Du Bois had predicted that the intellectual, educated and professional blacks, what he called the “Talented Tenth”, would save the race. “Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward?” he asked. “Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground.”⁹ The Talented Tenth would “civilize” the race (in other words, prove their civilization to the rest of the world) in part through the production of art and literature. For the NAACP, the Harlem Renaissance was a movement of ‘high’ culture. The black artists that the Association supported created poems and novels and paintings. Amy Kirschke writes that “Americans saw high culture as a measure of their greatness and level of civilization”.¹⁰ It was high culture, therefore, that the NAACP believed could change white perceptions of the race. Like other Harlem intellectuals, the NAACP’s leaders saw “art and letters as a bridge across the chasm between the races”.¹¹ White Americans would recognise and appreciate the artistic talent of black America.

The creation of ‘high’ art was seen as a signifier of a group’s status. The NAACP wanted to show the world that the race could produce talented artists. James Weldon Johnson explored this idea in his preface to an anthology of black poetry, a book which itself offered proof of black artistic talent. “The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly

⁸ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 265.

⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois “The Talented Tenth” (1903) in *The Negro Problem*, ed. August Meier (New York : Arno Press, 1969), 45.

¹⁰ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 172.

¹¹ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 5.

inferior”, Johnson wrote. “[N]othing will do more” to change the “mental attitude” towards the Negro and to “raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity” through “the production of literature and art.”¹² Johnson hoped that if the white public saw blacks producing novels, poetry or paintings then they would have to accept that African Americans deserved equal rights.

Not everyone within the Renaissance shared either Johnson’s conviction or the NAACP’s focus on ‘high’ culture. Many of the younger artists, such as Langston Hughes, incorporated elements of jazz into their work and were interested in black ‘folk’ culture. The NAACP’s rivals, the black nationalists led by Marcus Garvey, saw the arts as a “weapon in the struggle for African advancement”. The magazine of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, *Negro World*, published black literature.¹³ Garvey too stressed propaganda over aesthetics. However, he took this even further and argued that literature should be completely subordinate to politics. He also rejected Johnson’s argument that artistic accomplishment would open the door to racial equality. Garvey wrote, “A nation was not founded first of all on literature or on writing books, it is founded first upon the effort of real workers.”¹⁴

One of the most contentious debates during the Renaissance was that of art versus what Du Bois termed ‘propaganda’. It is significant for what it tells us about not only Du Bois and his NAACP colleagues’ ideas but also the views of others in the artistic and intellectual circles of Harlem. The *Crisis* editor grew increasingly out of step with the direction of the Renaissance. In the early 1920s, Du Bois had a relatively relaxed attitude towards the type of work being produced by and featuring African

¹² Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9.

¹³ See, for example, Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance* (Dover, Mass.: Majority Press, 1983), 5, 8-9.

¹⁴ Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1988), 149.

Americans. He celebrated the "younger literary movement" and the work of as diverse a groups as Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Georgia Johnson and Claude McKay, amongst others.¹⁵ He actually accused the race of being "tremendously sensitive" about its depiction in the arts. He recognised that a history of cultural stereotyping had led to suspicion amongst African Americans: "Any mention of Negro blood or Negro life in America for a century has been occasion for an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast."¹⁶ However, he warned that this was limiting and would have dangerous consequences for the development of black culture. Du Bois argued that black artists had a responsibility to be truthful and to portray black life as it happened. "Negro art is today plowing a difficult row, chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about ourselves", he wrote. "We want everything that is said about us to tell the best and highest and noblest in us." He warned, "We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end it is harmful." Du Bois recognised that there were good reasons for this insistence, because artists were afraid that any negative portrayal would be seen as racial stereotyping and would be seized upon by those advocating racial inequality: "We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual." This fear meant that the white artist, "if he be wise and discerning", may be better placed to see "the beauty, tragedy and comedy more truly" than African Americans themselves. Du Bois was optimistic about blacks' position in society, he felt they could cope with truthful portrayals: "We stand today secure enough in our accomplishment and self-confidence to lend the whole stern human truth about ourselves to the transforming hand and seeing eye of the artist." He saw beauty in truth. Du Bois believed art should be truthful; he wanted to encourage "the

¹⁵ Du Bois, "The Younger Literary Movement", *The Crisis*, February 1924, 161.

¹⁶ Du Bois, "Opinion", *The Crisis*, June 1924, 56.

Eternal Beauty that shines through all Truth”.¹⁷ Du Bois’s ideas about what this “truth” should be, however, would begin to take shape as the Renaissance progressed.

By the middle of the decade, Du Bois was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the direction in which the movement was heading. In the 1926 call for entries for the Amy Spingarn Prize he began to test his ideas about the need for propaganda. He wrote that he did not “believe in any art simply for art’s sake.” It must have some other purpose, although he was not yet ready to pronounce what this should be. What he did know was that he was less concerned with aesthetics than with message: “We want the earth beautiful but we are primarily interested in the earth. We want Negro writers to produce beautiful things but we stress the things rather than the beauty. It is Life and Truth that are important and Beauty comes to make their importance visible and tolerable.” At this stage, however, Du Bois was just testing the water and he provided a disclaimer: “Even this as we say it is not altogether true.” He instructed the entrants to his competition to write “about things as you know them: be honest and sincere.” Betraying his displeasure at some of the work coming out of the Renaissance, he promised that in his magazine “you do not have to confine your writings to the portrayal of beggars, scoundrels and prostitutes; you can write about ordinary decent colored people if you want.” However, he counselled, “do not fear the Truth. Plumb the depths. If you want to paint Crime and Destitution and Evil paint it. Do not try to be simply respectable, smug, conventional.” He was not yet ready to insist on propaganda, and told his writers to “Use [it] if you want. Discard it and laugh if you will.” All he asked was that they “be true, be sincere, be thorough, and do a beautiful job.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Du Bois, “Opinion”, *The Crisis*, June 1921, 55-56.

¹⁸ Du Bois, “Krigwa, 1926”, *The Crisis*, January 1926, 115.

Five months later he was ready to speak more forcefully on the subject of art and propaganda. At the NAACP annual conference in Chicago Du Bois laid out his "Criteria of Negro Art". He explained to his audience that he stood before them to talk about art because it was "part of the great fight we are carrying on and it represents a forward and an upward look – a pushing onward." For Du Bois, "Beauty", "Truth" and "Right" were "unseparated and inseparable." He reiterated his concern that the perceived need to please white publishers and a white audience damaged black writing. Whites "want Uncle Toms, Topsy's, good 'darkies' and clowns." Black writers needed to break away from the constraints imposed on them by white America. It was their duty to begin the "great work of the creation of Beauty", using the tools of "Truth" and "Goodness". Du Bois then made his most infamous statement about black literature:

all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.¹⁹

He was not arguing that there could be no pro-white propaganda but rather that blacks were denied positive propaganda. He explained that "it is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine" to which he objected, but "the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world." The white public demands "racial pre-judgement which deliberately distorts Truth and Justice, as far as colored races are concerned". There also needed to be a change in how blacks themselves viewed art. "We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people talk of it. Our religion

¹⁹ Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art", *The Crisis*, October 1926, 296.

holds us in superstition”, Du Bois complained. “Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying that we have or ever had a worst side.” He argued, “we are hemmed in and our new young artists have got to fight their way to freedom.” In order to achieve change, African Americans had to set a new standard for their art themselves. “The ultimate judge has got to be you”, he told his audience of (predominantly middle-class) African Americans, “you have got to build yourselves up into that wide judgement, that catholicity of temper which is going to enable the artist to have his widest chance for freedom.”²⁰

Du Bois’s statement on propaganda has often been taken out of the context of the rest of the speech and understood as a demand for art to be made completely subservient to propaganda. In fact, his ideas are more complex than that interpretation. As Keith Byerman notes, he does not reject artistic freedom.²¹ He wanted African Americans to be free from the constraints imposed on them by white America. Freedom meant African Americans, rather than whites, being the judge of black culture. He did, however, want art to be put to good use. Art did not need to be aesthetically beautiful, for ‘beauty’ meant ‘truth’. Amy Kirschke argues that pictures of lynching, for example, were “beautiful only in their truth” and Du Bois had “asserted truth equals beauty equals propaganda. If that propaganda is involved in the fight for freedom and equality, it is worthy propaganda.”²² The ‘truth’ is the most important element of art, if that truth helps the fight for racial justice.

Du Bois might have spoken of artistic freedom but that did not stop him attacking those authors and those novels to which he objected. The first book to really raise his ire was Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926). A boy meets girl (or

²⁰ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art”, *The Crisis*, October 1926, 290-97.

²¹ Keith E. Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, Art, and Self in the Work of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Athens Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

²² Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 125.

rather, girls) story, it begins and ends with the exotic and savage side of Harlem, but for the most part it is set in the "world of High Harlem, of plush brownstones and good grammar."²³ The novel divided opinion: on the whole it was hated by blacks, many of whom could, literally, not get past the novel's offensive title (which was supposedly a reference to a segregated balcony in a Harlem theatre); and it was loved by whites. Du Bois wrote a damning review in *The Crisis*. He called it "a blow in the face." "It is an affront to the hospitality of black people and the intelligence of white", he complained, referring to Van Vechten's appearance at many of Harlem's social gatherings and his friendship with African Americans. "I find this novel neither truthful nor artistic", he wrote. "It is a caricature." He admitted that at "some time and somewhere in Harlem every incident of the book has happened" but Van Vechten's focus on these events was a distortion. There was too much emphasis on the seedy side of Harlem which Du Bois argued was not representative of black life there. According to the *Crisis* editor, the average black man in Harlem was a labourer who went to church, lodge and movies, and was as "conservative and conventional" as all working people. There is something "racial, something distinctively Negroid" in Harlem but "it is expressed by subtle, almost delicate nuance" not by the "wildly, barbaric drunken orgy" of this book. "There is laughter, color and spontaneity at Harlem's core" but it will not be found in a cabaret, most of which were financed and supported by whites and so were not genuine expressions of black culture. What is more, the book was poorly written and did not entertain. He compared Van Vechten's and Langston Hughes' depictions of Harlem, quoting Hughes' "Cabaret": "One said he heard the jazz band sob/ When the little dawn was grey."²⁴ Van Vechten "never heard a sob in a cabaret", he only hears "noise and brawling". Du Bois argued that

²³ Lewis, *When Harlem*, 185.

²⁴ Actually it was a "she" who heard the jazz band in Hughes' original poem.

Hughes, the black poet, was able to capture the depth and soul of black culture in his poem, whereas Van Vechten, as Du Bois wrote, only “slops about” in the “surface mud”. This comparison suggests that it was not so much the material to which Du Bois objected but rather the way in which that material was used. It was the message behind it which he interpreted as offensive to his race.²⁵

There were many African Americans who agreed with Du Bois but not all. James Weldon Johnson, a personal friend of Van Vechten, defended the white author. He claimed Van Vechten was not antagonistic toward the race but rather a great admirer of it. Johnson understood why people objected to *Nigger Heaven* but he maintained that they were wrong. Van Vechten was the “first well-known American novelist to include in a story a cultured Negro class without making it burlesque or without implying reservations and apologies.”²⁶ If Du Bois had focused on the debauchery of the novel in his review, Johnson emphasised the ‘High Harlem’ which appeared in its pages. Walter White also defended the book. He argued that it showed white readers that a black middle class existed and that it would be read by whites who would not read work by black authors, therefore raising the issue of race before a new audience.²⁷

Du Bois was aggrieved by a white man’s portrayal of Harlem but he was dismayed when it was not only repeated but to his mind made worse by an African American. Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) features Jake, a deserter from the army who returns to Harlem and finds a life of cabarets, brothels, gambling and loose women. Du Bois wrote that it “for the most part nauseates me, and after dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath.” He acknowledged in his review that

²⁵ Du Bois, “Books”, *The Crisis*, December 1926, 81-82.

²⁶ James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 381-82.

²⁷ Janken, *Walter White*, 118.

there were parts which were "beautiful and fascinating". Perhaps unsurprisingly he liked Ray, the educated intellectual of the novel (although trapped by those very qualities). However, he asserted, "McKay has set out to cater for that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying". Du Bois believed he "used every art and emphasis to paint drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint in as bold and as bright colors as he can." "If this had been done in the course of a well-conceived plot or with any artistic unity", Du Bois claimed, "it might have been understood if not excused". But *Home to Harlem* is "padded" with a weak plot. Furthermore, Du Bois concluded, "a picture of Harlem life or of Negro life anywhere, it is, of course, nonsense." As with *Nigger Heaven*, this distortion comes not so much from its "facts" but "on account of its emphasis and glaring colors".²⁸ The *Crisis* editor was worried about the harm such novels could cause; he saw them as perpetuating the negative stereotypes which helped to oppress the race.

Not everyone, even within his own organisation, entirely agreed with Du Bois's views on art and propaganda. The editor knew this only too well because before he made his speech in Chicago he had initiated a symposium to spark debate about the issue. A list of seven questions were sent out to black and white publishers, writers and critics on the subject of the "Negro in Art". Du Bois wanted to know if white or black artists were under any "obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray." He asked whether authors could be criticised "for painting the worst or the best characters of a group" and whether publishers could be criticised "for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment,

²⁸ Du Bois, "The Browsing Reader", *The Crisis*, June 1928, 202.

on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting." "What", he wondered, "are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?" The next question asked whether the "situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy" did not call for "sincere and sympathetic" artistic treatment. "Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid" and, furthermore, "preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?" Finally Du Bois asked if there was "a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class."²⁹

Over the next eight months responses were printed in *The Crisis* that demonstrated wide ranging opinion on these issues. Du Bois would not exactly have been comforted by many of the responses from his white acquaintances. Carl Van Vechten replied that the "squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist", whereas "there is very little difference between the life of a wealthy or cultured Negro and that of a white man of the same class."³⁰ This type of comment confirmed Du Bois's worst suspicions about white attitudes towards African Americans in literature. Alfred Knopf dismissed the question about publishers refusing to handle novels that portrayed educated Negroes as "senseless".³¹ H.L. Mencken suggested that in order to counteract the derogatory portrayal of African Americans, black artists should "depict the white man at his worst". He provided the example of Walter White who had done it "very effectively",

²⁹ Du Bois, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" *The Crisis*, March 1926, 219.

³⁰ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, March 1926, 291.

³¹ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, April 1926, 280.

presumably by representing a white character as a barbarous lyncher in *The Fire in the Flint*.³²

Of the African Americans who took part in the debate, Countee Cullen's views most closely reflected those suggested by the editor's questions. He argued that if publishers rejected books about middle-class blacks because they were too much like whites, "they should reject those about lower class Negroes for the avowed reason that they do not differ essentially from white folk of the same sort." Black authors, like all authors, had the right to cover whatever topics they chose but he warned that "the Negro has not yet built up a large enough body of sound, healthy race literature" for only books about the lower classes to be written, in case they were taken to be "truly legitimate" by white America. He argued that authors "must create types that are truly representative of us as a people".³³ Langston Hughes, on the other hand, dismissed the premise of the debate, asking, "What's the use of saying anything – the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions."³⁴

Although he did not respond directly to the questionnaire, Charles Johnson wrote an editorial in August 1926 which may have been in response to Du Bois's Chicago speech. He made a plea for artistic freedom. He wrote that what was most important was that "these black artists should be free, not merely to express anything they feel, but to feel the pulsations and rhythms of their own life, philosophy be hanged."³⁵ This was not to say that Johnson rejected the social and political role of art but rather that he dismissed overt propaganda. He could not agree with the NAACP's

³² "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, March 1926, 291.

³³ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, August 1926, 194.

³⁴ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, April 1926, 278.

³⁵ Quoted in Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 52.

insistence on art always showing the ‘best’ of black life; he believed that African Americans had to be true to their own experience, whatever that might be. Indeed, many of the young black writers appealed to him precisely because they sought the “meaning of the black experience” in the “real world – the ghettos and slums of Harlem”.³⁶ Alain Locke also objected to Du Bois’s stance, although he approached the question from a different perspective. Locke emphasised aesthetics and beauty; his was an art-for-art’s sake mentality. In one critic’s analysis, he “was not about to compromise artistic excellence in favor of racial propaganda.”³⁷ Over this issue Du Bois was thus at odds with two of the other most important black intellectuals of the Renaissance.

The responses from Du Bois’s NAACP colleagues are also illuminating. They suggest differences of opinion about how art should be approached but all the answers reflect a consensus about the usefulness of the arts to the cause of racial equality. They were not all comfortable calling for ‘propaganda’ but in their own way they advocated this approach. Joel Spingarn wrote that a novel can be two things: “it may be considered a contribution to the *literature* of the world or as a contribution to the *culture* of a race.” A “mediocre” book might be rejected from the world’s literature but “from the standpoint of Negro culture it may be important that some writers should get a hearing, even if their books are comparatively poor.” Spingarn believed this was necessary because black culture was only just emerging; in time, the race too would be judged on its artistic merit. He dismissed as a “childish formula” the “art versus propaganda” debate and claimed that something did not need high artistic value to have worth.³⁸ Jessie Fauset suggested that black writers must “learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive

³⁶ Wintz, *Black Culture*, 121-22.

³⁷ Yvonne Ochoa, “The Race-Consciousness of Alain Locke”, *Phylon* 47, No. 3 (1986): 175.

³⁸ Emphasis in original. “The Negro in Art”, *The Crisis*, April 1926, 279.

that their portraits, even of the 'best Negroes', those presumably most like 'white folks', will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike." She blamed white publishers for "considering only certain types of Negroes interesting" and, like Du Bois, she saw the creation of a large, book-buying black audience as a partial solution.³⁹ Mary White Ovington argued that publishers wanted art not propaganda. It seems, however, that she saw "propaganda" as writing about the "sordid, foolish and criminal". In the last few years, she claimed, the "true Negro writer" had dropped this propaganda and was "painting reality". The "reality" she speaks of was for the NAACP a reality of black life, in other words middle class and respectable.⁴⁰

Walter White responded to Du Bois's questions about the "Negro in Art" with a call for artistic freedom. He regretted that "at a time when Negro writers are beginning to be heard there should arise a division of opinion as to what or what not he should write about." White refuted the suggestion that upper-class African American life was no different to white life and therefore was of no interest. "[U]pper class Negroes have through that very struggle sharpened their sensitiveness to the intense drama of race life in the United States", he argued, therefore the "lives of so-called upper class Negroes have advantages as literary material." He believed that upper- and middle-class blacks provided as much material for dramatic representation as the lower classes. This, however, was not the only topic on which African Americans should write; rather, he argued that all areas of black life were worthy and that writers should have artistic freedom. White asserted that the "Negro writer, just like any other writer, should be allowed to write of whatever interests him whether it be of lower, or middle, or upper class Negro life in America; or of white" and "should

³⁹ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, June 1926, 71-72.

⁴⁰ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, March 1926, 220.

be judged not by the color of the writer's skin but solely by the story he produces."⁴¹ White was less concerned with the content of black culture. Instead, he saw the very creation of culture as a political act.

Nevertheless, in his own literature he deliberately produced images which would challenge white stereotypes of the race: he filled them with respectable, middle-class blacks who battled against the prejudice of a white world. White had difficulty getting the manuscript for his first novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, accepted for publication. In response to the claim from George Doran that it was one sided, White demanded to know why that should not be the case. He allowed that for too long the point of view in literature had been that of Thomas Nelson Page or Thomas Dixon; he was trying to offer an alternative, to "depict the tragedy of race prejudice as seen by intelligent Negroes of high ideals". White wanted his book to reach a white audience: "the white person who has never suspected there are men like [his novel's protagonist, the black doctor] Kenneth Harper, who believed the ex-Confederates are right when they use every means, fair or foul, 'to keep the nigger in his place.'"⁴² He wanted his novel to work as a piece of propaganda, to expose to the white public the reality of race in America and to challenge their prejudices.

There was not only disagreement within black artistic and intellectual circles as to the aesthetic or political focus of the arts; related to this was the issue of whether culture should be 'Negro' or 'American' or both simultaneously. With hindsight George Hutchinson argues that the NAACP adopted a stance of cultural pluralism. He uses the example of *The Crisis* but his argument could be applied more broadly to the NAACP's work. He writes that the magazine "emphasized the American Negro's

⁴¹ "The Negro in Art", *The Crisis*, April 1926, 279-80.

⁴² Quoted in Lewis, *When Harlem*, 134, 135.

desire to share in a common American civilization, with racial distinctions subordinated to common aspirations and common values." This, however, did not mean "accepting the contemporary civilization of the United States as the 'American' norm." *The Crisis's* "idea of assimilation entailed the 'blackening' of national culture". At the same time "the magazine consistently argued that the American Negro was thoroughly a product of American experience and institutions."⁴³

Two passages, one from Du Bois and one by James Weldon Johnson, support Hutchinson's analysis. Du Bois argued that "American Negro art was built in the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that sprang from Emancipation, on the feelings of revenge, despair, aspirations, and hatred which arose as the Negro struggled and fought his way upward."⁴⁴ He celebrated the unique racial qualities of black culture; it was specific to African Americans and came out of the particular experiences and heritage of race. But it was also influenced by its American context. Johnson wrote that the Negro was "the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products." He applauded the "power of the Negro to suck up the national spirit from the soil and create something artistic and original, which at the same time, possesses the note of universal appeal", which he claimed "is due to a remarkable gift of adaptability."⁴⁵ Similarly Joel Spingarn, through sponsoring the *Crisis* literary awards and establishing the Spingarn medal to reward African American achievement, adhered to a "concept of cultural pluralism, the belief that a given race should preserve its unique cultural heritage, while, at the same time, seeking full

⁴³ Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 145.

⁴⁴ Du Bois, "The Social Origins of American Negro Art", *Modern Quarterly* (Autumn 1943). Quoted in Darwin Turner, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic", in *Critical Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. William L. Andrews (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1985), 78.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 10, 20.

integration into all other facets of the larger society.”⁴⁶ The NAACP celebrated the uniqueness of ‘Negro’ art but at the same time saw it as fitting in to the broader American (white) culture. It did not want to create a separate black culture but nor did it want to lose the sense of race within its culture. The NAACP wanted black culture to infiltrate and change white culture without losing its own distinctive qualities, until it too was accepted as ‘American’.

For the NAACP, the answer to the question of ‘Negro’ or American art was a compromise between the extremes of nationalism and assimilation. Others in the Renaissance, however, did not take such a consensual approach. One of the most provocative contributions to the debate was by journalist and author George S. Schuyler. In a piece published in *The Nation*, Schuyler denied there was any such thing as African American art. He wrote, “Negro art there has been, is, and will be among the numerous black nations of Africa; but to suggest the possibility of any such development in this republic is self-evident foolishness.” He argued that there was no difference between “the literature, painting and sculpture of Aframericans” and that of white Americans. Indeed, he went further and denied there existed any differences between the races: “it is sheer nonsense to talk about ‘racial differences’ as between the American black man and the American white man.” According to Schuyler, “the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon.”⁴⁷ This opinion was antithetical to the beliefs of many African Americans, including those in the NAACP. During a period when race consciousness was being encouraged and race achievement vaunted, the denial of a uniquely “Negro” art was offensive to many.

⁴⁶ B. Joyce Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1972* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 28. See also Wolters who argues Du Bois, Johnson and Spingarn “shared pluralist convictions about cultural dualism and ethnic identity”. Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 106.

⁴⁷ George S. Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum” *The Nation*, 122 (16 June 1926). Reprinted in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 51-53.

A week later Langston Hughes published a passionate and eloquent rebuttal to Schuyler's piece. He lamented the "mountain" that was the "urge within the race towards whiteness" and which stood in the way of "any true Negro art in America". He complained that artists wanted to be "as little Negro and as much American as possible." Hughes linked this desire to class, arguing that the middle-class artist was less able to interpret "the beauty of his own people", compared to the "low-down folks" who "furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations." He argued that the "present vogue in things Negro" had brought the "budding colored artists" to "the attention of his own people." It was the duty of the black artist to inspire race pride, to "change through force of his art that old whispering, 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful.'" Although he stressed the importance of art in shaping race consciousness, Hughes concluded that ultimately the artist was answerable to no-one but himself:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁴⁸

Hughes not only rejected Schuyler's argument but also the position of the NAACP. He believed that the artist should have to please neither whites nor blacks but should be free to do as he chose.

⁴⁸ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation*, 122 (28 June 1926). Reprinted in *Within the Circle*, 55-59.

The NAACP's engagement with the Harlem Renaissance involved debates and theorising but it also took a more practical form. Association staff, particularly James Weldon Johnson and Walter White, played a personal role in mentoring the 'New Negroes' of the Renaissance. Their interaction with these young artists and writers was borne of a belief that this group of African Americans could help advance the race through a demonstration of their creative talent. It was also driven by a personal interest in and love of the arts and the accompanying socialising. Johnson saw his involvement with the Renaissance and his own creative work as separate from his day job as Executive Secretary of the NAACP. In his autobiography he remembered, "My own literary efforts and what part I played in creating the new literary Harlem were ... mere excursions; my main activity was all the while the work of the Association."⁴⁹ This work, for Johnson and his colleagues, included investigating lynchings and race riots, defending fugitives from the South and homeowners in the North, fighting the white primary and residential segregation, pushing for legislation and lobbying politicians. However, the NAACP's cultural strategy was intended as a complement to this other work, not an alternative. The hope was that it would challenge white attitudes towards the race; that it would make it easier for whites to accept desegregation or to see blacks as something other than violent rapists who should be lynched.

Furthermore, evidence from the NAACP Papers suggests that there was in fact a close link between both Johnson and White's cultural activity and their roles as Executive and Assistant secretaries. Johnson had joined the Association in 1916 as Field Secretary and White arrived in 1918. Johnson and White used their position within the NAACP and the power and influence it gave them to assist black artistic

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 374, 382.

talent. Both men were widely known and respected within Harlem circles and in black communities throughout the country. They often used NAACP resources, contacts and knowledge. The files of the NAACP Papers are full of letters relating to the Renaissance. The majority can be found in the "Personal Correspondence" file but they were often written during work, typed by their NAACP secretaries and sent out on the Association's headed paper. White and Johnson gave NAACP mailing lists to publishers in order to send out circulars advertising their latest releases and NAACP branch members were used as salesmen.⁵⁰ When Johnson was made Executive Secretary in 1920 it marked the transition of power from white to black within the NAACP; the white Board relinquished control to the black secretariat.⁵¹ Thus, this involvement with the Harlem Renaissance marked, to a large extent, an African American strategy (although it was supported by many whites within the Association).

James Weldon Johnson's biographer, Eugene Levy, writes that he "did what he could for young black writers by praising them in his [*New York*] *Age* column and by including them in both editions of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*."⁵² In fact Johnson, and Walter White, did much more than this to help African American artists. There is voluminous correspondence between the two men and some of the leading lights of the Renaissance, including Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, Willis Richardson and Aaron Douglas. They contacted publishers on their behalf, introduced them to philanthropists, encouraged their endeavours, offered advice (both practical and artistic), even raised money, fed

⁵⁰ A circular sent out to advertise Johnson's autobiography offered discounts for bulk order and payment to the branch for sales; the branch received between \$1.16 and \$1.40 for every copy sold. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 12.

⁵¹ Elliot Rudwick and August Meier, "The Rise of the Black Secretariat in the NAACP, 1909-35" in *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience*, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (1976; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 94-127.

⁵² Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 311.

and entertained these youngsters. There are many examples of White and Johnson promoting their work. For example, after the publication of *Color* (1925), Countee Cullen wrote to White to thank him for his help in publicising the book: "I think Harper Brothers or I ought to pay you. If the book has any sale at all, much of it will surely be due to the fine spirit of cooperation you have shown in the matter."⁵³ The NAACP men wanted the public to read and buy the work of the New Negroes. Only in this way would the world be made aware of the talents of the race.

White often tried to mediate between writers and publishers, with varying degrees of success. It was done out of a wish to help the younger writers but also out of a desire to further his own position as an arbiter of the Renaissance. White was friends with George Oppenheimer and Harold Guinsburg of the newly formed Viking Press and he acted as a talent scout for them. He tried to persuade Claude McKay to publish with Viking. He urged McKay "as a friend" to "get your novel ready for publication as soon as possible." White boasted, "There are three or four first rate publishers who have asked me to keep an eye open for likely material". He had in mind "one firm in particular recently organized and known as the Viking Press ... If you want me to, I will put you in touch with them."⁵⁴ White was offended when, concerned about publishing with such a new firm, McKay ignored his advice: "I think you know me well enough to know that I would not have recommended The Viking Press to you in preference to another if I were not absolutely sure that it was the best bet possible." He reassured McKay that a new firm with a smaller list would put its full weight behind every book it published. "However", he sniffed, "it is your own

⁵³ Countee Cullen to WW, 20 June 1925. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 9.

⁵⁴ WW to Claude McKay, 20 May 1925. NAACP: Part 2 Reel 9. There is no reference in any of this correspondence as to the name of the novel. Most scholars believe that it was *Color Scheme*, McKay's first attempt at a novel which was never published. See, for example, Charles Scruggs, "Alain Locke and Walter White: Their Struggle for Control of the Harlem Renaissance", *Black Literature Forum* 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1980): 95.

novel and yours is the final decision to be made.”⁵⁵ White did not like having his advice ignored. Nevertheless, alongside critic Arthur Schomburg, he continued his attempts to find a publisher for McKay’s work. The saga continued for many months until McKay resigned himself to the idea that the book would never be published.⁵⁶ This example shows that White did not always have the temperament for dealing with some of these young artists. His own, considerable, ego meant that he was easily offended and at times he appeared more interested in furthering his own reputation than assisting others. He revelled in his position as elder statesman because it gave him power and prestige. Thus whilst this liaising and corresponding did have a potentially political consequence, in that it helped bring the achievements of these writers to the attention of the American public and therefore might change the image of the race, it could also be driven by self-interest. At times this work became divorced from any cultural strategy and was simply a matter of ego.

Compared to White, James Weldon Johnson had an easier relationship with many of the ‘New Negroes’. His temperament was perhaps better suited to the role of mentor. He was much more friendly with Claude McKay, despite the poet’s often prickly nature. Johnson urged McKay to return from France to America, where he would be able “to take full advantage of the great wave of opportunity that Negro literary and other artists are enjoying.”⁵⁷ He helped to sell copies of McKay’s first volume of poetry, raised money for his trip to Europe and the Soviet Union and arranged McKay’s re-admittance into the United States when he was having immigration difficulties.⁵⁸ McKay clearly liked and respected the NAACP secretary;

⁵⁵ WW to McKay, 8 July 1925. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 9.

⁵⁶ Scruggs, “Alain Locke and Walter White”, 96. See also Waldron, *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance*, 137-45.

⁵⁷ Letter JWJ to McKay, 1928. Quoted in Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 312.

⁵⁸ Watson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 110.

he wrote in his autobiography that Johnson was “my favorite among the NAACP officials. I liked his poise, suavity, diplomacy and gentlemanliness.”⁵⁹

Johnson and White also helped unpublished and unknown writers. Many people sent them poems, scripts and novels, asking for advice and assistance. Neither man shied away from offering their honest opinion of the efforts that were put before them. Johnson wrote to a prospective poet, “I have read the verses through, and while I see that you have poetic talent I must, in frankness, say that the verses that you sent me do not show distinction. They are good but I do not think good enough to merit any special recognition. I hope this does not discourage you and that you will keep on writing nevertheless.”⁶⁰ He did not flatter with unwarranted praise, for this Renaissance was to reward those with talent. Nevertheless, he would not have wished to discourage or offend and always remained polite and patient in his correspondence. Similarly Walter White, even if he could not provide practical assistance, offered moral support. A number of letters were exchanged in which a Mr Morgan asked White for advice on how to get his novelettes published. White concluded that the material as it stood was not suitable for publication and that there was nothing more he could do to assist Mr Morgan. However, he counselled, “if you feel deep down in your heart that you have something to say and know how to say it, do not be discouraged, but keep everlasting at it.”⁶¹ White and Johnson acted as cultural ‘gatekeepers’: they wanted the Renaissance to be of a high artistic standard and they wanted to be the ones to help decide what that standard should be.

James Weldon Johnson and Walter White both played significant roles in the “Cultural and Artistic development of the Negro”. A number of historians of the Harlem Renaissance have identified the two men as key figures. David Levering

⁵⁹ Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (1937; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 111.

⁶⁰ JWJ to Miss L Averitte, 31 March 1926. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 2.

⁶¹ WW to Mr Morgan, 15 October 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 12.

Lewis identifies them as two of six "notables" who helped to create in Harlem a significant cultural scene.⁶² Cary Wintz writes that Johnson, alongside Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, was one of the "major boosters" of the movement. Of the three, Johnson was "strategically placed to make the greatest contribution, because he, far more than any other black intellectual, was able successfully to bridge the gap between artists and critic or promoter."⁶³ Kenneth Janken acknowledges that while White did not necessarily have a "sophisticated awareness of art", he did know "the connoisseurs and could harness their expertise."⁶⁴ Such qualities were essential to building a cultural movement. Johnson and White's involvement in the Renaissance was closely linked to their 'day jobs' within the NAACP. They used the influence, reputation and resources of the Association to help not just the stars of the movement but also lesser known artists. They wanted people to hear of these artists and their achievements. Black literature and art needed an audience, both black and white.

This desire for readers and consumers brought White and Johnson into contact with the white publishers and financiers of the movement and with this came one of the central dilemmas of the Harlem Renaissance: white control of a black movement. White and Johnson served as intermediaries between publishers and new writers. Both the NAACP men and the publishing houses appeared to gain from the situation: the publishers had people to notify them of the latest talent and work; White and Johnson had direct access to the financiers of the movement. Johnson in particular during the 1920s had a national profile, thanks to his position in the NAACP, and his name and endorsement were a powerful commodity. Publishers used his favourable reviews and comments to help sell books. For example, in response to Johnson's comments on

⁶² The others were Jessie Fauset, Charles Johnson, Alain Locke and Casper Holstein, a West Indian businessman who ran a lucrative betting enterprise and donated money to *Opportunity*. Lewis, *When Harlem*, 120.

⁶³ Wintz, *Black Culture*, 102-3.

⁶⁴ Janken, *Walter White*, 91.

John Vandercook's *Tom-Tom*, the publishers wrote, "Very seldom do we receive a letter as valuable as yours. I showed your comment to Mr Vandercook who was more than delighted ... Of course I shall use your comment extensively in my publicity."⁶⁵

Johnson, who was acknowledged as a leading black critic of the period, was highly respected and his evaluations could decide the fate of a manuscript. Knopf, for example, often sent manuscripts for his reaction before they would publish them.

The relationship between the NAACP officers and white publishers was more than one of business; they were often friends. Indeed, interaction between the races on a social plane was a significant aspect of the Harlem Renaissance. Much of this took place in the clubs and cabarets for which Harlem was famous and in the homes of the great and good of New York. Tales abound of drinking and dancing into the night with celebrities, musicians, dancers, actors, artists and writers. Walter White and James Weldon Johnson, along with their wives, were the hosts for many such gatherings. They provided an opportunity for whites and African Americans to discuss the issues of the day, to form friendships and to make contacts. White turned his apartment at 409 Edgecombe Avenue "into a stock exchange for cultural commodities, where interracial contacts and contracts were sealed over bootleg spirits."⁶⁶ If his home was a "stock exchange" then White was a broker, earning influence and prestige from these transactions. Langston Hughes described the Whites' apartment block as "quite a party center." Walter White "was a jovial and cultured host, with a sprightly mind, and an apartment overlooking the Hudson. He had the most beautiful wife in Harlem, and they were always hospitable to hungry literati like me."⁶⁷ From a practical standpoint, these parties were an opportunity for

⁶⁵ Harper Brothers to JWJ, 22 November 1926. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 2.

⁶⁶ Lewis, *When Harlem*, 136.

⁶⁷ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940) reprinted in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 13* (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 191.

black artists to be introduced to white publishers, critics and wealthy patrons. Johnson wrote that he made many of his literary contacts at such Harlem gatherings: "[I] went to a great many 'literary' parties. At such gatherings I met and came to know a large number of American literary and artistic celebrities."⁶⁸ Men such as Johnson and White, working as they did for an interracial organisation, were comfortable mixing with those from a different race. These parties may sound frivolous but, to the NAACP mindset, socialising with whites was one more step along the road to acceptance by white America. This might not sound like a 'political' activity but given both the enforced and voluntary segregation between the races during the early decades of the century, it did provide an opportunity to break down social barriers and form alliances between black and white. However, it was also a chance to have a good time and as a political strategy it certainly left much to be desired. It may have appeared significant to Johnson and White and their small circle of acquaintances but this type of activity had little relevance for the rest of black America.

Johnson and White acted as 'tour guides' to Harlem, showing interested, liberal whites the sights and sounds of black America. Mr Raymond McKelvey wrote to Johnson, telling him that their mutual friend Elisabeth Freeman, an investigator for the NAACP, had led him "to believe that you might be willing to give me some enviable glimpses of Harlem life which would ordinarily be denied to a white outsider."⁶⁹ Walter White led a party on a 'tour' of the neighbourhood. He took English novelist, Rebecca West and writer, Konrad Bercovici to Harlem, where they visited the Abyssinian Baptist Church and met some of the locals. White wrote, "Both of them were tremendously impressed and we made plans for other visits which I think will materialize in interesting articles on what the really worth while colored

⁶⁸ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 378.

⁶⁹ Raymond McKelvey to JWJ, 17 December 1928. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 2. Unfortunately there is no evidence as to whether Johnson gave Mr McKelvey his "enviable glimpses" of Harlem.

people of New York are doing and are capable of doing.”⁷⁰ A year later Konrad Bercovici wrote an article for *Survey Graphic*’s Harlem Number on “The Rhythm of Harlem”.⁷¹ It refers to visits to Harlem where he heard black preachers and music and saw plays and dances, and may well have been based on White’s tour. White and others could be accused of treating Harlem as a theme park for their celebrated white friends. The place and its people were exoticised for white consumption and pleasure; it was a place where whites could enjoy the decadence and reckless abandon of the ‘Jazz Age’, before disappearing again to their safe, comfortable lives. However, White no doubt would argue that he was trying to challenge the view of Harlem as a playground. He showed white people the “worthwhile” of Harlem, not its underbelly. It was another way of introducing white America to the best of black life.

This interaction between white and blacks was criticised because while African Americans might host parties, it was whites who controlled the purse strings. The Harlem Renaissance might have been a black cultural movement but it was financed by whites.⁷² The people and organisations that put their money behind the Renaissance – the Harmon Foundation, established by the wealthy real estate developer William E. Harmon, which funded black artists through prizes, sponsorship, art exhibitions and sales; individual patrons such as Charlotte Osgood Mason who assisted Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes; publishers Harold Guinzburg, George Oppenheimer and Alfred Knopf who published many of the key texts of the Renaissance – were all white. Du Bois, for one, believed that white financing led to white control and subsequently had a damaging effect on the work

⁷⁰ WW to Alain Locke, 28 June 1924. NAACP/MF: Part 2 Reel 7.

⁷¹ Konrad Bercovici, “The Rhythm of Harlem”, *The Survey Graphic* Harlem Number, (March 1925): 679.

⁷² Harold Cruse is particularly critical of white control of the Renaissance; he claims this is the primary reason why it failed. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967; repr., New York: New York Review of Books, 2005).

being produced by black artists. Johnson and White's actions, however, suggest they did not share his concerns. They tried to make the best of the situation and even believed there were advantages to this arrangement. When White was having difficulty getting his first novel published, H.L. Mencken asked him if there were black publishing firms he could use. White replied that even if there were he would not publish with them because he wanted his books to be read by whites.⁷³ He saw white publishers as a way of reaching a white audience, which was crucial if literature was to play a part in combating prejudice. White Americans needed to be made aware of the achievements of black writers; once they had read a novel or a collection of poetry by an African American they would surely no longer be able to deny him his civil rights. White's comment reflects the integrationist attitude of his organisation: the NAACP did not want to create separate black institutions but rather to work with white ones to the race's advantage.

Johnson was particularly outspoken in his defence of white publishers; he denied that they affected the work produced by African Americans. In an article for *The Crisis* he defended the publishing houses and dismissed the complaint that "the leading white publishers have set a standard which Negro writers must conform to or go unpublished" and that "this standard calls only for books depicting the Negro in a manner which tends to degrade him in the eyes of the world; that only books about the so-called lower types of Negroes and lower phases of Negro life find consideration and acceptance." Johnson listed all the novels published in recent years which depicted the "upper" levels of Negro life, a list which included novels by Jessie Fauset, Walter White, and Nella Larsen. He drew up a similar list for those showing the "lower" levels, such as *Cane* and *Home to Harlem*. The "score is eight to six" in

⁷³ Lewis, *When Harlem*, 135.

favour of the “upper” levels. He did the same for non-fiction and found “the score is nineteen to two.” He concluded, “I believe that Negro writers today who have something worth while to say and the power and skill to say it have as fair a chance of being published as any other writers.”⁷⁴ Johnson, of course, had a vested interest in defending the publishers: part of his literary reputation came from being seen as someone who could influence publishers and he played a role in the publishing process. Therefore, he was defending himself as well as the publishing houses.

Du Bois was deeply concerned about the effect that white control was having on African American art. He believed that African Americans, rather than whites, should buy and judge work by black writers. Du Bois complained that the “American Negro as a race and in accordance with his numbers does not read books, does not support periodicals, does not buy pictures.” He urged African Americans to learn to read and buy books, journals and pictures, for “[o]nly in this way can we give to the world a new Negro American art.”⁷⁵ African Americans were encouraged to be consumers and judges of black culture in order to provide an alternative to white patronage and control. Otherwise black writers would think they had to distort their depiction of black life in order to get published and paid. In a letter to Amy Spingarn he argued that “if the young colored writer writes naturally, expressing his own life and his own reaction to the environment about him, it is still hard for him to get his work published.” Therefore he is “tempted” to “cater to what white America thinks that it wants to hear from Negroes.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ James Weldon Johnson, “Negro Authors and White Publishers”, *The Crisis*, July 1929, 228-29.

⁷⁵ Du Bois, “Postscript”, *The Crisis*, April 1927, 70.

⁷⁶ Du Bois to Amy Spingarn, 19 January 1928. Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume I, 1877-1934* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 372. Du Bois seems to have forgotten that Amy Spingarn was herself a white patron who financed the literary competitions of *The Crisis*. Presumably white money was acceptable to Du Bois when he decided where it should go.

The difficulty, for both his contemporaries and for later scholars, is establishing Du Bois's rules for acceptable black culture. As Arnold Rampersad explains, Du Bois had "written so ambivalently and confusedly about the relation of art to propaganda that misinterpretation" was "inevitable".⁷⁷ He wanted artists to be free from what he saw as the constraints of writing for a white audience. But at the same time, he wanted to be able to instruct black artists to create work that was useful to his cause. He advocated the 'truth' but it was his own truth that he wanted to see on the page; he set the rules. If black writers transgressed then he would chastise them. This meant that he became increasingly distanced from many in the Renaissance. However, an examination of his role as *Crisis* editor, as undertaken in the next chapter, raises questions about the extent to which he tried or was able to control the work produced by black artists.

James Weldon Johnson, on the other hand, was more interested in assisting than controlling young black artists. He could see the benefits of positive depictions of African Americans but he was more tolerant than Du Bois of those which did not conform to the standard of the Talented Tenth. He believed in the power of artists to change white perceptions but argued this would be achieved through the very act of creating art. This was why he spent so much time and energy encouraging and promoting black artists: he wanted to show their gifts to the world. Walter White also saw his writing, his mentoring and all that went with it as having a greater purpose. His ideas about black culture were not as clearly defined as Johnson's, or even Du Bois's; he was no great literary critic. However, he did share an assumption that culture could have a political end and he himself created propagandist works of

⁷⁷ Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 190.

literature.⁷⁸ At times it seems both Johnson and White were seduced by the Harlem Renaissance and that their work had nothing to do with a political or cultural strategy but was an end in itself; something to be enjoyed and celebrated. They saw the benefits of this arts approach for themselves and their small circle of friends – they benefited financially and socially from engaging with the arts – and therefore they assumed that this strategy would work more broadly. They hoped that their advancement would work its way down to the rest of the race and that others could replicate it by following their model.

This shows the limitations of the NAACP's strategy and, indeed, of the Harlem Renaissance more generally. It was never able to affect the underlying economic, social and political cause of inequality. The Renaissance "simply could not do the heavy lifting of eradicating the nation's pervasive and race-based economic and social inequality by the country's business and political leaders."⁷⁹ The Depression of the 1930s put these limitations into stark relief. Art and literature seemed unimportant in the face of unemployment, homelessness and starvation. As Langston Hughes wrote, "ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."⁸⁰

It did, however, achieve other, more intangible changes. Hughes conceded that the Renaissance "did a great deal to make possible a public willing to accept Negro problems and Negro art."⁸¹ In other words, it may have helped change white attitudes towards African Americans even if it did not immediately improve their condition (although this, of course, suggests the flaw at the very heart of the NAACP's

⁷⁸ This conviction became even more apparent during the 1930s with his use of culture in the anti-lynching struggle.

⁷⁹ Janken, *Walter White*, 90. Such arguments echo criticisms of the NAACP's broader cultural agenda.

⁸⁰ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 178.

⁸¹ Langston Hughes, quoted in Wintz, *Black Culture*, 227.

strategy). Furthermore, a gradualist approach was understandable when it is considered within the context of the racial violence of the period. The beginning of the Harlem Renaissance coincided with the "Red Summer" of 1919, which saw outbreaks of racial violence throughout the country; there were riots in Chicago, Washington D.C. and Longview, Texas.⁸² This upheaval continued throughout the 1920s. When a group of black sharecroppers in Phillips County, Arkansas were accused of planning an 'insurrection' dozens were shot and killed and the remainder arrested.⁸³ The dangers inherent in the race question were brought home personally to NAACP officials. When in 1919 the NAACP's national secretary John Shillady travelled to Austin, Texas, he was arrested, held in jail and beaten by a mob.⁸⁴ Walter White had an even closer brush with a lynch mob when he was in Phillips County investigating the treatment of the sharecroppers. His cover (he had been passing as a white man) was blown and he had to leave town in a hurry. As he was fleeing the state the train conductor told him, "There's a damned yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him."⁸⁵ It might seem strange that against a backdrop of such violence the NAACP should turn towards the arts as a solution. On the other hand, when black lives were so routinely threatened and taken, perhaps a more subtle, less confrontational approach to the racial question was exactly what was needed.

The Harlem Renaissance provided an exciting opportunity for the NAACP to engage with black culture, but it raised a number of troublesome issues. The most problematic was the question of white control. Johnson and White tried to take advantage of white money and to use it for the benefit of themselves, other

⁸² See Mark Robert Schneider, *We Return Fighting*, Chapter 2.

⁸³ See Cortner, *A Mob Intent on Death*.

⁸⁴ Kellogg, *NAACP*, 240.

⁸⁵ White, *A Man Called White*, 50-51.

individuals and the race as a whole. They were realistic about the position of black culture at the beginning of the century: they knew that there was neither the money nor the power within black institutions to challenge white control of the culture industries; the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* had taught them that lesson only too well. Du Bois, on the other hand, was extremely critical of white control of the Renaissance, which he was convinced distorted African American art. Du Bois, of course, had already come up with a potential solution, or at least an alternative, to white patronage and control. It was a place where black writers could contribute free from the shackles of their white paymasters, where African Americans could find discussions on the history of their culture and where they might see pictures of their race: it was called *The Crisis* and it was to prove one of the most important and influential black magazines in the opening decades of the century.

Chapter Three

The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races, 1910-1934

The cultural agenda of the NAACP during the 1910s and 1920s was informed by a belief that the arts could help reduce racial prejudice. An examination of the work published in *The Crisis*, the Association's magazine, allows us to study how the Association's position was put into practice. The ideas and theories, the debates and disagreements, discussed in the previous chapter are put to the test. This chapter considers the numerous ways in which the NAACP used creative work in its battle for racial equality in the years preceding and during the Harlem Renaissance, from proving black merit and challenging stereotypes to encouraging racial pride and establishing an African American identity. A number of NAACP leaders were influential in setting its agenda, but of primary importance when considering *The Crisis* were W.E.B. Du Bois and literary editor, Jessie Fauset. The significance of the work they selected and the extent to which it reflected both their ideas and the ideology of the NAACP is examined.

The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races, the NAACP's monthly magazine established by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1910, was a tool with which the Association could fight racial prejudice. The battle was waged through its editorials, reports, investigations, essays and articles on every area of black life. For the purposes of this study, this chapter will focus on the magazine's use of creative work. From the first issues it included paintings, short stories, poems and plays by and about African Americans. *The Crisis* used the arts to combat racism in a myriad of ways. It provided a space to demonstrate the artistic talents and achievements of African Americans. This reflected the NAACP's belief that one way of demonstrating black equality was

to show that the race could produce great works of art and literature. The Association encouraged this artistic endeavour not only by providing an outlet for publication and an alternative to white patronage, but also by establishing competitions which rewarded and raised the profile of the arts.

There was much more to the NAACP's cultural strategy than simply proving that African Americans could create works of art and literature. The body of work in *The Crisis* helped to forge a collective black identity which was crucial to the NAACP's fight. It created a sense of racial pride, not only by demonstrating the talent of fellow race members but also by foregrounding black faces and characters and black life. The magazine became a place where African Americans could see pictures, photographs, stories and dramas about themselves. The issue of how these black faces appeared is complicated and contentious. The NAACP has been accused of favouring lighter-skinned members of the race, reflecting its supposed assimilationist tendencies. The images of women in particular provide a fascinating insight into this debate; there are numerous examples of fair-skinned beauties on the front cover of the magazine. However, notions of a shared black and African identity complicate the message about racial pride.

The representations of African Americans in *The Crisis* challenged prejudice by offering alternative images to racial stereotypes. The depiction of black women provides one example of how this was done. Another is the prevalence of representations of the black middle classes. Depicting black professionals and successful, hardworking and decent members of the race exposed as false the claim that the race was lazy, foolish or bestial. If the images in *The Crisis* were supposed to represent the magazine's readers, this suggests that a collective black identity was to be built around the middle class. The issue, however, is more complicated than simply

arguing that the magazine only reflected an interest in this section of black society. It raises the question of the extent to which Du Bois censored material to fit his own ideas. Furthermore, it is complicated by the representations of other African Americans, such as workers, in the creative texts of *The Crisis*.

The forms of culture that appeared in *The Crisis* are central to understanding the NAACP's agenda. James Weldon Johnson suggested that 'high' cultural forms would prove black worth. Indeed, discussions and examples of fine art and literature dominated the arts pages of the magazine. Furthermore, the most significant form of 'low' culture of the period – jazz – was conspicuous by its absence. Du Bois used creative work to make political points and to change his readers' attitudes towards specific issues. One of the most obvious examples of this was the controversial debate over black involvement in the First World War. An issue complicated by personal ambition and political pressure, it nevertheless provides a clear example of Du Bois using the arts to support his own stance.

The importance of *The Crisis* in encouraging and shaping the arts has been recognised by scholars. A number of studies of the Harlem Renaissance refer to the role of the magazine. Nathan Huggins argues that *The Crisis*, alongside the other significant magazines of the period, *Messenger* and *Opportunity*, were significant because of their "tone" and "self-assurance". They "gave a sense of important to blacks who read them" and "were the Negro's voice against the insult that America gave him."¹ They provided a forum for black expression and could instil racial pride. The way in which the arts were used to do this will be considered later in this chapter.

Abby and Ronald Johnson, in their study of black literary magazines, found that *The Crisis* was particularly important in the years preceding the Renaissance,

¹ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 30.

when it laid the groundwork for what was to follow. They argue that Du Bois and his magazine “did more than anyone else to prepare for the flourishing of Afro-American culture in the 1920s.”² Arnold Rampersad also stresses the importance of *The Crisis* before it was superseded by *Opportunity* in the mid-1920s. He concludes that as a chronicle of the period and as a vehicle “for the necessarily confused expression of the creative artist of the time ... no other magazine was more important” than *The Crisis*.³ Du Bois’s biographer David Levering Lewis places the periodical within the wider context of the Renaissance and Du Bois’s strategy of “civil rights by copyright”. Again, he emphasises the importance of the magazine, alongside *Opportunity*, and finds that whilst neither could be said to have caused the Renaissance, the “mobilizing role” of Du Bois and *Opportunity*’s editor Charles Johnson was “indispensable”.⁴

George Hutchinson includes a chapter on *The Crisis* in his study of the Renaissance in which he argues that it represented the cultural pluralism of the NAACP.⁵ Much of the creative work published in *The Crisis* supports Hutchinson’s argument. There is a stress on race: the racial identity of its creators and its protagonists is made explicit. The particular difficulties faced by African Americans, the issue of race and how racial prejudice impacts on their lives are all recurring themes in these texts. At the same time these pieces emphasise their American identity. They show how blacks both embrace and represent ‘American’ values; there are stories that celebrate hard work, social mobility, heroism and patriotism. Furthermore, the artists take ‘American’, or white, cultural forms and transform them. They mix them with folk or African forms and they also use them to express the

² Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics*, 37.

³ Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, 201.

⁴ Lewis, *Fight*, 163.

⁵ Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 145.

condition of the black race. In this way *The Crisis* reflects the cultural pluralism of the NAACP.

Most of these studies of *The Crisis* consider the general role and tone of the magazine. They tend to focus on how Du Bois used it as a forum to air his own views on the purpose of the arts.⁶ Very few consider specific examples of the art and literature published within its pages. Notable exceptions to this are Amy Kirschke's *Art in Crisis* and *Word, Image, and the New Negro* by Anne Carroll. Kirschke is interested in the visual imagery that Du Bois published in his magazine and, as she puts it in her book's subtitle, his "struggle for African American identity and memory". Alongside his editorials, Du Bois used visual images to create a sense of collective identity and historical memory, which challenged white distortions. He addressed "the problems black Americans faced in the labor force, in education, within the family, in the military, and the prejudice they dealt with in daily life" and in so doing he "strengthen[ed] a strong sense of collective identity among his readers."⁷ I use this idea of collective identity when examining both the visual and literary texts in *The Crisis*. It was formed not only in the way Kirschke describes but also by the very inclusion of black faces and characters and by instilling pride in the black middle classes.

Carroll is interested in composite texts, that is the combination of diverse texts and images, which were used for both protest and affirmation. They were used to protest against injustice and violence but also provided a way to counteract the dehumanizing effect of such images and offered the chance to celebrate black success.⁸ In a chapter on "the arts as a social tool" Carroll argues that creative texts

⁶ The debate about the "Negro Criteria of Art", examined in the previous chapter, is much discussed.

⁷ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 200.

⁸ Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), Chapter One.

were used in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* to show the “inner lives” of African Americans. They provided an important way of encouraging “the recognition of African Americans as fully rounded human beings”. Furthermore, the arts could emphasise the “bonds across racial lines” and encourage white readers “to understand African Americans as people just like themselves”.⁹ Carroll illustrates how these principles were discussed in essays and articles in both magazines but she does not go on to demonstrate how these ideas worked in the actual creative texts that were published. Much of the work discussed in this chapter supports Carroll’s claim: the pictures and stories of African Americans allowed the emotional lives and humanity of the race to be shown.

The first issue of *The Crisis* was published in November 1910. It cost ten cents and all one thousand copies were sold. In theory *The Crisis* was the official organ of the NAACP; in reality it was, for the first twenty-four years of publication, the magazine of its editor, W.E.B. Du Bois. He was responsible for the content of each issue and set the tone. Du Bois saw *The Crisis*, his “soul-child”, as his most important contribution to the work of the NAACP. With his usual modesty he claimed that if it “had not been in a sense a personal organ and the expression of myself, it could not possibly have attained its popularity and effectiveness.” Under his editorship *The Crisis* was more than “the dry kind of organ that so many societies support for purposes of reference and not for reading.”¹⁰ Whilst it did bring news of branch activities and reprinted the Association’s annual reports it also included his fiery editorials, articles on subjects from history to politics and news of current and world affairs. To Du Bois *The Crisis* was bigger than the NAACP. And for a time it was,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102-105.

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; repr., Millwood, N.Y: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1975), 248, 258.

with circulation figures almost twice those of NAACP membership.¹¹ It was even, for a period, financially self-supporting. Du Bois "crow[ed]" in a 1917 editorial that as of the previous year his magazine was "self-supporting and entirely out of debt."¹² This financial freedom gave Du Bois a mandate for controlling the magazine the way he, and not the NAACP Board of Directors, saw fit. This, of course, often led to conflict and as the *Crisis*'s financial situation worsened and Du Bois became increasingly dependent on the goodwill of the Board, those tensions increased.

The question of who *Crisis* readers were is important when determining its role as a cultural and political tool. Some scholars have argued that the magazine cut across class divides. For instance, David Levering Lewis contends that in "an era of rampant illiteracy", when there was little time for reading "Harvard-accented editorial", *The Crisis* "found its way into kerosene-lit sharecroppers' cabins and cramped factory workers' tenements. In middle-class families it lay next to the Bible."¹³ Du Bois himself believed it was read by African Americans from all social backgrounds. He defined his readership as primarily "Negro workers of low income".¹⁴ This is unlikely, given the levels of illiteracy alluded to in the statement above. It seems likely that the majority of its readers were middle-class blacks (a reflection of the membership of the NAACP itself at this time), who had the income, time and inclination to read such a magazine, but that it was also known and discussed amongst a larger section of the African American community. Manning Marable claims that while the magazine was written "primarily for the Talented Tenth, it also spoke to a broad spectrum of Americans, from rural southern blacks to white northern

¹¹ In 1919 there were 56,345 members, whereas circulation of *The Crisis* peaked in June that year with 100,000 copies sold. Kellogg, *NAACP*, pp.136; 153. Furthermore, it is reasonable to speculate that the readership was even greater still, given that one copy of a magazine would often be seen by many.

¹² Du Bois, "Editorial", *The Crisis*, March 1917, 218.

¹³ Lewis, *When Harlem*, 7.

¹⁴ Quoted in Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics*, 35.

liberals.”¹⁵ The NAACP journal’s readership was bi-racial, as was its membership. By the end of 1919 it was estimated that of the 91,203 members nine-tenths were black and one-tenth were white.¹⁶ White readers, like members, were in the minority. In 1916 the white readership was estimated at only twenty per cent. Thus, “in determining the make-up of the magazine and its editorial policy, [Du Bois] kept in mind the fact that eighty per cent of all *Crisis* readers were Negroes.”¹⁷ At the same time Du Bois did publish material to appeal to whites. They may have made up only a small percentage of the readership but they were important if the NAACP’s cultural strategy was to succeed. Of course, *The Crisis* was preaching to the converted: the mainly northern, liberal whites who read the magazine would already have been sympathetic to the black cause. Nevertheless, they too needed to fully accept positive representations of African Americans and Du Bois’ journal helped to put such images in the public domain.

Du Bois is clearly central to any discussion of *The Crisis* during this period but so too is Jessie Redmon Fauset. As literary editor between 1919 and 1926, Fauset helped shape the cultural content of the magazine.¹⁸ Carolyn Sylvander notes the many contributions she made during those years: she ‘discovered’ Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, she corresponded with authors and smoothed relations between contributors and Du Bois, she ran the office and selected work for publication.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the lack of materials in the NAACP papers which explicitly refer to Fauset mean it is difficult to assess her influence on decisions about the magazine.

¹⁵ Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 77.

¹⁶ Kellogg, *NAACP*, 137.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁸ Her contribution to the Harlem Renaissance has not always been acknowledged and she has often been evaluated on the basis of her novels rather than her literary editorship of *The Crisis*. A notable exception is Abby Arthur Johnson, “Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance”, *Phylon* 39, No. 2 (2nd Qtr, 1978): 143.

¹⁹ Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 1981), 194.

However, whilst it was Du Bois's vehicle, Fauset clearly helped to keep it running and took a leading role in shaping the literary policy of the magazine. A discussion of the artistic content of *The Crisis* must necessarily acknowledge the influence of Jessie Fauset.

The pages of *The Crisis* were filled with drawings, poems, stories, plays and essays on the arts. In his editorials Du Bois set out his agenda for the arts in *The Crisis*. He wrote of the important contribution that African Americans could make: "we are likely to forget that the great mission of the Negro to America and the modern world is the development of Art and the appreciation of the Beautiful".²⁰ *The Crisis* was to play a role in this development: "We shall stress Beauty – all Beauty, but especially the beauty of Negro life and character; its music, its dancing, its drawing and painting and the new birth of its literature." *The Crisis* "shall encourage it in everyway – by reproduction, by publication, by personal mention – keeping the while to a high standard of merit, stooping never to cheap flattery and misspent kindness."²¹

Between 1910 and 1934 seventeen plays, one hundred and thirty-seven works of fiction (short stories) and seven hundred and fifty-five poems were published. During the 1910s the figures fluctuated, with an average of almost twenty-one pieces of literature published a year. After 1921 this number began to rise (though not consistently), with an average during the 1920s of forty-three pieces a year.²² The increase during this decade reflected the *Crisis*'s policy of actively encouraging and promoting the Renaissance. According to Lewis, Du Bois had withdrawn his

²⁰ Du Bois, "Opinion", *The Crisis*, November 1922, 7.

²¹ Du Bois, "Opinion", *The Crisis*, May 1925, 8.

²² These figures are taken from data in Jean Fagan Yellin, "An Index of Literary Materials in *The Crisis*, 1910-1934: Articles, Belles Lettres, and Book Reviews", *CLA Journal*, 14 (June 1971): 453-65.

magazine from the Renaissance by August 1927.²³ In fact, the greatest number of pieces published during the 1920s was in 1928 (68) and the peak during this period was 1931, when eight-two pieces appeared.²⁴ Du Bois might have become disillusioned by the direction of the Renaissance but he continued to find space in his magazine for work by black writers. The writers and artists published in the magazine represented some of the leading lights of African American arts. Langston Hughes was the most published poet in *The Crisis*, followed by Georgia Douglas Johnson. There were short stories by Charles Chesnutt and Jessie Fauset and artwork by Aaron Douglas and Laura Wheeler. Du Bois and Fauset also published work by new and lesser known artists.

The most obvious way in which *The Crisis* could use the arts to fight racial prejudice was to demonstrate the creative talent of black America. The publication of short stories, drama, poems and sketches put to the test James Weldon Johnson's assertion that "[n]o people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior".²⁵ A magazine with a national, bi-racial readership was the perfect place to showcase the artistic skills of African Americans. A contributor's race was often made explicit, either by a short biography or an accompanying photograph. The prize-winning entries published during 1926 were all printed with a photograph of the winner alongside.²⁶ Not everything that was published in *The Crisis* had an overt political message but it all conformed to the NAACP's broad cultural strategy, in the sense that every piece produced by an African American was further proof of the race's merit. The paintings of sailboats and

²³ Lewis, *Fight*, 180.

²⁴ This figure is inflated because a number of poems were republished during 1931. Figures from Yellin, "An Index of Literary Materials".

²⁵ Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9.

²⁶ See for example, "Krigwa", *The Crisis*, October 1926, 105-106.

the poems about love all played a part in the NAACP's strategy to overcome racism with culture.

Du Bois believed that to establish a body of black culture he needed to encourage and promote African American creativity and that one way to do this was to offer incentives. The first full scale competition was introduced in 1924, with \$600 prize money donated by Amy Spingarn, wife of NAACP Chairman, Joel. There were prizes for stories, plays, illustrations, essays and poems, ranging from ten to one hundred dollars.²⁷ The winners were announced the following year. The panel of judges included literary luminaries H.G. Wells, Charles Chesnutt and Eugene O'Neill. Rudolph Fisher won first prize for his short story "High Yaller", the winning play was *The Broken Banjo* by Willis Richardson and Countee Cullen won the poetry contest.²⁸

The competition ran again the following year and received six hundred entries. Du Bois gave out the prizes at a ceremony held in New York in October 1926. Arna Bontemps read his prize-winning poem and the winning story, "Swamp Moccasin", was read by its author, John F. Matheus. The Krigwa Players' Negro Theater, Du Bois's pet project, presented the second prize play, "Foreign Mail" by Eulalie Spence. The Negro String Quartet played and there was "dancing until 11.59 PM".²⁹ The competitions continued, in a number of guises, until 1931. The last reference is to the "Du Bois Literary Prize". It was an award of \$1000 for a work "written in English by a Negro born or naturalized in any country or island of the Western Hemisphere" and was to be given in "successive years in rotation for fiction, prose non-fiction, and poetry."³⁰ The money was donated by a Mrs E.R. Matthews, who suggested the prize

²⁷ Du Bois, "The Amy Spingarn Prizes for Literature and Art", *The Crisis*, October 1924, 244. A "competition" was first mentioned in *The Crisis* in 1912 but it was not so much a competition as a call for submissions of work. "Short Story Competition", *The Crisis*, August 1912, 189.

²⁸ Du Bois, "Krigwa", *The Crisis*, October 1925, 275-78.

²⁹ Du Bois, "Krigwa", *The Crisis*, December 1926, 70-71.

³⁰ Du Bois, "Proposed Rules of the Competition", *The Crisis*, May 1931, 157.

be awarded in Du Bois's name as "an inspiration to the Negro youth of future generations". He accepted the honour with a "lack of modesty" because he had "hopes that this substantial prize, as the years go by, will draw the thought and genius of our young writers ... to a more human and truthful portraiture of the American Negro in the 20th Century."³¹

According to Du Bois, "[t]he great object of these contests is to stimulate effort, set a standard of taste and enable persons to discover in themselves capabilities."³² He wanted to encourage blacks to pick up a pen or a paintbrush. The statement also tellingly demonstrates his desire to control the work produced by African Americans; he wanted to be the one to "set a standard of taste". These competitions, and indeed *The Crisis* more generally, allowed the NAACP to offer an alternative to white patronage and therefore white control. They also lent prestige to black artistic endeavour. By rewarding black artists with money at glitzy award ceremonies Du Bois helped to raise the profile of their achievements. He hoped to prove to white America that blacks deserved the equal treatment that he and his organisation demanded.

The awards and ceremonies were, at least in part, directed towards whites but Du Bois also published creative work in *The Crisis* for the benefit of his black readers. He used images of African Americans, both visual and literary, to strengthen a sense of collective black identity. Kirschke argues he did this by highlighting the prejudice and difficulties African Americans faced in all aspects of their life and demonstrating the areas, such as education, where they could make advancements. I would argue that he also did it in a more simplistic way; by simply featuring black

³¹ Du Bois, "The Annual Du Bois Literary Prize of One Thousand Dollars"; Du Bois, "Postscript", *The Crisis*, April 1934, 117; 137.

³² Du Bois, "Krigwa", *The Crisis*, December 1926, 71.

faces and black characters, he allowed his readers to recognise themselves on the pages of a national magazine. He wanted to instil pride in the race, to show African Americans that they deserved equality and that they should fight for it. Du Bois was keenly aware of the damaging effects of racial stereotyping on black self-worth. In one editorial he argued that African Americans had been made ashamed of their race because of stereotyping by whites. If *The Crisis* “puts a black face on its cover our 500,000 colored readers do not see the actual picture – they see the caricature that white folks intend when they make a black face.” He received letters claiming that the images in the magazine were “*too black*.” The race, Du Bois wrote, is “almost unconsciously ashamed of the caricatures done of our darker shades” because “they are cruel reminders of the crimes of Sunday ‘comics’ and ‘Nigger minstrels’”. He urged his readers, “let us train ourselves to see beauty in black.”³³ Du Bois wanted African Americans to be proud not only of their race but also images of their race.

The Crisis featured many photographs of black people. As Du Bois remembers in his autobiography, this was an extremely unusual practice when he began the magazine in 1910: the “colored papers carried few or no illustrations; the white papers none.”³⁴ In the annual Children’s issue the pages were filled with photographs of readers’ offspring; young black faces peered out between articles and editorials. The Education issue similarly published dozens of photographs of young college graduates, dignified in their congregation gowns. The regular “Men of the Month” column (which occasionally also featured women) celebrated the achievements of black businessmen, scholars and other professionals, with accompanying pictures. Such pictures acted as a direct challenge to caricatures of grinning ‘darkies’ with exaggerated lips and bulging eyes. Du Bois deliberately used visual imagery to create

³³ Emphasis in original. Du Bois, “Opinion”, *The Crisis*, October 1920, 263-64.

³⁴ Du Bois, *Dusk to Dawn*, 271.

a more dignified picture of black life. This not only challenged the prejudice of white Americans, it also inspired racial pride amongst *The Crisis's* black readers. Similarly, virtually all the fiction that was published featured black characters. African Americans could identify with the protagonists of the short stories and dramas that they read on its pages. At a time when black literature was only beginning to receive a wide audience the magazine played an important role in forging a sense of racial identity and pride.

This sense of identity and pride was similarly at play when *The Crisis* featured work inspired by Africa. Artists and writers often mixed elements of African and American, or European, culture with the intention of instilling in African Americans pride in their heritage, and therefore a sense of a shared past. Amy Kirschke argues that by including images of Africa, Du Bois “hoped to create and strengthen a sense of identity with contemporary Africa for his readers and to help them learn about their roots in the historically rich civilizations of Africa.” Visual imagery of Egypt was common in *The Crisis* and it was celebrated as an important example of a great black civilization. Aaron Douglas frequently used Egyptian iconography in his work. *Invincible Music: The Spirit of Africa* shows a figure in silhouette beating a drum, its head raised to sky [See appendix, Fig. 1]. His position, the profile of his body and his hair resemble those of Egyptian art. Douglas makes the African connection explicit to *Crisis* readers with his title. Laura Wheeler also used Africa as an inspiration for her work. In an image used on the magazine cover in April 1923, she presents a woman in African dress playing an instrument that resembles a harp [Fig. 2]. At the base of the harp is a sculpture of an African head. Kirschke identifies the blue lotus at the neck of the harp as typical of Egyptian iconography but also points out that the figure's stance

and attire are not Egyptian and nor are the sparrows drawn above her.³⁵ Wheeler combines African art forms with those from Europe. Both these images depict the musical legacy of Africa and indeed many of the pieces highlight the cultural influence of the continent. The message to *Crisis* readers was that they should have pride in their connection with Africa and revel in its beauty and culture.

The influence of Africa was also seen in some of the poetry of *The Crisis*, particularly in the work of Langston Hughes. He stressed the connection between blacks in America and in Africa. In "The Negro" he writes, "I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black / Black like the depths of my Africa." The black man on both continents has been a slave, a worker, a singer and a victim. He has suffered: "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo / They lynch me now in Texas." But he has created great things; through his labour "the pyramids arose" and New York's Woolworth building was constructed. His music is a legacy from Africa that has created something new on American soil: "All the way from Africa to Georgia I carried my sorrow songs. / I made ragtime." Hughes highlights the shared experience of black people in Africa and America. They are linked by their history and race. At the end of the poem Hughes reasserts his pride in his racial identity, when he repeats "I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black / Black like the depths of my Africa."³⁶

There are fewer references to Africa in *The Crisis*'s short stories and plays. Most were set in the contemporary period and in America. Du Bois did, however, publish some African folk parables and tales.³⁷ One example of an explicit reference to Africa in fiction is "Black Fairy", a short story written by Fenton Johnson. A little black girl meets an African fairy in the garden. The fairy sings "an old African

³⁵ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 141.

³⁶ Langston Hughes, "The Negro", *The Crisis*, January 1922, 113.

³⁷ "The Muslim Priest and the Heathen", adapted by A.O. Stafford, *The Crisis*, November 1913, 345-46; "How the Spider Won and Lost Nzambi's Daughter", from the collection by Monroe Work, *The Crisis*, October 1915, 301-302.

lullaby” and uses her magic to show the girl images from Ancient Africa: the pyramids of Egypt, the ships and other images of wealth and power. Then she shows the coming of slavery and blacks being shipped across the ocean. The fairy tells the girl that blacks in America “though not entirely Ethiopian have not lost their identity.” She prophesises that in the future there will be an end to inequality and a “brotherhood of all men”.³⁸ The story celebrates an African heritage as a source of strength to overcome prejudice and discrimination. Just as the fairy teaches the little girl about her African past, so Johnson teaches other children about Africa.

In these examples the creators mix African and American culture and African and American experiences. By publishing such work Du Bois sent a message to his contributors and readers that as African Americans they were ideally placed to draw on both these influences. This is consistent with what George Hutchinson claims was the pan-Africanism promoted by *The Crisis*: in this definition, it encouraged solidarity with people of African descent but this did not mean denying the “Americanness” of the American Negro.³⁹ African Americans should be proud of both their African and their American heritage. This sense of a shared past not only created pride but also forged a sense of a collective African American identity.

If black readers were to identify with the representations of their race on the pages of *The Crisis* then it raises the question of who stared back at them when they opened the magazine. The appearance of African Americans depicted in *The Crisis* was significant. There were those within the NAACP whose light complexions opened them up to accusations of prejudice against their darker skinned brothers. Many believed the NAACP as a whole, with its bi-racial membership and its stance

³⁸ Fenton Johnson, “Black Fairy”, *The Crisis*, October 1913, 292-94.

³⁹ Hutchinson, 145-46.

against segregation, wanted complete assimilation with the white race. If there was such a bias then you might expect it to be reflected in the images of race found in *The Crisis*. In her article on *Crisis* cover girls of the 1940s, Megan Williams allows that there was a history of light-skinned, well-dressed and educated African American women appearing on the pages of black journals, including *The Crisis*. In this tradition, light skin was equated with respectability. Williams contends that *The Crisis* used these images to challenge derogatory stereotypes of women but that they also reflected the assimilationist tendencies of the NAACP.⁴⁰ Although she is writing about a later period, her findings are also instructive when considering women in *The Crisis* between 1910 and 1934.

There are many examples of light-skinned women on the cover of the magazine during these years. The November 1913 cover features a young woman with skin so fair she looks white [Fig. 3]. The photograph's label, "Octoroon", clearly identifies her mixed race heritage. Her appearance is somewhat classical, with her dark hair tied under a band and a large pendant on her chest. Her dark eyes are in shadow and there is the trace of a frown across her face (perhaps suggestive of the stereotypical tragic mulatta). A similarly fair-skinned girl graces the cover of the March 1922 issue [Fig. 4]. John Henry Adams presents her in profile, her chin resting on her hands as she gazes into the distance. Her clothing is old-fashioned by the standards of the 1920s: the high collar and long sleeves demurely cover her body. She is an attractive example of respectable black womanhood. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson writes that New Negro periodicals "chose identifiably mixed-race women to represent the positive and dignified face of the New Negro woman." The images are "more sentimental than modern, more Victorian than New Negro. She is beautiful, educated,

⁴⁰ Megan E. Williams, "The *Crisis* Cover Girl: Lena Horne, the NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941-1945", *A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 16, No. 2, (2006): 200-218.

middle class”.⁴¹ These pictures suggest that the NAACP associated light-skin with respectability and that such women were the acceptable face of black America. According to Williams’ thesis, placing these women on the front cover reflects the NAACP’s desire for assimilation. However, the NAACP did not want complete assimilation with the white race. In fact, *The Crisis* often celebrated a black and African heritage. Moreover, the magazine featured numerous short stories and plays which suggested that light-skin could be more of a curse than a help and that passing brought about disastrous emotional and cultural consequences.⁴² Nevertheless, the light-skin of the *Crisis* cover girls was a deliberate tactic to appeal to whites. Sherrard-Johnson, amongst many others, points out that in nineteenth-century slave narratives the mulatta was a common figure because the appearance of whiteness was used “as a strategy for gaining sympathy”.⁴³ A similar strategy was at play in *The Crisis*; Du Bois may have hoped that whites would be better able to identify with fairer skinned African Americans. This suggests that there was a tension between providing positive images of black identity, which stressed racial pride and a shared black heritage irrespective of skin tone, and an appeal to whites which adopted white standards of respectability and taste.

More important than their skin tone was the attire and demeanour of these women. They directly challenge white stereotypes of black women. They provide a contrast to the ‘Jezebel’, who is overtly sexual and libidinous. The cover girl is attractive but she is also demure. At the same time these pictures grant black women

⁴¹ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 10.

⁴² See for example, Edith Manuel Durham, “Deepening Dusk”, *The Crisis*, January 1931, 12-14; February 1931, 49-52. Ottilie B. Graham, “Holiday”, *The Crisis*, May 1923, 12-17. Rudolph Fisher, “High Yaller”, *The Crisis*, October 1925, 281-86; November 1925, 33-38.

⁴³ Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, 4. See also, for example, Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

their femininity and so challenge the other dominant female image, that of the desexualised 'Mammy'. However, the representation of black womanhood in *The Crisis* was not limited to pictures of demure society girls. Indeed, African American women were often symbols of racial strength and dignity. Du Bois published work which challenged stereotypes of women in more interesting ways than simply showing they could be 'respectable'. Aaron Douglas' *The Burden of Black Womanhood* shows the figure of a black woman holding up the bottom of a sphere [Fig. 5]. She is, like Atlas, holding up the weight of the world. In the background are skyscrapers, with a factory in between and a log cabin to the far side; Douglas was commenting on the burdens carried by women from all classes and sections of society.⁴⁴ The woman, although she stoops a little under the weight of her burden, remains strong and poised.

An even more explicit representation of the strength of black womanhood is the cartoon "Woman to the Rescue" [Fig. 6]. The sketch shows a black woman using the club of the "federal constitution" to beat away the vultures of "segregation" and "Jim Crow law". She has already beaten "grandfather clause" to the ground. In the distance is the retreating figure of a black man, calling over his shoulder, "I don't believe in agitating and fighting. My policy is to pursue the line of least resistance." Behind the woman's skirts hide two black children. She is the protector of the race and its children; she fights for justice whilst the cowardly man deserts her. Another contrast to the delicate, feminine images of *Crisis* cover girls of the 1910s and early 1920s is seen on the front cover of the February 1933 issue [Fig. 7]. The drawing shows just a woman's head. Her chin is raised and her gaze is steady; she looks defiant and strong. The shadows on her face make it appear angular, almost

⁴⁴ Amy Kirschke notes the African imagery of the picture, suggesting Douglas was making an even broader point about international black female roles. Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 143.

masculine, but her lips are full and shiny. This image appears later than Adams' drawing and "Octoroon". Stylistically it is very different but the woman in the picture shares the mulatta's racial ambiguity and demeanour of respectability.⁴⁵ By the 1930s there were fewer of the demure society girls on the cover of the magazine but some of the same ideas about black womanhood remained. These cartoons and pictures show the black woman as resilient and competent. They were used to challenge white stereotypes of black women. It is also likely that Du Bois, a strong advocate of women's rights, published them to show black men that women were capable of campaigning for equality alongside them and to encourage women themselves to continue in their fight.

More unexpected, in the context of using the arts to challenge racism, are those images which show black women as alluring and overtly sexual. Given the stereotype within white culture of the black woman as promiscuous and the very real incidence of the rape of black women by whites, it is surprising that Du Bois chose to publish such pictures, sometimes on the front cover. Their presence might be explained by the fact that all these pictures use African imagery. Even in the African American mind the continent was still linked to the exotic. These images were published in the late 1920s, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. *Dark Easter* by Richard Brown shows an attractive young woman with her dress slung low below her shoulders, showing an enticing hint of cleavage [Fig. 8]. With her left hand she is caressing an exotic flower and she stares at the viewer with sultry eyes. As well as the flower, her headdress and bracelets indicate her 'African' status. Even more explicitly sexual is Allan Freelon's *A Jungle Nymph* [Fig. 9]. In this cover picture a naked woman sits beside a pool. Her shoulders are stretched back, exposing her breasts. The

⁴⁵ With thanks to Celeste-Marie Bernier for her response to Watson's picture.

palm trees and exotic foliage around her provide the African setting. Writing about Freelon's drawing and a photograph of a "Moorish Maid", Amy Kirschke comments that these images introduced a sensibility of primitivism. They "played to the male fantasy of the free and uninhibited 'primitive' African woman." She suggests that such front covers were designed to entice male readers to open *The Crisis* and that other African American magazines used similar tactics to attract new readers.⁴⁶ Du Bois was clearly not above modern marketing methods of titillation to disseminate his magazine. Such images showcase the talents of their creators but other than that would seem to be ineffective weapons against racism. Sometimes, it would seem, Du Bois was happy to simply have something beautiful on the cover of *The Crisis*.

These images appeared later in Du Bois's editorship, suggesting a change in the way women were represented in *The Crisis*. The demure society girls with high-necked blouses were replaced with images of exotic African temptresses. In part this reflected a change in artistic styles and a move towards the 'modern' images of the Renaissance. It also suggests a relaxation in Du Bois's attitude towards sex in black culture. Arnold Rampersad notes that in Du Bois's novel, *Dark Princess*, published in 1928 around the time these images appeared in *The Crisis*, there is nothing "conventionally prudish" about his "attitude to sex".⁴⁷ There were, of course, for Du Bois acceptable ways in which to deal with sex. He complained about the "lascivious sexual promiscuity" in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, for example.⁴⁸ Sex should be treated tastefully, reflecting high culture sensibilities and preferably depicted within the context of the exotic 'foreigner'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 160.

⁴⁷ Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, 208.

⁴⁸ Du Bois, "The Browsing Reader", *The Crisis*, June 1928, 202.

⁴⁹ The heroine of his novel is an Indian princess.

Representations, both literary and visual, of middle-class African American life abounded in *The Crisis*. This was significant in two respects. Firstly, if images in the magazine were meant to inspire a sense of pride and identity, it suggests that the collective identity that Du Bois was striving for was that of a black middle class. Secondly, these representations allowed the NAACP to challenge white stereotypes of African Americans, by presenting them as respectable, successful and 'American'. These assertions, however, are complicated by the question of how much Du Bois actually controlled and censored the material that appeared in *The Crisis*. Furthermore, the inclusion of images of other sections of black life disrupts the dominance of black middle-class representations.

Middle-class black life certainly featured heavily in the art and literature of the magazine. *The Crisis* cover girls discussed above were not just light-skinned, they were often identifiably middle class. In many of the short stories black doctors, teachers or other professionals are the chief protagonists. The particular injustices that educated blacks had to face are examined in a story by Alice Dunbar Nelson. "Hope Deferred" is about a black man, Edwards, who has trained as a civil engineer but, despite moving to a city busy with building projects, cannot find a job because of his race. He is forced to work as a waiter and one evening he serves one of the men who refused to employ him. He tells Edwards that he is "more fitted" to being a waiter than an engineer. This enrages Edwards, who attacks the white man and ends the story in jail.⁵⁰ Nelson exposes the discrimination that middle-class blacks faced and the humiliation of having to work in menial job despite their education and skills.

Du Bois filled *The Crisis* with photographs of middle-class blacks: from the annual "Education" issue with its pictures of black college graduates to the

⁵⁰ Mrs Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar, "Hope Deferred", *The Crisis*, September 1914, 238-42.

photographs of the distinguished African Americans which illustrated the “Men of the Month” columns. In February 1912 *The Crisis* featured a photograph of the “Social Life of Colored America” at the Mid-Winter Assembly in Baltimore [Fig. 10]. In this double-page spread men in black-tie and women in evening gowns stand in a grand ballroom. They are elegant and refined and the picture loudly, and proudly, proclaims their affluence. This is an utterly ‘respectable’ picture of black life. So too is the photograph “Colored Los Angeles greets *THE CRISIS* in its own motor cars” [Fig. 11]. A line of half a dozen cars, with well-dressed figures sitting inside their vehicles or standing proudly alongside, stretches across two pages. The photograph is a celebration of the consumer power of a burgeoning black middle class. These images were intended to instil pride in the magazine’s black readers by showing what the race could achieve. Readers were encouraged to aspire to the status of wearing expensive clothes and owning a motorcar. Furthermore, this pride was intended to reinforce a sense of black collective identity. Readers were to peruse these stories and look at these illustrations and think ‘that is me’ (or ‘that could be me’) and ‘that is my race’. Such representations could also be used to fight the stereotype that blacks were lazy, good-for-nothings who held only the most menial positions. They showed that blacks could be affluent. They appealed to white tastes and a white sense of social status. ‘See how like you we are’, they seemed to be saying.

Images such as these fit with perceptions of the NAACP as a bourgeois organisation but the creative work published in *The Crisis* did not solely reflect a preoccupation with the lives of middle-class African Americans. Other sectors of black life did receive attention. In one of the earliest issues is a drawing by John Henry Adams called *The Christmas Reckoning* [Fig. 12]. The accompanying text reads, “At Christmastide two million Southern Negroes make their annual wage

reckoning with the plantation owners and either receive the small balance due or are remanded in debt slavery.” In the picture an elderly black couple face each other across the table. They are simply but neatly dressed, and the signs of strain and worry are etched across their faces. Adams presents a sympathetic portrayal of the plight of sharecroppers, a group far removed from the middle-class car owners described in the photograph.

A number of stories are set outside the milieu of middle-class black America. These include “The Death Game”, which is set in a poor, black neighbourhood of Chicago. The streets are “cracked and dirty” and the houses are a picture of “general disorder and hopeless resignation.” The people are no better: “loud-mouthed men” sit on the step “and pick guitars and dance and sing the blues”, while “bold women in loose-fitting, low-necked, sleeveless gingham house dresses ... chew tobacco and swear and let the loud-mouthed men handle them with shameless familiarity.” In this area lives, Nell, a white woman who works in a cabaret. Nell has a black boyfriend, Joe, but is cheating on him with another black man, Shug. When Joe finds the two lovers together he challenges Nell to choose between them. She refuses and Shug suggests a card game to decide: “we’ll have a game of five-up right here and the winner gets the gal.” The loser is to be shot. But Nell tries to double-cross both men and Joe walks away, telling her “Nell, you ain’t worth a damn.” As he leaves he hears a gunshot; Shug has killed Nell.⁵¹ This story shows the underbelly of black life: promiscuity, gambling, drinking and violence. It is interesting to note that the most immoral character is a white woman, living and consorting with black men, which was a particularly controversial depiction. In contrast, Joe, though a gambler, is the story’s only source of morality. Sheen won second prize in the 1926 “Krigwa”

⁵¹ Edwin Drummond Sheen, “The Death Game”, *The Crisis*, January 1927, 134-37; February 1927, 198-202.

competition for this entry; Du Bois and his judges obviously felt that this tale, even with its controversial content, had considerable merit. It should be noted, however, that such depictions of the seedy side of black America were extremely rare in *The Crisis*.

More common, particularly in the 1930s with the Depression taking hold, were pieces of art and literature that celebrated the black worker. Du Bois increasingly saw the black proletariat as central to the struggle for civil rights.⁵² Working-class African Americans were honoured in a number of examples of creative work published in the magazine during these years. In the poem "Black Man", Heba Jannath describes the work that black men and women have done for his country: he has "plowed and planted cotton", "garnered in the rice fields", "laid the Southern highways", "mined for coal deposits", "blasted in the subway", "labored in the docks" and "cooked in countless kitchens". Not only that but the black man has "fought his country's battles" and "fashioned gallant rhythms". Still, his masculinity, his humanity, is questioned by white America:

And yet, they say, he's not a man
Not equal to the rest
What, we ask, is Manhood
If this not be the test? ⁵³

The poet demands that the toil and contribution of African American men be acknowledged by white America.

This interest in the labour of blacks extended to visual art in *The Crisis*. On the cover of the November 1933 issue was *The Black Miner* [Fig. 13]. This picture by J.E. Dodd shows the miner sitting in profile, his head resting on his hands, leaning on the

⁵² See Lewis, *Fight*, 305-10.

⁵³ Heba Jannath, "Black Man", *The Crisis*, May 1930, 163. Not all the pieces celebrating black life were written by African Americans. Heba Jannath was the pen name of Josephine Cogdell, the white wife of the black literary critic and *Messenger* editor, George Schuyler.

handle of his pick-axe. The figure is mostly in shadow, with his torch sending a beam of light off the page. He looks exhausted; his shoulders are sagging and his weary head is slumped. But there is something noble about his depiction; his figure is outlined and his shadow repeats his image on the wall behind him. Furthermore, publishing such a picture on front cover of magazine makes the miner a figure to be celebrated and admired, just like the cover girls.⁵⁴

The Depression hit African Americans particularly hard: they felt the effects in all areas of the country and all sections of black society. Unemployment rates for African Americans far exceeded those of whites in urban areas. In Harlem unemployment was five times higher than in the rest of the New York City.⁵⁵ The effects of this joblessness are portrayed in a one-act play, "Job Hunter". Set in the Public Employment Office in Harlem, it shows, in a rather impersonal manner, men coming in to look for work. Most of the characters are unnamed and are referred to by their status: "Unemployed". There are very few jobs to be had and those that are available are unskilled and poorly paid. The play gives a sense of the dire situation they face and shows that the few systems in place to offer help, the Office as well as charities and churches, are overwhelmed by demand.⁵⁶ The realism of the play is emphasised. In the middle of the text is a photograph of the breadline in Harlem and at the end it states that the play "is based on actual experience in a Harlem unemployment office".

These stories and images challenge the assumption that *The Crisis* exclusively privileged middle-class life. They suggest that it was not just affluent blacks who embodied American values. The working class could also represent dignity, hard work and respectability. In publishing such pieces *The Crisis*, demands that the labour

⁵⁴ For a discussion of other visual images of black labour see Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 187-89.

⁵⁵ Watson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 158.

⁵⁶ H.F.V. Edward, "Job-Hunters", *The Crisis*, December 1931, 417-20.

of African Americans be celebrated by members of the race. Furthermore, it was intended that their work should be recognised by white America as grounds for equal treatment. However, it should be noted that these pieces (with the exception of Adams' sketch and "Death Game" which appeared in 1910 and 1927 respectively) were published in the 1930s. This was a period when American culture more generally was taking a more 'proletarian' turn and Du Bois was beginning to take a greater interest in the plight of black workers. Furthermore, these works of art and literature are the exception rather than the rule in *The Crisis*.

It might be expected that a study of the magazine during these years would uncover the controlling hand of its editor. After all, Du Bois had plenty to say about the type of work he thought black artists should be producing, particularly from 1926 onwards when he made his pronouncements about the "Criteria of Negro Art". However, there does not appear to be any noticeable change in the work published. One factor which might have prevented Du Bois blocking the work of newer or less conservative artists was Jessie Fauset. As literary editor from 1919 to 1926, Fauset exerted enormous influence over the arts pages of *The Crisis*. She has been disparagingly remembered as a "traditional" and "imitative" writer, who avoided experimentation and radical ideas. In fact, in both her own writing and as literary editor she displayed a considerable range of interests and a "sensibility" both "catholic and global".⁵⁷ Fauset gave a freer hand to the young artists published in the magazine than might be imagined. It has been argued that after she left, Du Bois only "supported young artists whose ideals mirrored his own" and that he censored those who did not support his point of view. Those who were barred supposedly included

⁵⁷ Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction" to *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, Jessie Redmon Fauset (1929; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), xii-xiii.

Langston Hughes and Claude McKay.⁵⁸ In fact, whilst relations with both poets were strained he continued to publish their work in *The Crisis*; sixteen of Hughes' poems appeared between 1927 and 1933. Therefore it seems likely that it was not just the influence of Fauset but also the attitude of Du Bois himself that created space for different representations of black America in *The Crisis*.

Despite some variety in the content of the work published, virtually all of the cultural forms which filled the pages of *The Crisis* could be considered examples of 'high' culture: fine art and literature which were based on European and white modes of expression. This reflected the NAACP's conviction that whites would admire 'high' culture and would respect those African Americans who could create it and thus would respect the race as a whole. As James Weldon Johnson said, "The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art."⁵⁹ This bias is seen in some of the African-inspired work in *The Crisis*, much of which used Egyptian imagery. Europeans had appropriated Egyptian civilization and recognised it as 'high culture', therefore it "fit into Du Bois's idea of what African American culture should strive for."⁶⁰

A story which is an excellent example of this cultural elitism is "The Servant" by Fenton Johnson, published in a 1912 edition of *The Crisis*. It is a sketch about a young servant girl, Eliza, who has newly arrived in Chicago from Georgia. She feels out of place in the household of the refined and wealthy black family for whom she works. She is unsettled by her new surroundings because there are no class divisions amongst blacks in Georgia: "the color line obliterated every other line society should

⁵⁸ Carmiele Y. Wilkerson and Shamoan Zamir, "Du Bois and the 'New Negro'", in *The Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Shamoan Zamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9.

⁶⁰ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 137.

wish to draw." One evening she hears violin music and is drawn to it. Eliza goes downstairs and she is allowed to sit with the group of young people. She listens as they discuss novels and plays but, of course, "[a]ll this was Greek to the unlettered little girl." The son of the family then "started to play the sorrow songs that can never die, because they are a genuine expression of American life." The music makes Eliza recall her life in Georgia: the "little cabin", the cotton fields, her mother killed by poverty and her father killed by whites. She feels inadequate in face of his talents: he "could throw on the screen of her mind pictures of her home life by means of an instrument she could not even wield." She does not have the education or the culture to create such beauty in the same way as the children of the wealthy family: "He and his sister were versed in the lore and the music of civilization. Within her bosom was nothing save the emotions that she could feel so vividly but could not express." At the end of the story Eliza throws herself on her bed, sobbing "Ah wants tuh luhn!"⁶¹ The implication is that the poor, uneducated South is a source of great emotion and power in black life but it needs educated, civilized, cultured blacks to express those emotions properly. Although the 'folk' culture of the South is revered by middle-class blacks, it can only properly be expressed through high cultural forms (such as the violin played by a trained musician). African American life can only be truly conveyed by European, in other words white, forms of expression. 'High' culture triumphs over 'low'.

The tension between 'high' and 'low' is also evident in the very conspicuous absence of jazz from the pages of *The Crisis*. During the 'Jazz Age' one of most important and popular forms of African American culture was barely mentioned. The obvious explanation for this was the NAACP's cultural elitism. Jazz was associated

⁶¹ Fenton Johnson, "The Servant", *The Crisis*, August 1912, 189-90.

with working-class black life and the seedy side of Harlem. It was a form of 'low' culture which did little to imbue the race with the refinement necessary for acceptance by the white world. Indeed, in the eyes of Du Bois and his associates, it played into stereotypes of blacks as primal and base. Ted Vincent argues that *The Crisis* "seemed to be bending over backwards to avoid mention of the jazz or blues aspects to the popular music scene." In the magazine "concern for propriety seemed to be mixed with fear of anything in Black culture that might upset or confuse the many White NAACP members". Du Bois did not want to "confuse" whites by "trying to explain the value in music that seemed so 'wild'".⁶² In other words, he did not want to disturb the image of black life which much of *The Crisis* tried so hard to create. It seems that although whites made up only a small percentage of the readership they dictated the content of the magazine. However, Du Bois was not simply concerned about the white reaction to popular music. Its absence also reflected his personal prejudices and the bias of his organisation. Popular music evoked what were, to the NAACP, uncomfortable associations with minstrelsy and the 'entertainer' stereotype. For decades, minstrel shows had used music and dance to belittle the race. When black people were portrayed as singers, dancers and jesters it made them appear unthreatening and contented with their unequal status. 'Popular' entertainers, in contrast to 'high' artists, did not offer an image of the race which would improve white attitudes. Furthermore, music such as jazz came from the bottom up (in other words it was created and popularised by the working classes). The NAACP was more comfortable with the top-down forms of culture produced by its own leaders and members.

⁶² Ted Vincent, *Keep Cool: The Black Activists who Built the Jazz Age* (London: Pluto, 1995), 171, 169, 172.

Much of the creative work in *The Crisis* was published with the intention of changing broad notions of race. There were also examples of Du Bois using the arts to make political statements and to change attitudes towards specific issues. In the next chapter, for example, the NAACP's deployment of the arts in its anti-lynching campaign is examined. However, another example from this period was the issue of black involvement in the First World War. The editor used his position to endorse his stance on this controversial issue. Du Bois called for full participation of African Americans in the war. He even supported Joel Spingarn's proposal for a separate officer training camp for African Americans to be established in Des Moines, Iowa.⁶³ Du Bois saw the war as an opportunity for African Americans to prove their eligibility for full citizenship.

This was a controversial view as many blacks balked at the idea of fighting for a country which denied them equal rights, in an army which segregated them by race. Furthermore, there were those on the NAACP Board, such as Oswald Villard and Mary White Ovington, who were opposed to the war itself. Du Bois, nevertheless, used his position as editor of *The Crisis* to propagate his own view. In July 1918 he published his controversial editorial "Close Ranks" in which he urged his readers to unite behind the war effort: "Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens".⁶⁴ He appeared to be calling off the fight for racial equality during wartime. Du Bois was immediately and ferociously attacked in the African American press and by the black community, including by those inside the NAACP, for his position. A number of scholars have argued that the editorial did not mark an about turn in Du Bois's

⁶³ Whilst it might be surprising that the leading light in an association committed to racial integration could sanction separate facilities for African Americans, "Du Bois the racial integrationist could coexist with Du Bois the racial separatist." Lewis, *Biography*, 529.

⁶⁴ Du Bois, "Close Ranks", *The Crisis*, July 1918, 111.

principles, rather he was motivated by a more self-interested concern: securing a commission from the Military Intelligence Branch.⁶⁵

The editorial, whilst by far the most controversial and extreme example, was not the only piece to appear in *The Crisis* which encouraged black participation in the war. There were a number of pictures, short stories and poems printed which celebrated African American patriotism. As Amy Kirschke argues, many pictures were published in order to demonstrate black patriotism to a white society and a government suspicious of black loyalty.⁶⁶ In May 1918 the government passed the Sedition Act which allowed it to prosecute those making or publishing disloyal statements about the government during the war. African American organisations came under particular scrutiny. Spingarn was in charge of monitoring “Negro subversion” for Military Intelligence and in this capacity he warned the NAACP’s legal adviser, Charles Studin, that *The Crisis* was open to criticism. Studin promised that “all future issues of this magazine [will] comply with the wishes of the Government both in letter and spirit.” Spingarn reassured his superiors that Du Bois promised to “change the tone” of *The Crisis* to make it “an organ of patriotic propaganda hereafter”.⁶⁷ These promises were made in June 1918 but, interestingly, there are a number of examples of pro-war creative work in the magazine in the previous year.⁶⁸ This suggests that it was not simply pressure from the government which encouraged Du Bois to show his support for the black war effort.

⁶⁵ Spingarn, who worked for MIB, was hoping to persuade his supervisors to offer a position to his colleague and encouraged Du Bois to publish the editorial. In the end, MIB decided against Du Bois’s commission. See Mark Ellis, “‘Closing Ranks’ and ‘Seeking Honors’: W.E.B. Du Bois in World War I”, *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 96-124; and Lewis, *Biography*, 555.

⁶⁶ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 200.

⁶⁷ Ellis, “‘Closing Ranks’”, 105-106, 107.

⁶⁸ As well as the short story below, see Kirschke for a discussion of artwork in 1917 depicting black soldiers, *Art in Crisis*, 200-203.

The cover of the November 1918 issue featured a painting, *At Bay*, of a black soldier who has fallen in the trenches but still holds aloft the star spangled banner [Fig. 14]. It is a picture of black bravery and of loyalty to the ultimate symbol of the country: the flag. A short story printed the previous year has a similar message. In "The Ragtime Regiment", an aging Civil War veteran, poignantly named John Brown, hears pacifists making a speech in Chicago and is angered by their lack of support for their country. He returns to his black neighbourhood where "loyalty is a hereditary trait and patriotism is a passion perpetual, reverential and profound." He forms a 'Ragtime Regiment', from a group of volunteers he calls up on the street. Brown trains these black men and they enlist together.⁶⁹ The story is a celebration of black participation in the war and is constructed to prove that African Americans felt a sense of patriotic duty.

However, during the war, and increasingly in the months afterwards, the work in *The Crisis* reflected a certain "ambiguity" about the black war effort.⁷⁰ Du Bois remained critical of the hypocrisy of the government and frustrated with the lack of progress for African Americans despite their loyalty. This ambiguity is seen in the poem, "We Who Are Dark", by Clara Burrill Bruce. It begins with a description of the trials and hardship suffered by African Americans. They are then seen marching "side by side / With those who taught / Us all our woes". Bruce echoes the sentiment of "Close Ranks" when she writes, "Old Wrongs, old sores / Forgotten lie". But the poem closes with a damning indictment of the hypocrisy of blacks fighting for something they do not themselves possess: "Bearing aloft / To foreign lands / A freedom sweet / That's not our own."⁷¹ Du Bois used the arts in an attempt to persuade black readers to support the war and to prove black patriotism to whites. He

⁶⁹ Henry Davis Middleton, "The Ragtime Regiment", *The Crisis*, September 1917, 252-55.

⁷⁰ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 200-209.

⁷¹ Clara Burrill Bruce, "We Who Are Dark", *The Crisis*, December 1918, 67.

exploited his role as editor to ensure the material published reflected his own, changing, stance on the issue. The ambiguity of Bruce's poem demonstrates how the creative texts in *The Crisis* could be closely aligned to Du Bois's own opinion.

The controversy over black participation in the First World War was just one example of Du Bois using the magazine for his own agenda. Over the years of his editorship he frequently clashed with the rest of the NAACP leadership.⁷² These disagreements were usually solved, often by the diplomacy of Mary White Ovington, but the issue of control of *The Crisis* continued to simmer. The financial strain of the 1930s brought matters to a head. The Depression of the 1930s hit the NAACP as membership fell and subscriptions to *The Crisis* plummeted. By 1932 its monthly circulation was down to about 15,000 and Du Bois reported that it could not survive without support from the NAACP.⁷³

Du Bois resented having to be reliant on the Association and particularly on the then Executive Secretary, Walter White. The editor was suspicious of what he saw as White's attempts to control the magazine. Most seriously, their disagreements over the issue of segregation boiled over when Du Bois wrote an incendiary editorial in the April 1934 issue of *The Crisis* personally attacking Walter White. In the face of this attack, White persuaded the Board to pass a resolution declaring that "*The Crisis* is the organ of the Association and no salaried officer of the Association shall criticize the policy, work, or officers of the Association in the pages of *The Crisis*".⁷⁴ Du Bois, not wishing to be controlled in such a manner, offered his resignation. It was initially refused by the Board, but when Du Bois realised that no compromise would be reached he insisted on its acceptance.

⁷² For an account of his battle with Villard see Elliott Rudwick, "W.E.B. Du Bois in the Role of *Crisis* Editor", *Journal of Negro History*, 43, No. 3 (July 1958): 218-224.

⁷³ Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals*, 211.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 232.

Du Bois was replaced as editor by Roy Wilkins, who had worked as a journalist before joining the NAACP. Wilkins made clear his opinion of *The Crisis* under his predecessor: "For many years *The Crisis* has been ... a journal definitely marked as literary and intellectual. Its style and content have been such as to appeal only to the intellectual minority."⁷⁵ He argued that it was too "intellectual" and did not have broad appeal; in order to widen its readership and become financially self-sufficient it must move away from a literary emphasis. Under Wilkins, the magazine dropped its artistic flavour. The 'Renaissance' was over.

The Crisis, of course, was not the only magazine of the 1920s to concern itself with African American culture. The National Urban League's *Opportunity*, the magazine of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, *The Messenger*, and the single-issue *Fire!!* each featured African American arts. Many of the same artists that featured in *The Crisis* were also published in *Opportunity* and *Messenger*. Both these magazines reflected the belief that the arts could play a role in the African American struggle.

The first issue of *Opportunity*, edited by Charles Johnson, appeared in 1923. A number of scholars have argued that whilst *The Crisis* laid much of the groundwork for the interest in African American culture in magazines, by the mid-1920s *Opportunity* had taken over and become the most important black magazine in terms of the arts. As Steven Watson writes, "If *The Crisis* planted the seeds for the New Negro movement, *Opportunity* represented its flowering."⁷⁶ Anne Carroll has found many similarities in how the two magazines used the arts on their pages. They both "reflected the importance of the arts in representing African Americans" and both

⁷⁵ Wilkins, "Memorandum to the chairman of the Committee on the Future Plan and Program of the NAACP", July 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 16A Reel 8.

⁷⁶ Watson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 25.

placed “a great deal of emphasis on the potential of the arts to influence ideas about African Americans.”⁷⁷ Johnson recognised the political role of arts but he also stressed artistic freedom and he had an easier relationship with the young black artists who contributed to the magazine. According to Alain Locke, *Opportunity* usurped *The Crisis* by “substituting self-expression and interpretation for rhetoric and overt propaganda.”⁷⁸

The Messenger – the magazine of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters – was founded in 1917 and ran until 1928. Its editors, A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen, initially included few examples of African American art and only published literature if it served social and economic ends: “with us economics and politics take precedence [sic] to ‘Music and Art.’”⁷⁹ When editorial control shifted to George Schuyler and Theophilis Lewis in 1923, and during Wallace Thurman’s brief tenure in 1926, greater emphasis was placed on the arts. According to Theodore Kornweibel, *Messenger* published more poems during the period 1923 to 1928 than either *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*. Nevertheless, of the three race journals, *Messenger* had the least influence on artists because whilst it was “sympathetic to the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro spirit [it] never committed itself to them wholeheartedly.”⁸⁰

The magazines discussed above were each linked to civil rights organisations, from which they received official, and sometimes financial, support. A more independent enterprise was set up by a group of younger artists who rejected much that these more established magazines represented. This group included Wallace

⁷⁷ Carroll, *Word, Image*, 89.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics*, 51.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁰ 226 poems were published, compared to 194 and 202 respectively. Theodore Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 126, 106. Kornweibel has underestimated the number of poems in *The Crisis*; 253 poems were printed during this period. Figure from Yellin, “An Index of Literary Materials”.

Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Aaron Douglas. These modernists were more experimental in the form and content of their work. They rejected the leadership and philosophies (though not necessarily the assistance) of the middle-class intellectuals, or "Niggerati" as Thurman and Hurston nicknamed them. Under the leadership of Thurman they created their own quarterly magazine, *Fire!!*, which was "Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists." Only one issue, in November 1926, was ever produced but it provided an important statement about the group's attitude towards black culture. They rejected the philosophy of art as propaganda, they believed it was too restrictive and damaged the creative process. They "proudly wrote about just the things Du Bois ... wished to downplay if not ignore: sex, color-consciousness, racism, and self-hatred" and "the Negro as ... wild, colorful and possibly dangerous."⁸¹ They found the black 'intelligentsia' "too conservative in their representations of African Americans, too insistent on the idea of using art as a political and social tool, and too obsessed with the idea of race."⁸² These younger artists were scathing of Du Bois, particularly once he set out his propagandist stall, and of the conservatism of the NAACP. Interestingly, however, many of the contributors to *Fire!!* (including Douglas, Hughes, Cullen, Bontemps and Gwendolyn Bennett) also had work published in *The Crisis*. This indicates that their disagreements with Du Bois and his organisation did not stop them from using his magazine to advance their own careers. It also suggests that Du Bois did not always censor those who opposed him.

The complex and sometimes contradictory cultural agenda of the NAACP was reflected in *The Crisis*. The NAACP's strategy was shaped by the beliefs of many of

⁸¹ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995), 83.

⁸² Carroll, *Word, Image*, 191.

its leaders, by the practicalities of the situation and by the tone of the era. The significance of Du Bois in steering the path of *The Crisis* cannot be underestimated but his ideas developed and changed throughout this period and his control was moderated by the influence of Jessie Fauset. An examination of the work produced and published does, nevertheless, allow us to demonstrate how the NAACP's position worked in practice. The magazine provided a space in which to demonstrate and celebrate black artistic achievements. It could be used to prove to white America that African Americans were capable of creating beautiful works of art. The works created and published were, almost without exception, 'high' culture. The NAACP believed that this was the form of culture which whites would recognise and most admire and in this way the talent of black poets, novelists and artists could be used to challenge white stereotypes of the race. So, too, could the images produced: the fiction, poetry and art provided an alternative to the dominant caricatures of African Americans produced by white culture.

The NAACP wanted to use creative work to instil racial pride and to form a sense of collective identity. It gave African Americans the opportunity to read stories and poems about them and to look at drawings and photographs of themselves. These representations were designed to increase racial self-esteem, in order to ready the race for the larger battle for equality. No easy generalisations can be made about the 'type' of African American that the NAACP celebrated. There were light-skinned cover girls and characters but similarly many of the pieces celebrated a shared black and African heritage. Black women in *The Crisis* were often portrayed as strong, assertive and important champions for black rights. There were doctors and teachers but also sharecroppers and miners. Du Bois wanted art and literature which would help advance the race and this meant work which showed African Americans in what he

considered to be the best possible light. It required the portrayal of decent and upstanding citizens. After all, it was the debauchery and vice in much of the work of the Harlem Renaissance that Du Bois objected to, not the class of its protagonists. Nevertheless, whilst working-class blacks did appear in *The Crisis* the predominant image was still that of middle-class black America. Despite a greater breadth to its portrayal of black life than might be assumed, the NAACP's cultural strategy was still wedded to the portrayal of the black middle class.

In the previous chapter the limitations of the strategy behind the NAACP's involvement with the Harlem Renaissance were outlined, and as the same cultural strategy informed *The Crisis*, the same critique may be applied: the arts could not change the physical realities of black life in America. The NAACP learnt this lesson, although only to a limited extent. *The Crisis* changed; Du Bois's editorship was the last time that it devoted so much space to the arts on its pages. Never again would the Association be so closely aligned with an artistic and cultural movement. However, the NAACP did not give up on the idea that creative work could be used as a tool to fight racial prejudice. It continued to believe that the arts and other forms of culture influenced attitudes towards African Americans. Furthermore, it remained convinced that the arts could have a political message. Indeed, the most comprehensive example of this was its use of culture in the fight against lynching. It had already incorporated elements of the arts into its campaign and then in the 1930s, as its position as a champion of black culture came increasingly under threat from the Left and as American culture more generally took on a political tone, it instigated what Walter White would call a "union of art and propaganda".

Chapter Four

Plays, Pens and Paintings: Culture in the Fight Against Lynching

The NAACP believed that it could use the arts to change white perceptions of African Americans and for much of the first three decades of the twentieth century it used this principle to challenge attitudes towards lynching. The NAACP's strategy for ending mob violence was based on its conviction that the responsibility for lynching lay with the American public. Association President Moorfield Storey told the 1922 Annual Conference, "The people of the United States have the power to stop lynching and for all the lynchings that occur they are responsible, since they can if they will prevent them ... Our appeal, then, is to the conscience of America."¹ Lynchings occurred because people allowed them to occur, either through their explicit support or their acquiescence. This argument was an extension of the NAACP's idea that racism was formed by the attitudes of white Americans. Therefore, the solution was the same: education and persuasion. The NAACP needed to stop white approval of, and apathy toward, lynching. To do this it had to educate whites about the true nature and extent of the practice.

Education and persuasion were to be achieved, in part, through the arts. The NAACP's anti-lynching campaign began around the same time as the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance. Therefore, the NAACP's use of cultural forms reflected some of the priorities and principles of the Renaissance. It used 'high' cultural forms to reach middle-class whites and its work was shaped by discussions about the role of art and propaganda in the black struggle. The Association helped to develop and disseminate representations of lynching in a range of media. It commissioned, staged

¹ Moorfield Storey, NAACP Conference, June 1922. NAACP/MF: Part 1 Reel 8.

and published lynching dramas. Often written by black women, these plays dealt with the theme of mob violence both explicitly and implicitly and offered a strong anti-lynching message. In the 1930s Walter White helped establish the Writers' League Against Lynching, a pressure group made up of some of the most noted authors, poets and journalists of the day who used their talents to condemn lynch law. Finally, in 1935 White put together an exhibition of paintings which dealt with lynching. The show was designed to alert liberal Northern whites to the reality of mob violence and to convince them that federal action was needed. This chapter considers these three areas and how the NAACP tried to use work by both black and white artists to change perceptions of lynching.

This chapter, although it considers early anti-lynching plays, such as the staging of *Rachel* in 1916, concentrates for the most part on the 1930s, which is when the anti-lynching campaign became one of the NAACP's key priorities and therefore when much of the cultural work took place. After an unsuccessful drive for a federal anti-lynching law (as discussed below), the campaign was all but abandoned at the beginning of the 1920s. It was re-launched by the Association in 1933. Robert Zangrando has identified a number of reasons for this return to anti-lynching work. There was a sharp increase in the number of lynchings, from eight in 1932 to twenty-eight the following year. More significantly the NAACP faced increasing competition from the Left, as the Communist Party became involved in the struggle against mob violence. It therefore felt compelled to reassert itself as "a leading advocate of interracial justice."² This tussle with the Communists is an important element of the anti-lynching story, not least because it was also played out in the cultural arena. The

² Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 98-101.

Communist Party not only threatened the NAACP's position as chief protector of black rights but also its role as champion of African American culture.

Lynching - "the summary execution by a mob of an individual who had committed an alleged crime or a perceived transgression of social codes" - was an American phenomenon.³ Figures from the Tuskegee Institute show that 4,743 people died in the United States at the hands of lynchers from 1882 to 1968. It was also primarily a racial phenomenon. Of those victims, 3,466, or almost 73 percent, were black.⁴ Lynching was a form of control which punished any violation, or considered violation, of the racial order. It was used to keep African Americans as an underpaid and exploited workforce, particularly in the South under the sharecropping system. Mob violence could also halt economic progress by punishing those who forgot their 'place' or became too successful. Lynchers themselves argued that lynching punished, and therefore deterred, the "usual crime" of black men raping white women.⁵ But in his 1929 book on the phenomenon Walter White argued, "Lynching has always been the means for protection, not of white women, but of profits."⁶ Lynchings during the first decades of the twentieth century were notable for their use of torture and mutilation (frequently including castration) and as spectacles. The victim was often burned, hanged or shot in a public place, sometimes in front of crowds of hundreds or thousands who had travelled to see the event. The taking of mementos – whether photographs or body parts – was common and the body was frequently displayed for days after the attack. These practices further degraded and dehumanised the victim

³ Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), viii.

⁴ Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 4.

⁵ For a discussion of lynching, sexuality and patriarchy see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 145-147.

⁶ Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1929), 82.

and, indeed, all African Americans. Lynching was thus not simply a crime against an individual but against an entire race.⁷

In the South there were some moderate whites who looked on lynching less favourably. They were not necessarily opposed to mob violence on moral grounds but they had concerns about its impact on the reputation and development of the region. The South was newly industrialising and they feared that reports of burnings and torture would deter potential investors. Furthermore, one of the South's greatest economics assets, its labour supply, was disappearing with black migration out of the region. The NAACP wanted to encourage what Walter White called "enlightened selfishness" amongst moderate Southerners.⁸ It made an appeal based on expediency rather than justice. It also believed that many whites did not actively support lynching; they simply did nothing to speak out against it. Moorfield Storey claimed, "Silence, indifference, acquiescence prevail. No one approves the barbarism and injustice ... but few indeed are the men who condemn it."⁹ The NAACP hoped to shake whites out of their apathy and turn this acquiescence into condemnation. It did have some support from a Southern-grown anti-lynching movement which combined arguments of both expediency and justice.¹⁰

Lynching was such a pervasive and destructive force that the NAACP knew it could not be stopped simply by persuasion and education. As in its broader fight

⁷ The most useful general studies of lynching include: Dray, *At the Hands*; Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*; Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988); S.E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995); Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extra Legal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁸ White, *Rope and Faggot*, 112.

⁹ Address of Moorfield Storey, Annual Conference, 1921. NAACP/MF: Part 1 Reel 8.

¹⁰ Foremost was the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) formed by Will W. Alexander and Willis D. Weatherford in 1919. Out of this came the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), which was formed in 1930 and led by Jessie Daniel Ames. See Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.

against racial inequality, it did not rely solely on changing attitudes. It also used the courts and legislation. Indeed, the principal focus of its anti-lynching campaign was its efforts to lobby for federal intervention. The first real effort to push for anti-lynching legislation came in 1919 when it backed the bill of Leonidas Dyer, a Republican from Missouri. The Dyer Bill, which provided the basis for all subsequent anti-lynching bills, defined lynching as the murder of any citizen of the US by a mob of three or more people. It passed the House of Representatives in 1922 but was defeated in the Senate by a Democratic filibuster and because of the reluctance of Republicans to challenge the stalling tactics.¹¹ A number of arguments were made against such legislation. The most common was that lynching was murder and therefore should be dealt with by the state and not the federal government. Even liberal groups such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation opposed the NAACP's campaign for a federal law. However, the Association was not dissuaded and the second concerted effort came in the 1930s. Democrat Senators Edward Costigan of Colorado and Robert Wagner of New York introduced a federal anti-lynching bill into Congress in 1934.¹² Throughout 1934 and 1935 the NAACP pushed for the passage of this legislation in the Senate. It used its cultural projects, such as the art exhibition and the Writers' League, to stimulate support for legislation. However, the bill suffered a similar fate to the Dyer Bill. Indeed, the United States government has never passed an anti-lynching bill.

The retelling – by lynchers and their apologists – of the lynching story, through newspaper reports, verbal accounts, popular culture and visual images, was an important aspect of the phenomenon. As Angelina Weld Grimké wrote:

¹¹ See Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 51-71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114-15.

That people could see and hear about these events far away from and long after the fact of their occurrence is part of the act of lynching itself, for representations not only function to preserve the act in perpetuity, they also allow the act to be committed again.¹³

It created a record of lynching in which the act was justified and even celebrated. Furthermore, it allowed the lynchers to re-enact the event. If one of the purposes of lynching was to control African Americans through the threat of violence then replaying the act served to reinforce its message of black vulnerability. Re-presenting the capture, torture and killing further degraded and dehumanised the victim. The murdered African American often lost his individual identity and the act became an assault against the whole race. Despite their frequency, most Americans had not witnessed a lynching firsthand. The accounts disseminated the ideology of white supremacy that lynching enacted. Lynchings often followed ritual patterns: the location, the use of torture, the method of killing, the taking of mementos and the displaying of the body all had symbolic significance.¹⁴ Lynching narratives recreated this ritual and assumed standardised forms.¹⁵ They emphasised both the fiendishness of the African American victim and the outrage of the community over his crime. He was always presented as guilty, often of an assault on white womanhood. The cruelty and frenzy of the mob were downplayed; the participants were either upstanding citizens carrying out their moral duty or unknown members of the lower classes.

Such narratives appeared not only in white newspapers but also in novels, plays and motion pictures. American culture repeatedly condoned and even glorified the practice of lynching. Anti-lynching activists, including those in the NAACP, were all too aware of the power of these representations. The Association had fought *The*

¹³ Angelina Weld Grimké, quoted in Krasner, *Beautiful Pageant*, 105.

¹⁴ See Orlando Patterson, *Rituals in Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998); Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*; and Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 206.

Birth of a Nation in part because of the film's glorification of lynching and its justification that the act punished the rape of white women by blacks. Activists realised that, unless challenged, white accounts would remain the primary record of lynching. This was particularly pertinent because of the gap in the statistics on mob violence. No official records were kept and many incidents were unreported or misreported in both local and national newspapers.¹⁶ Most scholars believe that the actual number of lynchings is likely to be higher than those recorded.¹⁷ The NAACP kept its own annual tally of lynchings and printed it in *The Crisis*. It attempted to verify some of this information through correspondence with local people and it was often informed of lynchings which had not been reported in the press. The NAACP also investigated numerous lynchings, sending either staff members or reporters to gather information about events. It published and widely publicised their often-shocking findings. The reports exposed the identity of the lynchers (usually as a section of society but sometimes as individuals), explained the real reasons for the killings, reported in often graphic detail the torture of the victim and stressed the brutality of the mob. Even this approach was limited, however, because the NAACP did not have the resources to investigate and publicise every incident of lynching.

It was therefore necessary to have more than just a factual record of lynching: activists needed a further way of remembering events. The arts provided a way of fulfilling this need. Through their plays, fiction and paintings, artists constructed narratives that challenged white representations of lynching. They exposed some of the myths surrounding lynching, restored to the black victim his identity and history,

¹⁶ African Americans kept their own records. Figures were compiled by the Tuskegee Institute from 1882 onwards and the *Chicago Tribune* kept and published its annual record from 1885.

¹⁷ For example, George Wright in his study on lynching in Kentucky found that at least 353 people were lynched there, compared to the figure of 205 in most sources. He suggests that there was likely to be a similar disparity in other Southern states. George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 5.

and highlighted the brutality of the mob. They could remember or re-imagine events from an African American perspective. By encouraging cultural work in its fight against lynching, the NAACP helped create an alternative interpretation of the 'history' of mob violence. It did not want the record of lynching to be the one left by whites; out of its campaign came a body of work which challenged white representations and created a new record of both lynching and African American resistance.

One of the earliest examples of the NAACP using the arts in its anti-lynching campaign was the performance of *Rachel* in 1916. For the next twenty-five years the NAACP encouraged, commissioned, published and staged a number of lynching plays. Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens define a lynching drama as "a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has a major impact on the dramatic action."¹⁸ The works discussed below were all written by black women and they tended to focus on the domestic life of African American families. They dealt either explicitly or implicitly with the theme of mob violence and all strongly condemned the psychological, physical and social effects of the phenomenon.

Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* was first performed in 1916 under the auspices of the NAACP's Drama Committee in Washington DC.¹⁹ An announcement in the play's programme stated its intention: "This is the first attempt to use the stage for propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of the millions of Colored citizens in this free republic."²⁰ Some scholars have suggested that the play was commissioned by the NAACP to counter *The Birth*

¹⁸ Judith L. Stephens, "Lynching Dramas and Women: History and Critical Context" in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁹ It was performed again in April 1917 in New York, also under the auspices of the NAACP.

²⁰ From *Washington Evening Star*, quoted in *The Crisis*, April 1916, 284.

*of a Nation*²¹ but, in fact, Grimké had started work on the manuscript before the film's release.²² Nevertheless, the NAACP's decision to stage the play may well have been in response to Griffith's film. It could not make a film which challenged the vicious propaganda of Griffith's production; the next best thing would be a stage play. Theatre was one of the cultural forms to which African Americans and the NAACP had access.

The play tells the story of Rachel, her mother, Mrs Loving, and brother, Tom, and is set in their "scrupulously neat and clean" Southern home.²³ Over the course of the three-act play, Rachel changes from being optimistic, joyous and loving, to bitter and jaded by the racism she sees around her. The most extreme example of this prejudice is lynching. After keeping it secret for ten years, Mrs Loving tells her children the story of the death of their father and brother, who were lynched when their father denounced the mob killing of another black man in his newspaper. Rachel cannot bear the inequality she sees and experiences and that she suffers physically and emotionally. She refuses an offer of marriage because she decides it is not fair to bring a black child into such a cruel world. Rachel laments: "everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear" about the future of their babies. "Why – it would be more merciful – to suffocate the little things at birth."²⁴

When her play was published in 1920 Grimké had to answer the charge that it "preaches race suicide". She maintained that "the appeal is not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites." She said her target was white women; she wanted

²¹ James V Hatch, "Introduction" in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*, ed. James V Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 12.

²² Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 118.

²³ Stage directions, Angelina Weld Grimké, *Rachel*, in *Strange Fruit*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

them to "see, feel, [and] understand" the effect of racism on the "souls of colored mothers everywhere". Grimké hoped that then "a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won."²⁵ There is some evidence from the reviews to suggest *Rachel* was successful in provoking sympathy. The critic for the Buffalo, New York *Courier* found "a terrible tragic note throughout the [play], which compels one to think, and if possible to lend aid to try and remove the prejudice against the colored race." The *Catholic World* concluded, "As a protest against white prejudice it makes its mark."²⁶ Grimké's explicit intention was to change white attitudes toward lynching but not everyone on the NAACP's Drama Committee was comfortable with this approach. It was divided over whether the function of drama should be propaganda or art. A minority did not agree with the use of propaganda; they split from the Committee and went on to form the Howard Players, led by Alain Locke, which promoted an artistic approach to theatre.²⁷ As has been discussed, this split between Du Bois and Locke over the use of art would continue during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Crisis, in a reflection of Du Bois's belief that art should have a political message, provided a publication outlet for anti-lynching literature. This included two lynching dramas: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and *For Unborn Children* by Myrtle Smith Livingston. *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, published and performed in 1918, raises the question of whether African Americans should fight in a war for a democracy that has been denied them at home. Set in a "manufacturing city in the North" it features Chris, Dan – who has been injured in an industrial accident – and their sister, Lucy. Their parents are dead: their father was lynched, "Shot down

²⁵ Angelina Weld Grimké, "'Rachel', The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author", in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, 424-25.

²⁶ *Courier* and *Catholic World* quoted in Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, 122.

²⁷ James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds., *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans. The Early Period, 1847-1938* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 134.

like a dog for daring to defend his home”, and their mother died of “pneumonia and heartbreak” after they moved north. Chris has been drafted and is reluctant to join up. He asks, “Must I go and fight for a nation that let my father’s murder go unpunished?”²⁸ The issue is debated between the siblings and with their neighbours and, finally, Chris is persuaded to go. Although Dunbar-Nelson raises some of the contradictions of blacks serving in the American army, the overwhelming message of the play, as with most of the work Du Bois published in his magazine at this time, is one of patriotism. It ends with ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ playing in the background as Chris’s siblings convince him that it is his duty as an African American to go to war.²⁹ Lynching is not the primary issue in *Mine Eyes Have Seen*; it is used as just one example of racial injustice. The plays stresses the physical (the family was forced to move north, a move which killed their mother and led to Dan’s accident) rather than the emotional effect of racism. Whereas Grimké ends her play on a note of hopelessness, Dunbar-Nelson concludes that even these hardships should be overcome for the sake of the nation and for the good of the race.

For Unborn Children by Myrtle Smith Livingston, won third prize in the 1925 *Crisis* competition and was published the following summer. Leroy Carlson is a young African American lawyer who falls in love with Selma, a white girl. They want to go north to marry but Leroy’s family disapproves. His sister, Marion, condemns intermarriage for its effect on black women and asks him, “What is to become of us when our own men throw us down?” His grandmother is worried about miscegenation; she tells him to think of the “unborn children you sin against by marrying her.” She confesses to Leroy that his mother was white and that “she hated you because you weren’t white.” At the end of the play a white mob comes to the

²⁸ Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* in *The Crisis*, April 1918, 271-72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 273-74.

house for Leroy. He rejects the notion of race-mixing and tells Selma, "Forget me, and marry a man of your own race; you'll be happier, and I will too, up there." He goes out to meet his death willingly. The religious imagery at the end of the play – "he is transfigured; a gleam of holiness comes into his eyes" – equates black suffering with Christian martyrdom. He tells his family his death is "a sacrifice for unborn children".³⁰ However, Livingston's comment on miscegenation is ambiguous. As Remi Omedele notes, it could be read as a "commentary on the consequences of the irrational and inhumane segregation laws" or she could have been advocating a Garveyite nationalist ideology which condemned race-mixing.³¹ The play appears to be more of a comment on racial separatism or intermarriage than a condemnation of white brutality. Nevertheless, it can be considered an anti-lynching drama because Leroy's actions can be read as an attempt to reassert black control: he chooses to make his death an act of martyrdom.

One of the most prolific writers of lynching dramas was Georgia Douglas Johnson. She wrote a number of plays with explicit anti-lynching messages but found it difficult to secure their production or publication. *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) is set in the home of Sue Jones, who cares for her two grandsons, Tom and Bossie. A neighbour calls round with news that the whites are "trying to run down some po Nigger they say that's tacked a white woman last night". Moments later the police arrive looking for Tom. They claim he fits the description of the attacker – "Age around twenty, five feet five or six, brown skin" – and convince the white girl to positively identify him. Tom is quickly taken and from the reports of neighbours Sue learns that he has been lynched.³² In Johnson's play, *Safe* (1929), a black mother

³⁰ Myrtle Smith Livingston, *For Unborn Children* in *The Crisis*, July 1926, 123-24.

³¹ Remi Omedele, "For Us, About Us, Near Us and By Us': American Women Playwrights and the Making of NAACP-Du Bois's Edutainment Agenda", *Women's History Review* 11, No.1 (2002): 62.

³² Georgia Douglas Johnson, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, in *Black Theatre USA*, 233-37.

hears the lynching of her neighbour, Sam Hosea, whilst in labour and kills her newborn son to save him from future lynchers.³³ The lynching is averted in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930) when Tom Waters' mother calls on the Governor – who is also his father, a secret she has always kept – to save him.³⁴ The first two plays in particular are uncompromising in their condemnation of the psychological repercussions of lynching. It is mob violence specifically that destroys the peace of the Sunday morning and forces a young mother to kill her newborn son.

It was this bleak outlook which led to the plays being rejected by the NAACP. Johnson had sent a number to its Youth Council for possible production. However, they were returned because of concerns that they “all ended in defeat” and “gave one the feeling that the situation was hopeless.”³⁵ By the 1930s the NAACP was optimistic that anti-lynching legislation would be passed and that the practice would come to an end. Whilst it wanted work which showed the full horror of lynching, it also wanted plays to suggest there was a solution. The NAACP did recognise Johnson's talent as a playwright and she was asked in 1938 to write a short play about the anti-lynching legislation making its way through Congress. Johnson responded by writing *And Yet They Paused* and *A Bill to Be Passed*, slightly different versions of the same play.³⁶ Both recount the story of an anti-lynching bill's passage through the House of Representatives alongside the story of a lynching in Mississippi. The NAACP had originally intended to use the play during an anti-lynching demonstration but last minute changes meant it wasn't ready to be included. However, it kept copies

³³ Georgia Douglas Johnson, *Safe*, in *Strange Fruit*, 110-115. Johnson almost certainly deliberately chose a name close to that of Sam Hose, a black man who was brutally tortured and killed in Georgia in 1899. It was a lynching that had a particular resonance for African Americans. Du Bois often recounted how he was walking down a street in Atlanta when he learned Hose's knuckles were for sale in a nearby shop. See, for example, Dray, *At the Hands*, 3-16.

³⁴ Georgia Douglas Johnson, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* in *Strange Fruit*, 116-120.

³⁵ WW to Georgia Douglas Johnson, 18 January 1937. NAACP/LC: I C 299.

³⁶ Georgia Douglas Johnson, *A Bill to Be Passed*, circa 1938. NAACP/LC: I C 299

on file to send out to “the numerous white and colored groups throughout the country who constantly write us for anti-lynching plays.” Johnson was told, “[y]our play will indeed be a contribution.”³⁷ The staging is simple and Johnson wrote that she deliberately made it “easy to prepare and easy to commit.”³⁸ It alternates between two scenes, one in a Southern black church and the other outside a room in the Capitol. Most of the action – the lynching and the Congressional debate – happens off stage and is overheard and retold by those on stage.

The NAACP commissioned the work (though Johnson wrote it at no cost to the organisation, except for typing and printing) as a piece of propaganda. On reading an early draft, Juanita Jackson, a national staff member, suggested that “there is an excellent opportunity for bringing in the arguments of those opposed to the Anti-Lynching Bill, and convincing answers to those arguments.”³⁹ Johnson does this by having her characters repeat and comment on the speeches made in the House. However, handwritten comments on the script calling for more arguments in favour of the bill suggest the NAACP wanted the propagandist element of the play to be strengthened. The portrayal of the lynching is dramatic and the scenes in the church, with the use of music and prayer, are more like Johnson’s earlier work. However, the play lacks the emotional depth of her other plays. This play was intended purely as a piece of propaganda and it is effective in its simplicity. The play is a clear example of the NAACP prioritising propaganda over art.

These lynching dramas (with the exception of *A Bill To Be Passed*) share many characteristics. They all take place within a domestic setting and centre on the black family. This allows the playwrights to create a picture of ‘normal’ black life on

³⁷ Letter Juanita Jackson to Georgia Douglas Johnson, 7 February 1938. NAACP/LC: I C 299. There is no evidence in the NAACP Papers that it was used in this way.

³⁸ Georgia Douglas Johnson to Juanita Jackson, 7 January 1938. NAACP/LC: I C 299.

³⁹ Letter Juanita Jackson to Georgia Douglas Johnson, 7 February 1938.

which violence and racism then impinge. The family is always respectable and often relatively prosperous. For example, in *For Unborn Children* the Carlsons are described as a “refined family, evidently of the middle class.”⁴⁰ Rachel and her family are educated and well spoken. Grimké said she drew her characters “from the best type of colored people” in order to challenge the usual theatrical stereotype of “the darkey”.⁴¹ The NAACP wanted cultural work that presented the ‘best’ black characters in order to appeal to middle-class whites. Setting the plays in the domestic sphere also creates a focus on black motherhood, with a matriarchal figure (mother or grandmother) at the centre of the piece. She is less ‘threatening’ to a white audience than the black male and therefore more likely to elicit sympathy, particularly, as Grimké hoped, from white women. Indeed, some of the characters distinctly resemble the Mammy stereotypes with which many whites were so comfortable. Sue Jones in *A Sunday Morning* “wears a red bandana handkerchief on her grey head, a blue gingham apron tied around her waist and big wide old lady comfort shoes.”⁴² The NAACP seemed to accept those stereotypes it challenged so vociferously elsewhere. This reflects the extent to which it wanted to reach whites; it was willing to compromise in order to get them on side.

The plays tend to deal with the “Aftermath”, to use the title of Mary Burrill’s play, of mob violence.⁴³ This decision has practical implications and no doubt these playwrights had issues of staging in mind because it would have been difficult to realistically show a lynching on the stage. It also allows the play to deal with the

⁴⁰ Livingston, *For Unborn Children*, 122.

⁴¹ Grimké, “‘Rachel’, The Play of the Month”, 425.

⁴² Johnson, *A Sunday Morning*, 233. For a discussion of black women in lynching dramas see Trudier Harris, “Before the Strength, The Pain: Portraits of Elderly Black Women in Early Twentieth-Century Anti-Lynching Plays”, in *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage*, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett (New York: Garland, 1999), 25-42.

⁴³ *Aftermath* was published in 1919 and performed by the New York Krigwa Players in 1928. In it a black man returns from the war in France to discover his father has been lynched. See Perkins and Stephens, *Strange Fruit*, 79-91.

consequences and impact of racial violence on the black family and on future generations. Even in those plays which end with a lynching, such as *A Sunday Morning*, the audience is asked to imagine the effect of the act on the family left behind. Trudier Harris accuses these playwrights of disguising the horrors of lynching by ignoring the physical reality of the act. She believes plays like *Rachel* and *Aftermath* "shy away from directly treating the issue" so much so that "we might ask if these are truly anti-lynching plays."⁴⁴

There certainly is a distancing in the plays, in terms of both staging and language, from the physical act of lynching. Nevertheless, the plays have an undeniable emotional impact, although they do veer into melodrama and sentimentality at times. Furthermore, the women rarely shy away from criticising white society for the evils done in its name and from linking lynching to wider social and economic injustice. In this way, they reflected the NAACP's stance on culture and anti-lynching. The Association wanted plays which condemned whites and showed them the harmful consequences of lynching. It staged, published and commissioned such plays because their message was in accordance with its own. The NAACP was clearly happy to use theatre for the purposes of propaganda. This is one of the clearest examples from its cultural campaigns of the Association using art with a specific political message. The situation was so extreme – the threat of violence so real and so deadly – that it needed a direct approach. The plays' significance is also demonstrated by their creation. At a time when racial violence was a very real physical threat to African Americans, the fact that black women were writing such uncompromising and critical works of drama was remarkable in itself.

⁴⁴ Harris, "Before the Strength", 32.

In 1933 Walter White and some of his associates had the idea to use their contacts in literary and journalistic circles to increase publicity and public support for the anti-lynching campaign. They formed the Writers' League Against Lynching to act as a "hell-raising committee to influence the country through writing, pronouncements and the like."⁴⁵ White explained the motivation behind the League: "Stirred by the recent increase in the number and viciousness of lynchings and the growing spirit of mob violence throughout the country, a group of us met to determine in what way we writers could best help to formulate public opinion against such lawlessness."⁴⁶ By 1934 it had over 150 members from the literary and media worlds, including some of the brightest stars such as Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Atherton, E. Franklin Frazier, Sterling Brown, Erskine Caldwell, Countee Cullen, Virginius Dabney, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Alain Locke, Edna St Vincent Millay, Upton Sinclair, Jean Toomer and Carl Van Vechten. White boasted, "I think it is safe to say that it represents the most distinguished list of writers yet organised to fight for social justice."⁴⁷

The League operated in two ways: it encouraged its members to take up the theme of lynching in their work and it acted as a pressure group of distinguished Americans to call for anti-lynching legislation. It sent a telegram to the President and members signed an open letter to Congress supporting the Costigan-Wagner Bill. It kept its members informed about incidents of racial violence in order to encourage them to write about lynching. The League, though ostensibly an independent organisation, was closely linked to the NAACP. Walter White was a founder and numerous NAACP staff were members. It had the same postal address as the Association and funds raised by the League were put towards the NAACP's anti-

⁴⁵ Quoted in Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 112.

⁴⁶ Letter from WW, 12 January 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 4.

⁴⁷ Letter WW to Heywood Brown, 5 December 1933. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 4.

lynching campaign. The League reflected the Association's ideas about lynching: people's opinions about the phenomenon had to be changed in order to bring an end to lynching and one of the best ways to achieve this was to educate them about its full horrors. Literature was an effective way of exposing the brutal nature and racist causes of lynching. The target audience was the white American public but works of literature could also be used to try and influence politicians. In 1940 White told the Senate Judiciary Committee considering anti-lynching legislation, "If [they] are sufficiently interested and concerned about these conditions to want to find out what the atmosphere is, in a town where lynchings are possible, let me urge them a reading of [*Trouble in July*]."⁴⁸ Erskine Caldwell's 1940 novel is about a Southern sheriff who fails to stop the lynching of a young black man accused of rape. White clearly felt this fictional representation could help sway these politicians in a way the facts and figures could not.

The theme of lynching and racial violence, of course, appeared in American literature long before and continued after the League or the NAACP's campaign. There are numerous examples of white and black writers including it, explicitly or obliquely, in their work. Some of the more famous examples include Theodore Dreiser's short story "Nigger Jeff" (1918), Sutton Griggs's novel *The Hindered Hand* (1905), Claude McKay's poem "The Lynching" (1922) and "Big Boy Leaves Home", a short story in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). NAACP members themselves produced work which included or dealt with incidents of racial violence. Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) depicts two lynchings; Branch Secretary Robert Bagnall wrote a short story about the effect of lynching on whites ("The Unquenchable Fire", 1924); the protagonist of James Weldon Johnson's *The*

⁴⁸ Quoted in Edwin T. Arnold, "Erskine Caldwell and Judge Lynch: Caldwell's Role in the Anti-Lynching Campaigns of the 1930s", in *Reading Erskine Caldwell: New Essays*, ed. Robert L. McDonald (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 198.

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) witnesses a mob killing and he writes of it in his poem "Brothers" (1916).⁴⁹

These and other anti-lynching texts form a record of lynching that contrasts with that created by apologists by challenging the standard lynching narrative in a number of ways. Many question the claim that the mob acts to punish the "usual crime" of rape. According to Trudier Harris black male writers in particular were conscious of the "oppressive shadow of white women upon their lives" and returned to the theme of sexual taboo many times.⁵⁰ In a number of the texts there is an accusation of rape but this is exposed as false to the reader and at times to the characters.⁵¹ Some black writers directly challenged the standard lynching narrative by creating ironic representations of newspaper reports. Walter White finished his novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, with a mock newspaper report on the lynching of the central character, in which it is charged he attempted to assault a white girl. In fact the black doctor was trying to treat her and the reader knows that white resentment lies behind the attack. White is thus able to expose the hypocrisy of both the lynchers who committed the acts and the press that reported them.

Walter White knew all too well white newspapers' propensity to manipulate the facts of lynchings. He attempted through his work to correct the imbalance of reporting. Some of these accounts provided inspiration for fictional re-telling. In 1918 White went to investigate a series of lynchings in Brooks and Lowndes County,

⁴⁹ Anne P. Rice has edited a collection which includes many of the authors above and provides a useful cross-section of writers' reactions to lynching. Anne P. Rice, ed., *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, 28.

⁵¹ See Langston Hughes, "Home" (1934), in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Volume 15, the Short Stories*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 37-45; Robert Bagnall, "The Unquenchable Fire" (1924), in *Witnessing Lynching*, 240-46; Erskine Caldwell, *Trouble in July* (1940; repr., London: Falcon Press, 1948). In the latter two white women also become victims of a patriarchal and racist society.

Georgia. He found there had been eleven lynchings; the most horrific of those was the killing of Mary Turner. His graphic report was reprinted in *The Crisis*:

At the time she was lynched, Mary Turner was in her eighth month of pregnancy ... Her ankles were tied together and she was hung to the tree, head downward. Gasoline and oil from the automobiles were thrown on her clothing and while she writhed in agony and the mob howled in glee, a match was applied and her clothes burned from her person. [A] knife was taken and the woman's abdomen was cut open, the unborn babe falling from her womb to the ground. The infant, prematurely born, gave two feeble cries and then its head was crushed by a member of the mob with his heel. Hundreds of bullets were then fired into the body of the woman, now mercifully dead, and the work was over.⁵²

White's investigation, which was reprinted in a number of newspapers, was in itself a direct challenge to the standard narrative because it exposed the full brutality of the lynch mob. Turner's story inspired a number of artistic responses.⁵³ In her short story, "Goldie" (1920), Angelina Weld Grimké made a direct reference to the incident; she describes a man returning to the South to find his sister and her husband have been lynched: "Underneath those two terribly mutilated swinging bodies, lay a tiny unborn child, its head crushed in by a deliberate heel."⁵⁴ This story is particularly revealing because Grimké comments on the repression of lynching stories, the tales – such as that of Mary Turner – of which no-one speaks. She warns that the truth will out and that the consequences for the lynchers and those who ignore their deeds will be dire.

An example of White explicitly attempting to provoke an artistic reaction with a real-life incident occurred when he sent WLAL members the NAACP report into

⁵² "The Work of a Mob", *The Crisis*, September 1918.

⁵³ Including Anne Spencer's poem "White Things" (originally printed in *The Crisis*, March 1923) in Rice, *Witnessing Lynching*, 236. Barbara Foley draws the comparison between Turner's death and the lynching Kabnis hears of in Jean Toomer's *Cane*. See Barbara Foley, "'In the Land of Cotton': Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's *Cane*", *African American Review* 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998): 184.

⁵⁴ Angelina Weld Grimké, "Goldie" (1920), in *Witnessing Lynching*, 203.

the lynching of Claude Neal in Jackson County, Florida in October 1934. Neal was seized from jail, held captive and tortured for two days whilst news of his impending lynching was broadcast throughout the region. He was finally shot by his captors, his body mutilated by a mob of hundreds and hung from a tree in the courthouse square.⁵⁵

The premeditated and spectacle nature of this lynching shocked many, as did the authority's apparent inability, or unwillingness, to do anything about it. In his covering letter White wrote, "If the writers of America will on every possible occasion use their efforts to arouse public opinion against such bestiality as [this lynching] they can do much toward putting an end to it."⁵⁶

A month after White sent the letter a selection of verses by George Schuyler, a League member, appeared in *The Crisis*. At the top of the page was a quotation from the report into the Neal lynching, which found that 75 to 80 percent of the people in the county where he was killed went to church. Schuyler had cleverly re-worked passages of scripture: thus the Lord's Prayer was rewritten as "The Lyncher's Prayer"; the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" became "Onward Christian Lynchers"; Psalm 23 began with the line "The Coon is our victim; we shall not want"; and "Genesis" told a story of violence rather than creation.⁵⁷ The collection of verses provided a bitter and ironic indictment of white society's claims of Christian morality. On the opposite page of the magazine was a reproduction of Reginald Marsh's drawing, *This is Her First Lynching* (discussed later in the chapter), and on the next page were letters from senators expressing support for the proposed anti-lynching bill and a box of text explaining that only one-sixth of lynchings were to punish an allegation of rape. These pieces were deliberately positioned in this way: the artistic responses to lynching were intended to arouse the reader's emotion; they would then

⁵⁵ See Dray, *At the Hands*, 344-54.

⁵⁶ WW to WLAL members, 24 December 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 4.

⁵⁷ George Schuyler, "Scripture for Lynchers", *The Crisis*, January 1935, 12.

turn over the page and see what was being done by the NAACP to combat this evil and what they could do to help (contact their senators to demand passage of the bill). This provides a clear example of how the NAACP used cultural work to try and bring an end to lynching.

It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of the Writers' League Against Lynching as its records in the NAACP files are slight. Furthermore, it is unclear the extent to which members were prompted or inspired by the League to write about lynching. Walter White himself felt the enterprise was a success and, as he recounted in his autobiography, "[t]he committee kept writers supplied with carefully checked facts about lynchings and there has been ever since a continuing concern which has been reflected in articles, fiction, plays and other writings."⁵⁸ It may not have been directly responsible for the work cited above but the establishment of the Writers' League was nevertheless a significant gesture. It demonstrated the importance of protest literature in the anti-lynching campaign. Writers could create alternative stories of lynching. They challenged the standard narratives of lynching apologists and alerted readers to the crimes being committed against African Americans. Through their novels, stories and poems these writers made moral and emotional appeals for an end to lynching. Of course, not all writers deliberately created campaigning literature; they explored lynching for a variety of reasons. However, the Writers' League shows how the NAACP hoped such work would be read and understood.

From the beginning of its anti-lynching campaign the NAACP also used visual culture to provoke outrage about mob violence. In *The Crisis* it printed photographs of

⁵⁸ White, *A Man Called White*, 167.

actual mob killings and published cartoons which satirised the paradox of American civilization. In 1935 it organised *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, an exhibition in New York with contributions from black and white artists. Du Bois (as editor of *The Crisis*) and Walter White (the curator of the exhibition) knew visual images had the power to shock and could provoke an emotional response from the viewer. They hoped this would encourage outrage about lynching and stimulate action against the practice. The exhibition in particular was closely linked to the Association's attempts to secure passage of federal legislation. Furthermore, visual images formed part of the lynching narrative established by white racists and photographs, cartoons and paintings were another way of re-telling the story from an African American perspective.

Lynching photographs were usually taken by whites and were intended for white audiences. They were sold as souvenirs and provided a further way of degrading African Americans by prolonging the white gaze on the (usually dead) black body. The NAACP was able to obtain such pictures and it attempted to subvert their meaning by using them as part of its anti-lynching campaign. One example followed the killing of Jesse Washington, an eighteen-year-old young man who was seized by a mob from the courtroom in Waco, Texas in 1916, taken to the town square, mutilated and burnt alive in front of a crowd of thousands. Alongside her report for *The Crisis* the NAACP's investigator, Elisabeth Freeman, was able to provide Du Bois with photographs of Washington's burning body, the white crowd and his charred remains. These had been taken by local photographer Fred Gildersleeve and were sold for ten cents apiece. Local officials belatedly realised that the photographs would further damage the reputation of the town and Gildersleeve wrote to Du Bois telling him, "[w]e have quit selling the mob photos, this step was

taken because our 'City dads' objected on the grounds of 'bad publicity.'"⁵⁹ It was exactly this "bad publicity" that the NAACP hoped to provoke with the photographs. Du Bois used a number of them in a *Crisis* supplement, "The Waco Horror", and the front page carried a picture of Washington's burnt body.

These photographs are shocking and the use of such images is troubling. It could be argued that in reprinting images of black victims the NAACP was continuing the abuse and dehumanisation of the black victim. However, the Association was able to alter the context in which such pictures were viewed and understood. When the photographs were originally taken and viewed the victim was usually anonymous, identified only by his race or his alleged crime. In *The Crisis* the name of the victim, his background and the circumstances of his death were usually recorded. Often the accusations made against the victim were shown to be false and the white mob, the local community and the authorities who had allowed the extra-legal killing to take place were strongly condemned. In some cases the NAACP inverted the mob's message completely by drawing attention away from the black body to the white crowd. A photograph of Rubin Stacey, who was lynched in Florida, showed his body hanging from a tree, surrounded by smiling white children. The NAACP published it with the accompanying command: "Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven white children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle."⁶⁰ This version of the picture inverted its original message; the white community that had gloatingly stared at the black body was forced to look instead at itself.

As well as photographs, Du Bois published cartoons and illustrations which dealt with the theme of lynching. Amy Kirschke has divided the lynching imagery in

⁵⁹ "The Waco Horror", *The Crisis*, July 1916, 6. See also Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror*.

⁶⁰ Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 40. See also James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000).

The Crisis into three categories: religious images showed “the paradox of lynching in a Christian context” and presented black suffering as Christian martyrdom; in patriotic images artists used symbols of America, such as the flag and Statue of Liberty, to comment on the un-American nature of mob violence; and finally, pictures were used to show that whites were “uncivilized” not the African Americans they killed, as apologists claimed.⁶¹ Such images were a powerful statement against lynching, designed to shock and shame whites. As with other images in his magazine, Du Bois also used them to create a sense of black collective identity and to inspire African American activism.⁶² This dual purpose – to embarrass whites and galvanize black activism – was common to much of the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign.

The use of visual imagery in the anti-lynching campaign culminated with *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, an ambitious exhibition of artwork which dealt with mob violence.⁶³ Walter White had the idea towards the end of 1934 and in a few months had organised the show, under the sponsorship of the College Art Association. He told a friend, “This, of course, seems and is morbid. But even a morbid subject can be made popular if a sufficiently distinguished list of patronesses will sponsor the exhibit and the right kind of publicity can be secured for it.” He was “trying delicately to effect a union of art and propaganda.”⁶⁴ White wanted the audience for his exhibition to be liberal, moneyed, northern whites. He compared it to the involvement of “snooty society girls” in the anti-prohibition movement and understood that such

⁶¹ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Chapter Three.

⁶³ Discussions of the exhibition can be found in Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*; Helen Langa, “Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized View Points, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints”, *American Art* 13, No. 1 (Spring 1999): 10-39; Marlene Park, “Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s”, *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 18 (1993): 311-65; Margaret Rose Vendryes, “Hanging on Their Walls: An Art Commentary on Lynching, the Forgotten 1935 Art Exhibition” in *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century*, ed. Judith Fossett and Jeffrey Tucker (New York: New York University Press 1997), 154-176.

⁶⁴ WW to Mrs Harry Payne Whitney, 13 December 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

people could greatly influence society's opinions on a contentious issue.⁶⁵ By using fine art, White hoped to attract those who would normally shy away from a subject as unpalatable as mob violence and to provoke the many apathetic whites who "have become hardened to the point where they accept without second thought the inevitability of the practice."⁶⁶ This appeal to the middle classes was common throughout both the NAACP's cultural campaigns and its anti-lynching work.

White was able to secure 183 sponsors, including Sherwood Anderson, Dorothy Parker, Carl Van Vechten, Countee Cullen and George Gershwin.⁶⁷ He wanted these patrons not only to give the show a certain intellectual status but also to create some distance between it and the Association. He wrote, it "will be an indirect approach to the subject of lynching in which the hand of the NAACP will not be evidenced."⁶⁸ In response to accusations about the political nature of the exhibition White wrote, "the exhibit is not sponsored by organisations but by a number of distinguished individuals." He claimed this was to "broaden the bases of the fight against lynching and to enlist new recruits." The show was designed to attract more than just the usual NAACP supporters. White went on, "I want also to clear up any notion that the exhibition is for the purpose of support of any given anti-lynching bill. Instead, the purpose is to focus attention on lynching."⁶⁹ It is true that one of White's aims was to arouse opposition to the practice of lynching generally. However, the exhibition was for the express purpose of garnering support for anti-lynching legislation. The Costigan-Wagner Bill was introduced to Congress in 1934 and the timing of the art exhibition was not coincidental. The Senators' names were on the list

⁶⁵ WW to Suzanne La Follette, 13 December 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁶⁶ Erskine Caldwell, "A Note", *An Art Commentary on Lynching Catalogue*. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁶⁷ NAACP Press Release, 7 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁶⁸ WW to Julius Bloch, 20 December 1934. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁶⁹ WW to Hugo Gellet of *The New Masses*, 16 January 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

of exhibition sponsors released to the press. Furthermore, in the exhibition catalogue Erskine Caldwell explicitly linked the show to the legislation when he wrote, "it is the duty of the Congress of the United States to pass the necessary legislation".⁷⁰

White wrote to artists to ask for the submission of specific works or to ask them to produce something for the exhibition. *An Art Commentary on Lynching* featured over 40 pieces by 38 artists, including eight African Americans.⁷¹ It opened on 15 February 1935 and ran for two weeks. The artists approached the subject of lynching in a number of different ways. *Death* (1934), a sculpture by Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi, was a contorted, faceless metal figure, hanging from a rope. Dora Apel suggests the work is based on a photo of George Hughes who was lynched in Sherman, Texas in 1930.⁷² Indeed, the position of the body is virtually identical; its legs and arms shrivelled upwards by the fire as were Hughes's. George Bellows' posthumous contribution, *The Law is Too Slow* (1923), also depicts the act of lynching. A black figure is tied to a stake in a burning fire, his back arched as he struggles against his torture. The lynchers are present, too, men crowded round the fire. Bellows, as Apel notes, has left space in the foreground which "makes way for the viewer as a potential participant".⁷³ The painting reinforces the NAACP's message that all white Americans are potential mob members when they do nothing to stop lynching. Walter White believed the picture had such a powerful message he had

⁷⁰ Caldwell, "A Note".

⁷¹ The black artists were Samuel Brown, E. Simms Campbell, Henry Bannern, Allan Freelon, Wilmer Jennings, Malvin Grey Johnson, William Mosby and Hale Woodruff. There are some disparities between the pieces and artists discussed in the secondary literature. I have based my discussion on those which are listed in the NAACP's catalogue and whose appearance has been corroborated by one of either Apel, Langa, Park or Vendryes. Furthermore, it has not been possible to view all the pieces which appeared in the exhibition, some of which no longer exist; I have had to rely on those reproduced in the NAACP's catalogue, *The Crisis* and in secondary sources. This has influenced my discussion and analysis.

⁷² Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 93. The Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozo's *Negroes* (1934) also appeared to take the photograph as inspiration. The figures in his lithograph mirror the position of Hughes's body.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87.

used it as the frontispiece for his study of the causes of lynching, *Rope and Faggot*. The practice of castration is portrayed most graphically by Harry Sternberg in his *Southern Holiday* (1935). An African American male is bound to a ruined pillar, with the smoking chimneys of industry in the background, a comment on the conflict between America's claims for progress and civilization and its treatment of its black citizens. There is blood running from a wound between his legs and the "repeating phallic shapes create a symbolic contrast to the victim's castration."⁷⁴

Both Bellows and Sternberg were white and Apel discusses the highly problematic nature of such depictions of the black male body. Their use of nudity may be read, she argues, as signifying inferior social status and the allusion to castration "reifies the stereotype of the virile black man" at the same time that it subverts the figure's power through his emasculation. The artworks also expose "the helpless and mortified body to the commanding gaze of the viewer who may take pleasure in the looking even while appalled."⁷⁵ However, nakedness is also suggestive of innocence and the artists may well have been clearing the victims of assumed guilt. Furthermore, it could be argued that Sternberg and Bellows are drawing attention to the *irrationality* of the fear of the virile black man rather than reinforcing the stereotype. When read in such a way the pictures' anti-lynching message is potentially more powerful. Not all white artists incorporated such graphic depictions of lynchings. Reginald Marsh removed the black body from his picture altogether and instead depicted a crowd of whites in the glow of the lynchers' pyre. The figure of a young girl being held aloft by her mother gives the piece its title, *This is Her First Lynching* (1934) [Fig. 15]. As with the NAACP's use of the photograph of Rubin Stacey, the

⁷⁴ Langa, 22

⁷⁵ Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 91.

picture is a comment on the impact of lynching on whites rather than African Americans.

When comparing the pieces contributed by black artists to those by whites some broad themes emerge. Langa points out that only two of the black artists portrayed explicit violence; the others used images of black grieving and religious metaphors as symbols of the violence. According to Langa's analysis this "allowed them to downplay both the frenzied white violence and demeaning black victimization".⁷⁶ Margaret Vendryes likewise argues that the black artists tended to focus on "victimhood" and appealed to the "morality of the viewer".⁷⁷ For example, in *I Passed Along This Way* (1935) E. Simms Campbell drew Jesus carrying the cross with the figure of a black lynch victim behind him [Fig. 16]. Such religious analogies, Langa allows, "highlighted emotional suffering, expressed communal grief" and "evoked black Americans' historical dependence on Christian faith to endure injustice."⁷⁸ There was certainly a conscious effort by black artists to preserve the dignity of the African American victim. In William Jennings' *At the End of a Rope* (1935) the face of a black male lynch victim is peaceful, almost serene. It is placed in a jungle setting which evokes an African heritage and the coils of rope are not immediately obvious; it is only once the viewer has noticed them that the scene is transformed. Black artists were wary of the dehumanising effect of reproducing the lynching scene.

Those African Americans who did explicitly depict acts of white violence had a different focus to white artists. The black body, or face, became the centre of the

⁷⁶ Langa, 28.

⁷⁷ Vendryes, 168.

⁷⁸ Langa, 28. See also Hale Woodruff's *By Parties Unknown* (1935), in which the victim's body is left on the steps of a church and *The Crucifixion* by Malvin Gray Johnson. White artists also used religious symbolism; for example, Prentiss Taylor's *Christ in Alabama* (1932); and Julius Bloch's *The Lynching* (1932) which shows a black man in the Crucifix position.

frame. Allan Freelon's *Barbecue-American Style* (1934) shows, in the words of the artist, "that moment when the victim first feels the flames begin to lick at his body."⁷⁹ He focuses on the black man's pain-filled body, as he pulls against his restraints and strains upwards from the fire. All that can be seen of his white torturers is a line of feet. *The Lynching* (1934), by Samuel Brown, gives a bird's-eye view of a hanged man, his agonised face dominating the picture. The white mob are reduced to barely discernible drops on the ground far below him. Both these pictures are graphic and disturbing images of black suffering. However, in focusing on the black figure the artist forces the viewers to confront that suffering and encourages them to empathise with the victim.

The exhibition received mixed reviews in the Northern press. The critic for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* found the portrayals of actual lynchings to be the least successful, claiming, "as propaganda they are rather innocuous" and arguing "[t]he painters were more preoccupied with problems of space and coloring than they were with social issues."⁸⁰ Others found them to be too hard-hitting and complained that propaganda took precedence at the expense of aesthetics. The *New York Times* critic complained that Noguchi's *Death* was realistic "to a disastrous extent" and concluded that while it might be an effective protest against lynching, as a work of art "it seems merely sensational and of extremely dubious value."⁸¹ There were, however, reviewers who were more comfortable with the political nature of the exhibition. One critic concluded, "No spoken or written argument against lynch law could be as hard-hitting as the work of these artists."⁸² The reviewer for the *New York World-Telegram* articulated the NAACP's hopes for the show when they predicted it "may do much to

⁷⁹ Allan Freelon to WW, 2 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁸⁰ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 3.

⁸¹ Quoted in Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 95.

⁸² *New York Post*, 15 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 3.

crystallize public opinion” about lynching. The writer warned that it is not an exhibition for “softies” but concluded, “[i]f it upsets your complacency on the subject it will have been successful.”⁸³

According to the NAACP over 2000 people from all over the country and overseas attended the exhibition.⁸⁴ It toured briefly but this was cut short due to lack of funds.⁸⁵ The NAACP judged the exhibition to have been a success. In terms of notoriety it seems it was, thanks in no small part to the controversy over the show’s sudden cancellation, as discussed below. Taken together the exhibits offered a varied and vigorous condemnation of lynching. Many of the pieces turned the usual apologist’s arguments about lynching on their head. It wasn’t the African American who was savage and guilty of some brutal crime, but the white mob. Images of black figures contorted in agony while gleeful spectators, including women and children, looked on challenged notions of American civilization. The repeated use of religious imagery allowed a more dignified portrayal of black life and again challenged white claims to superiority and Christian charity. Most of the exhibits did not depict specific events. This allowed the artist to comment symbolically on the general practice of lynching and to condemn the phenomenon rather than just one occasion of it.

Many representations of lynching, particularly those which are visual, are problematic. In the 1930s the NAACP faced the dilemma of needing to show black torment to elicit sympathy whilst at the same time replacing the notion of black victimisation with a sense of collective resistance. The exhibition had to show lynching as a horrific crime and at the same time offer hope for a solution. The artist too had to decide how literally or realistically they wanted to depict black suffering. Sometimes the images of lynching were sanitised, either to make it more palatable to

⁸³ Quoted in *The Crisis*, April 1935, 106.

⁸⁴ WW to William Mosby, 26 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁸⁵ See NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

a white audience or to spare the black viewer. Some, such as Brown's and Freelon's pictures, were intended to make the audience uncomfortable and to challenge them to act on this feeling. Such images were the most effective, when judged against the NAACP's standards. After all, the NAACP's primary aim was not to curate a show of fine art but to create a piece of propaganda. In this respect, it was the exhibition itself, as an event that drew crowds and attracted publicity, that was more important than the work it showed. As with much of the NAACP's cultural work, propaganda took precedence over aesthetics. Whatever the merits of individual paintings, it could be argued that the decision to exhibit a collection of images of naked male bodies, castration, torture, blood-thirsty whites and black Christ-figures, was the boldest choice of all.

Another anti-lynching art exhibition took place in New York at the beginning of 1935. This "opposition show" was not only a rival to *An Art Commentary*; its Communist-affiliated organisers directly and deliberately challenged the NAACP event.⁸⁶ The Jacques Seligmann Galleries, where the NAACP show was due to be held, pulled out at the last minute, allegedly due to pressure from the Communist Party. According to an NAACP press release, "The Seligmann Galleries authorized the statement that 'political, economic and social pressure had been brought to bear' to induce them to cancel their donation of space for the exhibit."⁸⁷ Fortunately for his venture, Walter White was able to secure space at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries and publicity about the cancellation only increased the media and public's interest. The Communists objected to the Association's proposed anti-lynching legislation and

⁸⁶ Walter White sneeringly referred to it as "the opposition show" in a letter to Charles Alston, 13 March 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

⁸⁷ Press release, 12 February 1935. NAACP/MF: Part 7B Reel 2.

threatened to boycott the show.⁸⁸ They believed that the Costigan-Wagner Bill was too conservative and that the NAACP was too cautious in its approach to mob violence. It proposed its own legislation, The Bill for Negro Rights, which demanded the death penalty for lynchers.⁸⁹ This clash over the art exhibitions reveals the increasing tensions between the NAACP and the Communist Party. The CP was beginning to challenge NAACP as the champion of both black rights and as a sponsor of black culture.

The Communist exhibition, *Struggle for Negro Rights*, opened at the ACA Gallery on 3 March and ran for two weeks. It was organised by the John Reed Club in conjunction with the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), the International Labor Defense (ILD), the Artists' Union, the Artists' Committee of Action and the Vanguard.⁹⁰ The exhibition catalogue set the tone. It was written by Angelo Herndon, a black Communist who had been sentenced to twenty years on a chain gang for organising workers, and was titled, "Pictures Can Fight!" He criticised the NAACP's support of the Costigan-Wagner Bill and argued "we can only stop lynching by STRUGGLE – by mass organisation of white and Negro workers, by mass defense, by mass pressure for a real fighting antilynching bill like the Bill for Negro Rights and the Suppression of Lynching."⁹¹ The show included fifty-six works by forty-five

⁸⁸ *New York Amsterdam News*, quoted in Park, "Lynching and Antilynching", 327.

⁸⁹ Langa, 12. It was only meant as a symbolic gesture because the Communists believed lynching could not be stopped by legislation but could only be ended through revolution.

⁹⁰ The John Reed Club was set up in 1929 as an organisation for writers, artists and cultural workers with Communist sympathies; the LSNR was established in 1930 with the fight against lynching its central programme; the ILD was the CP's legal defence organisation; the Vanguard was an interracial Leftist group in Harlem which organised arts groups, music programmes and literary discussions; the Artists' Union and the Artists' Committee of Action were pressure groups which protested against cuts to arts funding and employment.

⁹¹ Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 122.

artists, including four that also appeared in the NAACP's show. None of the exhibitors was known to be black.⁹²

The pieces in *Struggle for Negro Rights* dealt with issues such as Scottsboro, racial solidarity between workers and the threat of fascism. These themes were as prevalent in the pictures as lynching itself.⁹³ This reflected the Communist belief that lynching must be linked to a wider class struggle which could only be overcome by interracial cooperation between workers. Stephen Alexander's review in *New Masses* compared the two exhibitions. He argued it was not enough "merely to arouse indignation or sympathy or horror ... We must attack the social forces responsible for lynching."⁹⁴ This is what the Communist exhibition did more successfully than the NAACP show. The exhibits in the Arthur Newton Galleries focused on the physical, emotional and spiritual *impact* of lynching, whereas the ACA show raised questions about the *causes* of racial violence and suggested class struggle as a primary reason. Many of the pieces demonstrated an overt political agenda, such as Louis Lozowick's *Strike Scene (or Hold the Fort)*, which depicted a powerful black worker protecting a fallen white man from a policeman. The NAACP would no doubt have argued that such a picture was merely Communist propaganda that had little relevance to the problem of lynching. Indeed, it was only the context of its place in the exhibition that it could be considered an anti-lynching work at all. Nevertheless, the Communist exhibition attempted to explore economic factors and to suggest a solution to lynching which was not simply legislative. This was a deliberate critique of what the Communists saw as the NAACP's elitist and gradualist approach to lynching. It could also be argued that because the Communist Party was a predominantly white

⁹² The artists who appeared in both shows were Aaron J. Goodelman, Noguchi, Orzco, Becker and Sternberg. See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 64.

⁹³ Langa, 14-15.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 119.

organisation it was more detached from the threat of violence against blacks. This allowed it to analyse the broader causes in its exhibition, whereas the NAACP show emphasised the emotion of black vulnerability.

The CP and the NAACP had come to blows before the exhibitions of 1935. Since the end of the 1920s, the Communists had taken an explicit interest in the race question. Initially, they believed the enemies of black self-determination and revolutionary change were not just white oppressors but also the black middle class. Therefore the Communist Party worked to undermine organisations such as the NAACP and set up rival organisations; the competing art exhibitions provide one example of the Communists acting in direct competition to the Association. This approach was reversed in 1935 with the introduction of Popular Front policies. Communists were urged to form alliances with the black middle classes and attempts were made to work alongside liberals and the black intelligentsia. They even put their support behind the NAACP's anti-lynching legislation.⁹⁵ The most famous example of the tensions between the two sides began in Alabama in 1931 with the arrest of the nine 'Scottsboro boys', who were charged with raping two white girls. The NAACP and the ILD tussled over who should represent the defendants, with the latter eventually seizing control of the case. The NAACP did re-enter the case in 1933 (when it agreed to help the ILD with expenses) and it was one of five groups who formed the Scottsboro Defense Committee in 1935 (when, in-line with wider Communist policy, the ILD sought to form alliances with black organisations). Nevertheless, the incident, which dragged on throughout the 1930s, provides an

⁹⁵ See Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1990* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995); and Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

example of the differing approaches and tactics of the CP and the NAACP towards the question of race.⁹⁶

The Communists, like the NAACP, had a cultural element to their work with African Americans.⁹⁷ They used the arts in similar ways to the Association, to spread their message and to recruit African Americans to their cause. There has been some debate amongst scholars as to the consequences of the Communist influence on black culture. During the Cold War many scholars were highly critical of this relationship and argued it stifled black creativity and that the Communists used black culture for their own political purposes.⁹⁸ In the last twenty-five years there has been something of a reassessment by scholars as to the Communist influence on black culture. They have uncovered a less exploitative and a more nuanced relationship which allowed for a two-way process of influence and creativity.⁹⁹

Studies such as these suggest the NAACP faced competition in its attempts to shape and encourage African American culture. Groups such as the John Reed Club and the Vanguard provided opportunities for black and white artists to meet and

⁹⁶ See Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Hugh T. Murray, "The NAACP versus the Communist Party: the Scottsboro Rape Cases", *Phylon* 28 (1967): 276-87; James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage, 1995); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, Chapter 4.

⁹⁷ Indeed, the conflict over Scottsboro also played out on a cultural level. Many artists, black and white and particularly those with Communist sympathies, were inspired by the incident. See James A. Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). The NAACP took offence to John Wexley's play, *They Shall Not Die* (1934), which it said distorted events and discredited the organisation. See Roy Wilkins to Warren Munsell, 24 February 1934 and WW to Guild's Lawyer, 5 April 1934, NAACP/LC: I C 303.

⁹⁸ See Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (1951; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1971), 292; Record, *Race and Radicalism*; Cruse, *Crisis of Negro Intellectual*, 187; 148-51; James O. Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 180; Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (1958; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 116.

⁹⁹ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (1983; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Important in this scholarly reassessment of the Left and culture is Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997). He provides a broader understanding of Popular Front influence which lasted longer and was farther reaching than had been assumed.

exposed many African Americans to Communist ideas. *New Masses* was a radical magazine with an artistic and literary tone that published work by African Americans and articles on racial issues.¹⁰⁰ Significantly, many of those the CP attracted through its cultural work were from the black middle class, the NAACP's core constituency. According to Mark Naison, the CP's "cultural policies were far more attuned" to middle- rather than working-class "artistic tastes" or "more to the point *aspirations*". For example, in theatre the Communists supported work that would "display the 'serious' artistic talents of black writers, actors, and directors" and they "counted on 'education' to ultimately cultivate a large black audience."¹⁰¹ This approach is very similar to that of the NAACP: it promoted artists producing 'high' cultural forms and then attempted to persuade African Americans to become consumers of this art. By targeting the same sections of the black community as the NAACP, the Communists were a direct challenge to the Association's role as cultural sponsor.

The similarities between the cultural work of the two sides are telling. They targeted the same groups, they used the same artistic forms and, perhaps most importantly, they used that work for the same purpose: propaganda. Both *An Art Commentary on Lynching* and *Struggle for Negro Rights* were designed to influence public feeling. *Struggle* dealt with a broader range of issues than simply mob violence and it promoted a Communist doctrine. For example it included paintings that showed class struggle and interracial cooperation between workers. The NAACP exhibition focused instead on the single issue of lynching and it was held to increase support for the passage of the anti-lynching legislation. Nevertheless, both shows were united in calling for political and racial change. Walter White and company would no doubt object to the comparison between the two groups. The NAACP was scathing about

¹⁰⁰ See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 8-20.

¹⁰¹ Emphasis original. Naison, 207-208.

the CP's use of propaganda because it was either directed against them or a challenge to their own work. White tried to distance the NAACP from accusations of propaganda; he claimed the art exhibition was not political. But in this he was being disingenuous. The show was held for the explicit intention of rallying support for anti-lynching legislation and was, therefore, a political act. Furthermore, an examination of the NAACP's use of the arts across its campaign against lynching demonstrates how readily and frequently the Association used art as propaganda in the 1930s.

The NAACP's aim in using cultural forms in its anti-lynching campaign was two-fold. Primarily, it hoped to change white attitudes towards lynching in order to bring an end to the practice. It also understood that the production of written and visual texts would create an alternative record of lynching; a history which challenged that produced by lynchers and their apologists. It is difficult to measure the extent to which the NAACP was successful in changing white opinion about lynching. The number of lynchings began to fall in the second half of the 1930s. In 1933 there had been twenty-eight reported incidents but the total number for the last four years of the decade was lower, and there were only three lynchings in 1939, the lowest number since records were started.¹⁰² Whilst the decline in lynchings could have been due to a number of factors, there are suggestions that opinions were beginning to alter. When a 1937 Gallup Poll asked "Should Congress pass a law which would make lynching a federal crime?" over 60 percent of respondents answered "Yes".¹⁰³ Although such legislation was never passed, the response indicates that there was growing support for federal intervention.

¹⁰² Figures from Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 6-7.

¹⁰³ Gallup Brian Search Results

<http://brain.gallup.com/search/results.aspx?SearchTypeAll=lynching&SearchConType=1>

Of course, although there was a gradual shift in public opinion, this was not necessarily due to the efforts of the NAACP and anti-lynching activists. It has been argued that Southern support for lynching, in its contemporary form, began to wane for reasons of self and economic interest.¹⁰⁴ However, anti-lynching activists can be credited with applying pressure on whites, not just in the South but throughout the nation. They opened many eyes to the brutal nature, the extreme scale and the consequences of the lynching problem in the United States. Whether their reaction was based on moral or selfish impulses, Americans began to turn against lynching as it was understood in the 1930s.¹⁰⁵ Certainly the NAACP felt its approach was successful. Walter White wrote that “[t]hrough magazine articles, books, lectures, and personal contacts”, the NAACP “kept the issue of mobbism constantly before the public and thus helped to change apathy and hostility to interest and support of the campaign against Judge Lynch.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, journalist Philip Dray argues that “most indispensable” to lynchings demise was “the steady pressure from the reformers and writers who never quit insisting that we were too good to be a nation of lynchers.”¹⁰⁷

The artistic work created in response to lynching and as part of the campaign against it forms an alternative history of lynching. There is a gap in the ‘official’ historical record of lynching: the statistics are incomplete and we can never know exactly how many people were lynched. Anne P. Rice argues that writers are able to help to fill in this gap. The text “carries the burden of remembering and working through the past.”¹⁰⁸ For the NAACP the value of this cultural work was limited when

¹⁰⁴ Tolnay and Beck argue that migration brought a reduction in lynchings because it economically affected the white southern elite. *Festival of Violence*, 255.

¹⁰⁵ Lynching never really disappeared from America, it just changed form. Spectacle lynching all but ended after World War Two but racial violence continued in the forms of executions and murders too numerous to mention.

¹⁰⁶ White, *Rope and Faggot*, 181.

¹⁰⁷ Dray, *At the Hands*, 461.

¹⁰⁸ Rice, *Witnessing Lynching*, 23.

taken in isolation; it had to exist alongside its investigations and its publication of statistics. Nevertheless, these alternative narratives serve an important function. They recreate the elements missing in standard narratives: the victim's identity, his family and community, the identity (as a collective group) of the lynchers. The dominant white representation of lynching was thus challenged and an alternative story of lynching created. This body of work exists today as a reminder of a shameful period in America's history and as a form of resistance against white brutality.

Artists, poets, playwrights and novelists were responsible for re-writing, and thus righting, the lynching narrative. They took the standard motifs of lynching and subverted them or replaced them completely. In these works the psychological and emotional impact on blacks and whites is emphasised. So too is the destructive legacy on the black family and the African American community at large. In many works the physical reality of lynching, the brutality of it, is explicit. In others, religious imagery is used to find spiritual solace in suffering and the Christian strength to overcome. Many of the works challenge the stereotypes and myths which surrounded white perceptions of mob violence. The black man is not always lynched to punish rape (and if he is, then it is made clear he was not guilty of such a crime). In the anti-lynching narratives the victim is often given back his identity: he is named and given a family and a community. Perhaps contradictorily, the universal nature of lynching is also shown. Lynching is presented as a crime against both an individual and his race. This accords with the NAACP's arguments for federal intervention. In order to show lynching was not only murder, but a crime that came under the jurisdiction of the states, activists had to show the lynchers were "acting under the pretext of service to

justice, race, or tradition.”¹⁰⁹ Again, the NAACP used cultural works which reflected its own views towards lynching and how to end it. The lynching record that was created by activists and artists was thus a key weapon in the fight against lynching. Using cultural forms allowed the NAACP to reach those who chose to ignore or had become immune to the brutal facts of racial violence.

The arts provided the NAACP with a powerful way of making a moral appeal to these Americans. The positive reviews of *Rachel* and the art exhibition, for example, indicate that the arts could successfully provoke sympathy for the anti-lynching cause. Furthermore, the NAACP believed that most whites were simply apathetic about lynching rather than staunch supporters. If this was the case, then emotive and powerful artistic representations of mob violence may have been enough to shake them out of this apathy. The Association probably reached only a small minority of liberal, Northern whites with its use of ‘high’ cultural forms. This, of course, was part of its strategy. It thought it had the best chance of persuading middle- and upper-class whites of the desirability and necessity of an end to lynching. The NAACP hoped these whites would then use their influence – in politics, business and as public opinion formers – to persuade others and to press for political changes. This reflects its broader approach to racial inequality (that it was caused by ignorance and could be combated with education and persuasion) and it also mirrors the NAACP’s cultural strategy. It often used ‘high’ culture to reach and impress the upper sections of white society.

However, the focus on ‘high’ cultural forms at the expense of all others highlights a weakness in the NAACP’s strategy. It might have been able to reach an even broader audience if it had embraced other ‘popular’ forms of culture. Probably

¹⁰⁹ Definition drawn up at conference of anti-lynching activists in 1940. Quoted in Jessie Daniel Ames, *The Changing Character of Lynching* (1942; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1973), 29.

the best known example of a cultural response to lynching was a song, 'Strange Fruit', made famous by Billie Holliday. *Time* magazine described it as "a prime piece of musical propaganda for the NAACP".¹¹⁰ In fact, it is unclear what the NAACP's reaction to the song was or whether it was associated with it in any way. Perhaps its long-standing wariness of jazz or the Left-wing politics of the song's composer, Abel Meeropol, made the NAACP reluctant to incorporate the song into its anti-lynching campaign. An important reason why the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign focused on 'high' culture at the expense of other forms was that these were the ones which the organisation was most able to influence. It did not have the resources or contacts to make an anti-lynching film, for example. It did, however, have a history of reacting to those films which dealt with racial violence. After all, one of its chief complaints about *The Birth of a Nation* was that it condoned and actively encouraged lynching. When MGM released *Fury* (1936), in which a man narrowly avoids being lynched, the NAACP called it "one of the strongest educational features against lynching that has ever been placed before the public."¹¹¹ In fact, all references to race were removed from the final movie; the lynch mob's intended victim is played by the white actor, Spencer Tracy.¹¹² The NAACP's over-enthusiastic reaction to a film which ignored the racial history of lynching suggests the poor state of racial depictions in Hollywood movies at the time. Very few films dealt with issues of race in a sympathetic manner. Nevertheless, after *Birth* a film such as *Fury* was a step in the right direction. There was, however, still much work to be done. Walter White hoped that a painting hanging in a gallery could influence a person's attitude towards lynching; he was convinced that motion pictures held an even greater power over public opinion. So, as

¹¹⁰ Quoted in David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), 74.

¹¹¹ "Anti-lynching film is hit in New York", *The Crisis*, July 1936, 212.

¹¹² Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 295.

the 1930s drew to a close, the NAACP Secretary took the tactics of lobbying and persuasion he had honed in his battle for an anti-lynching law and the principle that cultural representations of African Americans could influence attitudes, and he headed to Hollywood.

Chapter Five

Walter White Goes to Hollywood

Walter White had a somewhat utilitarian attitude towards the arts and popular culture: he tended to see them in terms of how they could assist the African American struggle for equality. He promoted the artists of the Harlem Renaissance because he admired their talent but also because they were shining examples of black culture and achievement. He formed the Writers' League Against Lynching and organised his art exhibition in order to drum up support for anti-lynching legislation. Similarly when he watched a motion picture, he assessed whether it would reinforce or challenge racial prejudices. He was concerned that films were having a damaging impact on race relations, by reinforcing white stereotypes about African Americans. So he resolved to go to Hollywood and bring about a change in how African Americans were depicted on the screen. White used some of the tactics he had developed in earlier campaigns: he targeted the rich and powerful and white; he conducted business over luncheons and drinks parties; he lobbied and cajoled; he appealed to people's conscience; and he made the most of every opportunity to press his organisation's arguments.

This chapter considers Walter White's dealings with Hollywood between 1939 and 1945. It examines the NAACP's strategy towards motion pictures and the ways in which this had developed since the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Rather than protest a film once it had been made and call for it to be censored, the Association attempted to intervene before and during production. White went to Hollywood, the heart of American filmmaking, to tackle the problem at its source. The chapter assesses whether White had any success in persuading Hollywood to alter

its depiction of African Americans and considers the ways in which he was assisted by the upheaval of the Second World War.

During the late 1920s and the 1930s the NAACP was largely silent on the matter of motion pictures. There was the odd skirmish against *The Birth of a Nation*¹ but the Association devoted little time to the question of black images in films. Its resources were depleted by the Depression and it was distracted by other issues, such as the fight against the nomination of Judge John Parker to the Supreme Court and the battle for an anti-lynching law. Nevertheless, it continued to keep an eye on what was coming out of Hollywood and was hopeful for any sign of improvement. For example, in 1929, with the Harlem Renaissance still in full flow, two musicals with black casts were released, *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah*. The NAACP called the former a “fine film” and had particular praise for the second which it said was a “great drama”.² However, the same old stereotypes prevailed, with the servant figure particularly common as a figure of reassurance in a time of upheaval and difficulty.³ Despite this, black actors were often able to give their characters dignity and humanity. For example, Louise Beavers was applauded in *The Crisis* for her part as a black cook in *Imitation of Life* (1934).⁴ The NAACP did not seem overly concerned about either the stereotypes or the signs of improvement. Whilst there were occasional references to films in NAACP correspondence or reviews in *The Crisis*, the Association devoted little attention to the business of motion pictures until the decade

¹ In 1930 a synchronised version incorporating the musical score and sound effects had been released. Caught between the old dilemma of not wanting to inadvertently assist the film by fanning the flames of controversy and the fear of leaving it uncontested, the national office instructed the branches to quietly exert pressure on the local authorities. The film was banned in a number of cities, including Detroit, Portland, Jersey City and Philadelphia, and the state-wide bans from the previous decades in Kansas and Ohio were re-imposed. Stokes, 243.

² “Hallelujah”, *The Crisis*, October 1929, 355.

³ Bogle, *Toms*, 36.

⁴ Chauncey Townsend, “Out of the Kitchen”, *The Crisis*, January 1935, 15, 29.

drew to a close. It had not yet discovered a way into the closed world of the white film industry and the broader national climate had not yet provided it with the opportunity for action.

When the NAACP turned its attention once more to the motion picture industry it did so with a new approach. Its strategy was shaped by a number of factors, including the leadership of Walter White and, most significantly, the changing national and international climate brought about by the rise of Fascism in Europe and the outbreak of the Second World War. White became the permanent Executive Secretary in 1931 and was an increasingly dominant figure after the resignation of Du Bois in 1934. The NAACP's increasing involvement in the motion picture industry was driven by White's own interests and concerns. By 1942 he considered "the matter of the treatment of the Negro in the motion pictures of such importance that it takes rank over some other phases of our work."⁵ It was White who spearheaded the NAACP's campaign in Hollywood and it was he who spent his time on the West Coast and in correspondence with movie men and women. He was a man who enjoyed the chance to mingle with celebrities and powerful people, as had been seen in the previous decade during the Harlem Renaissance. There is no denying that the focus on Hollywood during the early 1940s reflected, in part, White's enjoyment of the work. While this chapter focuses on the work and attitudes of White, he was not the only one within the organisation who was interested in the film industry. He was supported in his venture by Roy Wilkins, who was his assistant secretary, and Julia Baxter, who worked for the NAACP's Division of Information and whose role involved watching movies and reporting back to White and the Board on their

⁵ Letter WW to Joseph Breen, Motion Picture Producers Association, 27 July 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

content. However, from the NAACP records it appears that he was the person within the organisation who had the most to say about motion pictures.

Walter White's work in Hollywood corresponded with the NAACP's approach to the depiction of African Americans in the arts and popular culture. The Association believed that negative representations of the race exacerbated racial tension and prevented African Americans from progressing by reinforcing the prejudices that held them in place as second-class citizens. The motion picture was a particularly pernicious medium. Walter White argued that the movie was "the most widely circulated medium yet devised to reach the minds and emotions of people all over America and the world" and that it "was perpetuating and spreading dangerous and harmful stereotypes of the Negro."⁶ These stereotypes were doing incalculable damage to white perceptions of the race and therefore to the race itself. As Walter White told a meeting of Hollywood producers:

Restriction of Negroes to roles with rolling eyes, chattering teeth, always scared of ghosts, or to portrayals of none-too-bright servants perpetuates a stereotype which is doing the Negro infinite harm. And showing him always as a mentally inferior creature, lacking in ambition, is one of the reasons for the denial to the Negro of opportunities and for low morale ... as it constantly holds the Negro up to ridicule and disparagement.⁷

The depiction of blacks in motion pictures reinforced white prejudice. Furthermore, White believed it damaged the psyche of African Americans themselves and contributed to a lack of racial pride amongst some sections of the black community.

Walter White and his colleagues were not the only ones to be interested in and concerned about the effect of motion pictures on race relations. By the 1930s, there was a growing argument within academia that movies had an educational effect. In

⁶ White, *A Man Called White*, 199.

⁷ Press Release, 27 July 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

the October 1937 issue of *The Crisis* the editor published a speech by respected academic, Edgar Dale, on "The Movies and Race Relations". Dale argued that for many white Americans their lack of contact with other races meant their "mental portrait" was based on "second-hand or indirect contact" through literature, radio and motion pictures. This last form of media was particularly important; it "not only entertains", Dale explained, it "also educates". He quoted a number of studies which had found that motion pictures shaped attitudes and that this had damaging implications for relations between races.⁸ The NAACP's longstanding belief that the way blacks were culturally represented affected the way they were perceived was now supported by a powerful consensus of opinion. The black press also monitored Hollywood and black film critics frequently attacked the film industry's stereotypical portrayals of African Americans.⁹ Many shared the NAACP's belief that such depictions could be damaging. However, the Association was the only black organisation to mount a concerted effort to alter Hollywood's representation of the race.

The NAACP's solution was to replace negative depictions with more positive images of the race, ones which would show African Americans in a new light and prove to white America, and themselves, that they were deserving and capable of full equality. This meant lobbying for professional, middle-class black characters to appear on screen. It did not necessarily mean that these should be the only images. Walter White claimed, "I strongly believe that Negroes, like every other group, should guard against hypersensitiveness. There are Negro sharecroppers and there is no reason why in moving pictures, fiction or elsewhere their existence should not be acknowledged." However, and this was the crux of the NAACP's argument, "there

⁸ Edgar Dale, "The Movies and Race Relations", *The Crisis*, October 1937, 294-96.

⁹ See Everett, *Returning the Gaze*.

are also Negro artists, doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, business men and others who have made and are making very material contributions to their own and the country's advancement. We contend that these others should be shown in the films as well as sharecroppers, the comedians and the menials."¹⁰ The NAACP did not protest every time a black servant appeared on screen but it objected to those films which featured blacks only in these stereotypical roles. It wanted the race to be more 'fairly' represented. In other words, it wanted middle-class, respectable characters on the screen. This reflects the NAACP's bias towards the 'Talented Tenth', the people who made up the leadership and the majority of its membership. These were the people that the NAACP believed reflected the 'best' of the race. Furthermore, the Association's cultural campaigns were designed to appeal to the white middle classes; it hoped to show these whites that African Americans were just the same as them.

Walter White wanted these characters to appear in mainstream, white films. He was opposed to the idea of the all-black cast, in which African Americans and black communities were shown as separate from the white majority. He told a friend that when he and his ally Wendell Willkie went to Hollywood they made it clear "that neither of us favored the all-Negro picture", their reasoning being that "90 percent of movie goers in the United States are white and they will just not go to see an all Negro picture unless it has some unusual merit."¹¹ White was a pragmatist and he recognised Hollywood for the business it was. He knew that the studios were motivated primarily by profit and he worried that poor box office returns could jeopardise his efforts. His attitude also reflects the integrationist philosophy of the NAACP: motion pictures should reflect the integrated society for which the

¹⁰ WW to Peter Furst, editor *PM*, 23 September, 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

¹¹ Letter WW to Edwin Embree, 4 March 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 279.

Association strived. In this society African Americans would be accepted as equals and would live and work alongside whites.

Much of the philosophy behind the NAACP's cultural campaigns remained the same but its strategy for tackling motion pictures was beginning to change from the days of *The Birth of a Nation*. As Walter White told a friend, "the problem of the Negro in the cinema is not now so much that of deletion as it is of getting the moving pictures to present the Negro as a normal human being and an integral part of human life and activity."¹² By and large, it moved away from a strategy of censorship towards one of persuasion. White decided that he and his organisation stood a better chance of success if they could intervene before and during the production of films, rather than waiting until they were made and having to resort to calls for suppression and cuts.

The first film that really captured the attention of the NAACP after its fight against *Birth* was *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Walter White was just beginning to turn his attention to the film industry and, although it was a somewhat half-hearted campaign, it provides examples of the arguments and tactics he would use in subsequent years. When the Association heard that Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel of the same name was to be made into a film, it was apprehensive. Many people had criticised the novel for its sentimental portrayal of the antebellum South and its depiction of freed blacks during Reconstruction. Writing in *The Crisis*, George Schuyler argued that it might be a Pulitzer Prize winner "but it is just another Rebel propaganda tract to the colored citizen who knows our national history and knows the South." For Schuyler it was "an effective argument against according the Negro his

¹² WW to Sara Boynoff, *Los Angeles Daily News*, 12 March 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

citizenship rights and privileges and sings Hallelujah for white supremacy.”¹³

Malcolm Cowley called it “an encyclopaedia of the plantation legend.”¹⁴

Mitchell claimed her characters were not “lavender-and-lace-moonlight-on-the-magnolias-people”¹⁵ but whilst she did challenge some of the romanticism of the Old South (for example, the O’Haras are middle class, not aristocrats in a white-columned house on the plantation as they would become in Selznick’s movie), she nevertheless leaves many of the conventions in place, particularly when it came to the issue of race. All the named black characters are loyal black slaves, epitomised by the “archetypal black mammy”.¹⁶ Mammy is devoted to ‘her’ white family, particularly to the novel’s heroine, the wayward and stubborn Miss Scarlett. She is joined by the often hysterical and comically useless Prissy, the stoic Pork, and Big Sam, who at one point in the story saves Scarlett from an attack. These are the loyal blacks who choose the security of the past over the opportunity of freedom after the War. They are the African American characters who ‘prove’ that slavery was a benign institution, who free the North of any responsibility for contemporary race relations, and who show that white southerners know better how to deal with ‘their Negroes’ than northerners. During the Reconstruction section of the novel, there are the usual freed blacks on the rampage, examples of black violence against whites and attacks on white women, complete with references to the subsequent reprisals of the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings.

The film’s makers were well aware that aspects of the novel were offensive to African Americans. David O. Selznick, whose Selznick International produced the

¹³ George Schuyler, “Not Gone With the Wind”, *The Crisis*, July 1937, 205-206.

¹⁴ Malcolm Cowley, “Going with the Wind”, *New Republic*, 16 September 1936. Reprinted in *Recasting: Gone with the Wind in American Culture*, ed. Darden Asbury Pyron (Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 19.

¹⁵ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 259.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

film, was worried about potential controversy or black pressure on his picture. No doubt he had seen the reaction of African Americans to *The Birth of a Nation*, some twenty years earlier. In 1937, as he began work on the film, he opened a clerical file labelled "The Negro Problem".¹⁷ He told his screenwriter, Sidney Howard, "I, for one, have no desire to produce any anti-Negro film. In our picture I think we have to be awfully careful that the Negroes come out decidedly on the right side of the ledger."¹⁸ They were particularly concerned about the references to lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan in the novel, albeit relatively minor ones compared to *Birth*. In what may have been a reflection of the NAACP's work to highlight the issue in the 1930s, Howard wrote that due to "the lynching problems we have on our hands these days, I hate to indulge in anything which makes the lynching of a Negro in any sense sympathetic."¹⁹ Similarly, Selznick feared the KKK's presence in his film might be an "unintentional advertisement for intolerant societies in these fascist-ridden times".²⁰ These aspects of the story were thus purged from the film. This can be read as a belated success in the NAACP's campaign against *Birth*. Selznick and Howard must have been conscious of the controversy stirred up by the Association over Griffith's glorification of the Klan and lynching. The NAACP, even if it had not rid Hollywood of them completely, had succeeded in making such images controversial.

With production well underway by the summer of 1938, the NAACP kept a close eye on proceedings. It had been perturbed by the book but it was extremely worried about the film. For the NAACP the change in medium signalled a change in potential damage. Walter White explained that the "motion picture, appealing as it does to both the visual and auditory senses, reaches so many Americans, particularly

¹⁷ Leonard J. Leff, "David Selznick's *Gone With the Wind*: 'The Negro Problem'", *Georgia Review* 38 No. 1 (1984): 149.

¹⁸ Quoted in Cripps, *Making Movies*, 3-4.

¹⁹ Quoted in Leff, 150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

of the middle classes, that infinite harm could be done in a critical period like this one when racial hatred and prejudices are so alive.”²¹ This comment reaffirms the NAACP’s concerns over the link between films and racial prejudice. The harmful representations became more ‘real’ and therefore more powerful when they appeared on the screen compared to the book. They were brought to life by light and sound. Moreover, by the end of the 1930s motion pictures reached larger audiences than even the most popular books, so the potential to influence people’s attitude was increased still further. Most telling is White’s comment that motion pictures reach the middle classes. There is some debate about which social class dominated cinema audiences during this period but what can be said is that during the golden era of the motion picture more people than ever before were watching films and that this included people from all classes.²² Middle-class whites certainly attended the cinema in large numbers during the 1930s and 1940s. This was the group that the NAACP was most concerned about; these were the opinion-makers, the influential people who could help either deny or grant equality to African Americans.

The leaders of the NAACP feared that the film version of *Gone with the Wind* would be a “second ‘Birth of a Nation’”, the film which remained the touchstone for its attitude towards racist movies.²³ White contacted Selznick to express his concerns. He said that he and his staff had “found among both white and colored Americans a very definite apprehension as to the effect this picture will have” and it was an apprehension that he shared. White recommended that Selznick “employ in an advisory capacity a person, preferably a Negro, who is qualified to check on possible errors of fact or interpretation” and suggested that his scriptwriter read Du Bois’s

²¹ Letter WW to Selznick, 26 June 1938. NAACP/LC: II L 15.

²² See Richard Butsch, “American Movie Audiences of the 1930s”, *International Labor and Working Class History* 59 (2001): 106-20.

²³ Letter Roy Wilkins [hereafter RW] to Alfred Duckett, Secretary of Brooklyn Branch, 31 January 1940. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

Black Reconstruction.²⁴ Selznick was quick to distance himself from any potential accusations of racism and “hasten[ed] to assure” the NAACP leader “that as a member of a race that is suffering very keenly from persecution these days, I am most sensitive to the feelings of minority people.” (Like many in Hollywood Selznick was Jewish, and White was aware that international events could strengthen his appeal to the Jewish conscience in the current climate.) He reassured White that the scriptwriter, Sidney Howard, was “also a very good friend of the colored race” and promised they would heed White’s suggestions to read Du Bois’s book and hire a black advisor.²⁵

White replied to Selznick that his and Howard’s connection to the film was “most heartening”. Nevertheless, the book was “so essentially superficial and false in its emphases that it will require almost incredible effort to make a film from the novel which would not be both a hurtful and inaccurate picture of the Reconstruction era.” The NAACP was not suffering from “racial chauvinism or hypersensitiveness” but rather was interested in “accuracy according to the most rigid standards of historical truth.”²⁶ As with *The Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP worried about the ‘southern’ depiction of historical events. It knew that the distortion of the portrayal of the antebellum period, the Civil War and Reconstruction was detrimental to the black fight for equality.

It wasn’t only the NAACP that was concerned about the movie during production; the filmmakers faced criticism from all quarters of the black community, with the black press particularly vehement. Members of the public, too, were

²⁴ Letter WW to Selznick, 7 June 1938. NAACP/LC: II L 15.

²⁵ Letter Selznick to WW, 20 June 1938. NAACP/LC: II L 15. There were two historical advisers on the set, both white southerners. Although there was some discussion of black advisors – Selznick thought of the choir leader Hall Johnson, whilst the NAACP suggested the Dean of Howard University, Charles Wesley – one never materialised. See letter RW to Selznick, 25 July 1938. NAACP/LC: II L 15.

²⁶ Letter WW to Selznick, 26 June 1938. NAACP/LC: II L 15.

increasingly perturbed by the rumours they heard coming out of Hollywood. By February 1939 the studio had received hundreds of letters demanding that the producer shelve the project.²⁷ The pressure from the black community, or at least a fear of controversy, did lead to Selznick removing some of the most offensive elements from the movie. Thomas Cripps suggests that the film version of *Gone with the Wind* “had been stirred by [the] winds of racial change”.²⁸ The increased visibility of African Americans in public life, the atmosphere of reform created by Roosevelt’s New Deal and events in Europe had a liberalising effect on Selznick and his production. However, just as these “winds” were little more than gentle breezes, so the film was racially liberal only to a degree.

The debate over the use of the epithet “nigger” is a case in point. Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration (PCA)²⁹ had urged Selznick to remove the term from the script as early as 1937. He wrote to “urge and recommend that you have none of the white characters refer to the darkies as ‘niggers’.” Initially Breen thought it would be acceptable if black characters used the term but he later changed his mind and decided the term should be removed altogether.³⁰ The letter ably demonstrates the limits to white liberal attitudes towards race in the film industry: whilst balking at ‘niggers’, Breen clearly thought the term ‘darkies’ was acceptable. Selznick argued for the epithet to remain, suggesting it provided “historical accuracy” and arguing that it would not be offensive if it was used by “the better Negroes” in the film. When they started filming it was still in the script. It was

²⁷ Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 157.

²⁸ Thomas Cripps, “Winds of Change: *Gone with the Wind* and Racism as a National Issue” in *Recasting*, ed. Pyron, 139.

²⁹ At this time the film industry practiced self-censorship. The PCA, established in 1934, was the means through which the Motion Pictures Producers Association (MPPA), also known as the Hays Office, implemented its Production Code.

³⁰ Leff, 152.

only after uproar in the black press and when Selznick's story editor, whom he had instructed to consult with local African American leaders, had informed him "they resent it as they resent no other word" that he agreed for it to be cut from the script.³¹ Selznick was motivated by commercial considerations; he did not want any controversy to damage the potential profit of his movie. The NAACP might have preferred filmmakers to be motivated by a sense of moral duty or racial justice but in reality it was satisfied if any considerations led to improvements in depictions of the race.

When the film was released at the end of 1939 it received mixed reviews in the black press. Whilst there was some praise for Hattie McDaniel's Oscar-winning performance – the *California Eagle* praised her "brilliant work" – many were critical of the film as a whole. Melvin Tolson of the *Washington Tribune* said it was "more dangerous than 'The Birth of a Nation'" because *Birth* was "such a barefaced lie that a moron could see through it... [but] 'Gone With the Wind' is such a subtle lie that it will be swallowed as truth by millions of whites and blacks alike." Du Bois, meanwhile, waved it aside, arguing that while the 1915 film had been "a cruel libel", *Gone with the Wind* was only "conventional provincialism about which Negroes need not get excited." A review in the *Chicago Defender* was more damning, criticising its historical distortions. It claimed the film "has lied about the Civil War period shamelessly" and "has glorified slavery."³²

In contrast, the NAACP's reaction to the finished film was strangely muted. Roy Wilkins' review appeared in the January 1940 edition of *The Crisis*. According to the editor, anyone who read the novel "had reason to be apprehensive over the making of a moving picture from it. The novel contained much objectionable material on

³¹ Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 154, 158.

³² Tolson quoted in Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 174-75; Du Bois quoted in Cripps, *Slow Fade*, 364; William L. Patterson, "Gone with the Wind: A Review", *Chicago Defender*, 6 January 1940.

Negroes and sought to show that the colored people would have been better off as slaves and were totally unfit to be citizens." Wilkins reassured his readers that "[h]appily" the film "eliminates practically all the offensive scenes and dialogue so that there is little material, directly affecting Negroes as a race, to which objection can be entered." He warns that there "are two or three uses of the word 'darky' which may make some spectators wince", as well as "a fleeting scene of carpetbaggers and Negroes." Furthermore, "there is the emphasis upon the devotion and faithfulness (to white folks) of the 'Uncle Tom' servant type." But "the inflammable dialogue in the novel has been omitted."³³ He told the secretary of the NAACP's Brooklyn branch there was "very little direct anti-Negro material" in the film, compared to the book. He conceded that, "the whole theme glorifying the South's civilization under slavery and the South's point of view in the Civil War is one with which Negroes cannot agree" but concluded that "there is no good reason why we should advise colored people not to go to see the picture."³⁴

Wilkins' review seemed to miss the point about what made a film offensive; it was not a question of racial epithets but rather it was the message it sent out and the characters it included which could damage opinions about the race. His comments demonstrate that he was aware of the racist ideology which underpinned *Gone with the Wind* – he complains about its racist "theme" – but he appeared to have been appeased by Selznick's small improvements. The producer had launched a public relations campaign, wooing black leaders and journalists, and it seemed to work on the NAACP. Perhaps the Association felt that because some concessions had been made it was not able to continue complaining.

³³ Roy Wilkins, "Editorial", *The Crisis*, January 1940, 17.

³⁴ Letter RW to Alfred Duckett, 31 January 1940. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

Walter White could not remain entirely silent on the matter of Selznick's film. A few months after its release he wrote to the producer, informing him that the success of his film had led to a revival of *The Birth of a Nation* and that "out of this revival and other situations has come an alarming recrudescence of the Ku Klux Klan." He repeated reports that some white southern women who had previously been supporters of federal anti-lynching legislation turned against it and embraced "the Confederate and anti-Yankee spirit" after seeing *Gone with the Wind*.³⁵ In reply Selznick expressed his horror at such reports and again pledged his support for the black cause, offering to join the NAACP and make an annual donation.

Other than this exchange, however, the Association did little to challenge the film upon its release. For an organisation that had been and would continue to be so sensitive about racial representations in movies, the half-hearted response to *Gone with the Wind* was surprising. Leonard Leff suggests that its indifference "probably derived from a combination of White's general apathy toward American film and his organization's inability to incorporate Hollywood into its agenda of legal-judicial reform." The NAACP was "[i]ll-suited to affect movies at their source and weary from two decades of pursuing its *bête noire*, *The Birth of a Nation*".³⁶ There are elements of truth in this; certainly it had learnt a hard lesson from the relatively ineffective campaign against Griffith's film and it realised that once a motion picture had been released it was very difficult to do much about it. However, the NAACP was able to incorporate a concern with popular culture into its "agenda of legal-judicial reform". Admittedly, when it came to Hollywood it was still finding its feet. It had not yet found a strategy for tackling films at their source, but the ever resourceful and

³⁵ Letter WW to Selznick, 26 March 1940. NAACP/LC: II A 280.

³⁶ Leff, 155.

determined White (who was not apathetic about film, but rather deeply concerned and interested) was beginning to sense the time was right for action.

Indeed, White was, in 1939, on the cusp of launching a concerted effort to lobby Hollywood and persuade it to improve its depiction of African Americans. He was both prompted and assisted by world events. The outbreak of the Second World War and America's subsequent involvement opened up opportunities for change in race relations. The country was fighting a war for what Roosevelt called the 'Four Freedoms' and yet the fact that some of its own citizens were denied such freedoms had become embarrassingly obvious to both America and her enemies. African Americans were quick to realise that the changing climate might offer an opportunity to press for improvements in the treatment of the race. Many got behind the *Pittsburgh Courier's* "Double Victory" campaign which called for freedom at home as well as abroad. A. Phillip Randolph established the March on Washington Movement and with other black leaders was able to pressurise Roosevelt into issuing Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Commission and called for an end to discrimination in the defence industries. Although in many ways this turned out to be a disappointing compromise, the successful forcing of the President's hand demonstrated the level of governmental concern over the potential disruption of racial conflict.

The government knew it needed to keep all sections of American society behind the war effort and it established a number of agencies whose job was to improve morale and to 'sell' the war to Americans. The Office of War Information (OWI) was the leader in this propaganda effort. OWI had a somewhat confusing bureaucratic history. It had its beginnings in the Office of Government Reports that

was formed in 1939 and headed by Lowell Mellett. A number of other government propaganda and information agencies existed at this time and to simplify the situation the Office of Facts and Figures was established in 1941, with Archibald McLeish in charge. Mellett became coordinator of government films and in April 1942 he set up the Hollywood office, headed by Nelson Poynter, to liaise with the film industry on the West Coast. When the Office of War Information was created in June 1942, with radio presenter Elmer Davis at its head, Mellett's film liaison office became the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP). The BMP's responsibilities included releasing government shorts and Poynter's office continued to be the main point of contact with Hollywood.

As the creation of Mellett's Bureau indicates, considerable emphasis was placed on the role films could have in the process of selling the war to the American people. President Roosevelt called the motion picture "one of our most effective media in informing and entertaining our citizens" and declared that it could make a "very useful contribution" to the war effort.³⁷ The BMP attempted to persuade the film industry to use its movies to help win the war. The OWI-produced handbook, "Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry", asked filmmakers to consider this central question: "Will this picture help win the war?"³⁸ OWI acted in an advisory role, with most studios passing their scripts to Poynter's office before they went into production. Poynter could then ask the studios to change aspects of the film he and his staff found unsuitable or he could offer suggestions for how it could help "win the war". The government shared the NAACP's utilitarian approach towards motion pictures. It was a case of persuasion rather than coercion, as OWI had

³⁷ Quoted in Allan Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 57.

³⁸ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co., 1987), 66.

no powers to force Hollywood to comply. Hollywood resented outside interference and was wary of being accused of making propaganda films. However, OWI's links to the censors and overseas distribution agencies gave it some leverage. This, combined with a degree of patriotic and ideological belief in the war amongst studio executives and screenwriters, allowed OWI some influence on the films of the period.

The government was particularly conscious of the need to 'sell' the war to African Americans. A poll taken by a government agency produced "formidable evidence of the degree to which racial grievances have kept Negroes from an all-out participation in the war effort."³⁹ The government feared the potentially damaging effects of such resentment and so the Office of War Information became increasingly concerned with the portrayal of African Americans in films. A study by the Bureau of Motion Pictures in 1943 of the depiction of blacks in wartime movies concluded that "in general, Negroes are presented as basically different from other people, as taking no relevant part in the life of the nation, as offering nothing, contributing nothing, expecting nothing." African Americans appeared in twenty-three percent of the films released in 1942 and early 1943 and were shown as "clearly inferior" in eighty-two percent of them.⁴⁰ The government realised that the negative images of blacks in movies were damaging to morale and therefore potentially damaging to the war effort. Through these agencies, it put pressure on Hollywood to make films which would at the very least refrain from antagonising blacks and, if possible, go some way towards improving morale.

The NAACP hoped to use the establishment of these agencies to its advantage. Roy Wilkins attended a conference held by the OFF in 1942, in which the participants discussed how to "build up the morale" of African Americans "to full and enthusiastic

³⁹ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, "Blacks, Loyalty and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II", *Journal of American History* 73, No. 2 (September 1986): 385.

⁴⁰ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 179.

support of the war effort.”⁴¹ Wilkins explained that it was white attitudes, rather than black, which needed changing; white Americans needed to see and treat their black compatriots in a more equal manner. He argued that “the primary job in improving the condition of the Negro as a citizen is the changing of the dominate white public opinion. Much of this opinion is not hostile, but is uninformed, or has been influenced by stereotyped treatment of the Negro.”⁴² He “made several suggestions as to how the OFF might attack the problem of influencing white public opinion through the use of the radio, the films, newspapers and magazines, and speeches by government officials”. Wilkins was optimistic that there were allies within the OFF and that “a goodly percentage of men” are “‘straight’ on the chief aspects of the Negro minority problem.” He suggested that “the NAACP be as helpful as possible to the OFF in working out a procedure that will be mutually helpful to the country and to our race”.⁴³ Certainly during his dealings with Hollywood Walter White consistently tried to use the influence of these government agencies to press his own programme. He was in regular contact with Lowell Mellett and Nelson Poynter and their colleagues. White was aware of the unique opportunity that the war presented for the NAACP’s campaign to change representations of the race. President Roosevelt had overseen the expansion of government during the New Deal and War and there existed legislative channels – of the kind favoured by the NAACP – into areas of life previously outside the remit of the government. The Association tried to exploit these channels to advance the black cause.

⁴¹ Memo RW to WW, 23 March 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 607.

⁴² Memo by RW for OFF, “Improving Negro Morale with White People”, 3 April 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 607.

⁴³ Memo RW to WW, 23 March 1942.

White had been concerned about the portrayal of African Americans in motion pictures and frustrated with the NAACP's lack of action for some time. He had been to the West Coast on NAACP duty many times and during some of these trips, including a speaking tour in support of the Gavagan anti-lynching bill in 1937, he had visited the studio lots.⁴⁴ During a four-week tour of the West Coast in 1940, he was invited to a lunch hosted by film producer Walter Wanger, where he discussed his concerns about the film industry with studio executives.⁴⁵ But these were little more than brief distractions. This hiatus suggests that whilst the NAACP was consistently interested in culture, its priorities and focus changed over time. By 1941 White was convinced that the NAACP needed to take decisive action on what he saw as an important issue. He was frustrated because the "terrific pressure of issues that had to be handled immediately more than monopolized the time and energy of the staff" and therefore the campaign against the portrayal of blacks had been fought "more or less spasmodically". The time, he decided, had come for a "relentless campaign".⁴⁶

In order to launch such a campaign, White needed some way to infiltrate the film industry; he needed someone who shared his concerns and could reach the powerful industry leaders. His ally came in the form of the former Presidential candidate and chairman of the board of Twentieth-Century Fox, Wendell Willkie. In 1941 Willkie represented the "big eight" studios during the Senate investigation into propaganda in the motion picture industry. He was a man with considerable influence in both political and industry circles and he was sympathetic to White's concerns. During a lunch between the two men towards the end of that year, Willkie admitted to White that he "ought to have a tiny bit of influence right now ... with the motion picture people" and suggested that they "go out to Hollywood and talk with the more

⁴⁴ See letters NAACP/LC: VIII 458.

⁴⁵ Janken, *Walter White*, 252.

⁴⁶ Letter WW to John Holley, 25 November 1941. NAACP/LC: II A 280.

intelligent people in the industry and see what can be done."⁴⁷ White did not need to be asked twice.

In February 1942 the NAACP's Executive Secretary headed to the West Coast, armed with a letter of introduction from the First Lady. His "mission", according to Eleanor Roosevelt, was "to see producers and others, in the effort to have broadened the roles in which Negroes are presented in the moving pictures."⁴⁸ The trip was a rush of meetings and dinners, most of which were spent establishing initial contacts and planning the arrangements for a subsequent visit. To begin with he spent most of his time lunching with actors, including "Jimmy" Cagney, who held a lunch for him at MGM, Melvyn Douglas and Jean Muir. He recognised, however, that the actors had little power, and as he admitted to Roy Wilkins, it was the "producers we've got to crack." "The movie job moves but so slowly", he complained. "The movie moguls are just beginning to become dimly aware that war, anti-Semitism and world collapse affect Hollywood too."⁴⁹ White knew that he had to seize the opportunity provided by the war and convince the studios that change was necessary for the greater good.

The breakthrough came on his last "feverish" day, when, as he recounted to his friend Sara Boynoff of the *Los Angeles Daily News*, he was summoned by Willkie to the Biltmore hotel to meet with Walter Wanger, producer Darryl Zanuck and "several others whose names I did not get in the excitement." Willkie told the group White "had a legitimate complaint against the movies which had to be met." An initial proposal by White's former correspondent, David Selznick, was for the NAACP to pay for someone to work with the Hays Office to read all the scripts which included black characters. However, White said, "[t]his didn't strike them, or me, as being too

⁴⁷ White, *A Man Called White*, 199.

⁴⁸ Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt, 17 February 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁴⁹ Letter WW to RW, 23 February 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 607.

effective.”⁵⁰ White’s doubts reflected the change in NAACP strategy towards motion pictures; it wanted inclusion rather than censorship. From the filmmakers’ point of view, their objection reflected a distrust of the Hays Office and its attempts at censorship.

White felt his initial visit had at least succeeded in raising awareness of the problem. He boasted that during the meeting Zanuck “marched up and down puffing a cigar and stopped to declaim, ‘I make one-sixth of the pictures made in Hollywood and I never thought of this until you presented the facts.’”⁵¹ White reported back to the NAACP Board of Directors that he had “conferred in Hollywood with a number of leading producers, directors, actors and actresses regarding the harmful effects of limitation of the Negro to comic or menial roles in moving pictures.”⁵² In reality, very little had been achieved aside from a few lunches and some cautious comments of support by a few executives. But this was how White operated: he hoped to charm and cajole the industry into implementing changes and he believed he had used these initial meetings to lay the groundwork for subsequent lobbying. This, of course, highlights the weakness in White’s strategy. He could do little more than try to *persuade* the white film industry to change.

White returned to Hollywood in July and again his itinerary primarily consisted of a series of lunches, dinners and parties, including the Academy Awards’ dinner as Willkie’s guest. The highpoint was a lunch on 18 July given in White and Willkie’s honour by Darryl Zanuck and Walter Wanger at the Café de Paris restaurant on the Twentieth-Century Fox studio lot. Amongst the seventy plus guests were William Goetz of Twentieth-Century Fox; David Selznick; Will H. Hays, head of the

⁵⁰ Letter WW to Sara Boynoff, *LA Daily News*, 12 March 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Report of Secretary for April 1942 Meeting of Board of Directors. NAACP/LC: II A 144. What White did not mention that all these people were *white*. He consistently ignored black Hollywood. See Chapter Six.

MPPA; E.J. Mannix, head of MGM; scriptwriter Marc Connelly; Frank Capra; and representatives from Paramount, Universal, Warner Brothers, and the Screen Actors Guild.⁵³ White told his audience he "did not expect Negroes to be treated always as heroes" and reassured them that "Negroes wanted no propaganda films, because propaganda is self-defeating" and that "they did not ask motion picture companies to lose money to satisfy a minority because to remain in business the companies had to make pictures that will sell." White's pronouncement might signal a change in attitude from the 1930s when he used art as propaganda in his anti-lynching campaign and the 1920s when he wrote his own propaganda novels. Certainly by 1942 propaganda, already a loaded issue, had been discredited by its association with the totalitarian regimes in Europe. However, it was not entirely true that White wanted no propaganda in motion pictures. Ideally, he wanted films to show blacks in the best possible light. Nevertheless, he would settle for films which at least stopped portraying African Americans in a derogatory manner. Moreover, White knew that he had to get these businessmen on side by remaining reasonable. He did not want to be accused of over-sensitivity nor did he wish to make unrealistic demands of the industry. He did, however, tell them, in no uncertain terms, that the stereotypical images of African Americans in their films was harmful, that they damaged black morale and made the race the object of ridicule and abuse.⁵⁴ The allusion to morale was not coincidental: White deliberately echoed the wartime rhetoric to strengthen his argument. He believed his message had hit home and returned to the East Coast confidently declaring, "Negroes will hereafter no longer be restricted to comic or menial roles in motion pictures".⁵⁵

⁵³ Guest list, 18 July 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁵⁴ Press Release, 27 July 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

The NAACP celebrated what it saw as the positive response of industry leaders, who gave "assurances that Negroes will be given roles more in keeping with their normal place in American life". It quoted Fred Beeston, Vice President of the Motion Picture Producers Association, who felt "every producer who was at the meeting was greatly impressed and will undoubtedly find ways and means of helping to put into effect some of the suggestions offered" and Mr Lichtman of MGM, who promised he was "thoroughly in accord with the efforts being made for the Negroes" and would "do my utmost in whatever way I can in helping this cause. I think the program is a very intelligent one."⁵⁶ However, these comments amounted to little more than vague support for the principles of fairer representation, rather than concrete plans for radical change.

A letter from Eddie Mannix at MGM typified the view of many executives, who were happy to support vague notions of improvements but were suspicious of any interference. He recognised that what White was "actually asking for is that Negroes be used in motion pictures in the same manner in which they occupy positions in life" and promised he had "committed [himself] to this program." However, in a later meeting with White he claimed to have extracted a promise that the NAACP would not push for a black member of the Production Code Administration nor anything else which "might be misunderstood as pertaining to censorship, which might retard rather than advance this desirable program." White apparently said, "it would be much better to leave the whole matter to the responsibility of the individual studios."⁵⁷ White had learnt from the fight against *Birth* that censorship was a tricky issue and he wanted to keep the studios on his side.

⁵⁶ Press Release, 21 August 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁵⁷ Letter EJ Mannix to Office of Darryl Zanuck, 21 July 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

Mannix was not the only one who tried to discourage White from interfering too deeply. Joseph Breen, head of the PCA, wrote to tell him about a letter Zanuck had written "to a number of the important people in the studios hereabouts, as a kind of follow-up to your visit." Zanuck "expressed himself in pretty plain language" and Breen was "certain that his letter made a profound impression on all who received it." Therefore, argued the PCA head, "I think it would be best to let the situation stand as it is now. I do not think it is necessary for you to press the matter further."⁵⁸ The movie producers were happy to listen to White's ideas over a long lunch and to make noises of encouragement but they did not want to commit themselves to any radical changes in their industry. Nor did they want this outsider to meddle too deeply with their work. They were already feeling the pressure from the government's wartime agencies; they did not need pressure from elsewhere.

White himself recognised that he faced a difficult task. He knew there were not going to be any overnight conversions to his cause amongst studio executives. He was "certain that the stereotypes about the Negro are so indelibly fixed in their minds, as well as a lot of other American white people, that it is going to take a very long time to eradicate them."⁵⁹ White was all too aware how pervasive and powerful stereotypes of the race were and he recognised that he would have to change the film industry's attitude towards African Americans before he could expect any improvements. Nevertheless, he was able to build up relationships with executives such as Walter Wanger, Daryl Zanuck and David Selznick and studios like Twentieth-Century Fox and MGM, who were sympathetic to his arguments. A number of White's allies in Hollywood were Jewish. There is a long and complex history of the relationship between blacks and Jews but the historical position of Jews as outsiders

⁵⁸ Letter Breen to WW, 3 August 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁵⁹ Letter WW to Peter Furst, 9 June May 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

in America and even more pertinently, the contemporary persecution of their people by America's enemies, made many sympathetic to black causes.⁶⁰ White appealed to the common bond between the two oppressed groups and was able to get a number of studio heads and executives on side.⁶¹

The first test of White's strategy came within weeks of his July 1942 visit in the shape of the controversy over *Tennessee Johnson* (1942). Originally to be called *The Man on America's Conscience*, the film was a biopic of President Andrew Johnson. It was an attempt to restore Johnson's damaged reputation and, even more controversially from an African American point of view, it depicted the man who many saw as a champion of the race, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, as a "heavy".⁶² It was David Platt in the Communist *Daily Worker* who first started the campaign against the film. Walter White was sent a clipping from the newspaper and given his recent pronouncements about his work in Hollywood he was forced to act.⁶³ The film actually included very few black characters, which was problematic in itself, given the historical context of the story. Therefore it was the portrayal of Stevens, and the glorifying of Johnson, which became contentious. On hearing of the film, the NAACP leadership must have had flashbacks of *The Birth of a Nation*. Yet again, white Hollywood was intent on besmirching the achievements of Reconstruction.

⁶⁰ The NAACP had always counted American Jews amongst its friends. Indeed a number of the founders of the Association and its early financiers, leaders and attorneys were Jewish. See Nancy J. Weiss, "Long-Distant Runners of the Civil Rights Movement: The Contribution of Jews to the NAACP and the National Urban League in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 123-52. See also Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

⁶¹ It was not necessarily an easy alliance, however, and sympathy for African Americans' plight was not always able to overcome the industry leaders' financial and pragmatic concerns. See Thomas Cripps, "African Americans and Jews in Hollywood: Antagonistic Allies", in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, 257-74. Michael Rogin argues that Jews appropriated white stereotypes of blacks in order to prove their own 'whiteness' and assimilate. Michael Paul Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁶² Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 69.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 70.

White wrote to Louis Mayer, head of MGM, enclosing the newspaper reports and asking to see the script in order that he might judge for himself whether there was any cause for concern. Mayer replied, all patronising flattery, that White's request to see the script before issuing a statement shows the "fine man and character that I believed you to be." He claimed he could not be "anti-negro" and invited White out to Hollywood to view the footage himself.⁶⁴ In the meantime it seemed White had already got hold of the script, possibly from Nelson Poynter at the Hollywood office of the BMP. In an example of the many occasions in which White liaised with the government agency, he wrote to Mellett, head of the Bureau, expressing his concern: "[I] regret to say that I strongly believe that the making of this picture at this time would do enormous injury to morale." "The treatment", he complained, "is historically biased to the point of gross inaccuracy" and Thaddeus Stevens is made to look "like a vulture". White suggested that "MGM could find infinitely more pertinent and valuable films to make, especially during the war period, to which it might devote its great machinery and talent."⁶⁵ White was always careful when appealing to the BMP to place his organisation's concerns within the wider discourse of the war.

On the surface Mayer and his colleagues appeared to tolerate White's interference. Howard Dietz, MGM's head publicist, invited White to view the film so he could see for himself that his "apprehensions were needless."⁶⁶ However, correspondence from Poynter indicated a less patient stance within the studio. He reported that the "management of MGM is completely upset because it feels the agitation of the negroes over the picture is directly a result of the communists." MGM had asked his office, "Shall a minority in the country dictate what shall or shall not be

⁶⁴ Letter WW to Louis Mayer, 3 August 1942; Mayer to WW, 19 August 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁶⁵ Letter WW to Lowell Mellett, 17 August 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁶⁶ Letter Dietz to WW, 14 September 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

on the screen through the Mellet Office?"⁶⁷ The studio knew it would have an easier job dismissing complaints if it could link them to Communist agitation. Walter White no doubt could have done without what he considered the 'interference' of David Platt and his comrades. As the NAACP would see even more clearly later in the decade, the issue of Communism and race in Hollywood would prove a tricky course to navigate.⁶⁸

Despite Mayer's complaints, pressure on the studio resulted in some changes to the motion picture. Critics of the film had objected to the portrayal of Stevens, in particular scenes in which he was shown to be a gambler, a conspirator in Lincoln's murder and the cause of Johnson's drunkenness. These scenes were cut and the character of Stevens was "softened."⁶⁹ The Bureau of Motion Pictures was evidently satisfied with the final product. Mellett was quoted as calling it "a forceful, dramatic exposition of the development of democratic government in this country. I believe that so far as it has any effect on popular thinking it will cause a better understanding of what it is that makes American democracy work."⁷⁰ White, however, was not so convinced. He was "still puzzled" by the revised version. "The motion picture industry", he told Dietz, "has unwittingly become so conditioned in the treatment of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Period that it appears impossible for it to make a picture except from the Southern point of view".⁷¹

The NAACP had been battling Hollywood's "Southern point of view" for almost thirty years. This fight had usually taken the form of protests against the finished film but in 1942 Walter White believed there might be a chance to offer an alternative on the big screen. He wrote to author Philip Van Doren Stern about his

⁶⁷ Copy of letter from Nelson Poynter, 28 August 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁶⁸ See Chapter Six.

⁶⁹ Cripps, "Wind of Change", 64-65.

⁷⁰ Quoted in letter Dietz to WW, 2 December 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁷¹ Letter WW to Dietz, 27 November 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

"amicable controversy" with MGM over *Tennessee Johnson*. He told Stern about a conversation he'd had with Howard Dietz, in which he told the MGM man "the South had completely won the Civil War, so far as Hollywood is concerned". According to White, "no Hollywood producer had the guts to make a film showing the northern side of the war" and "the *Gone with the Winds* completely dominated cinematic treatment of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period."⁷² Stern had been trying to find backing for a movie of his novel about the Abolitionist movement and ensuing Civil War, *The Drums of Morning* (published in 1942). The book was hailed by reviewers as the "reply" to *Gone with the Wind*.⁷³ Stern's sympathetic, even celebratory, portrayal of the emancipation of African Americans and the important role of historical figures such as Frederick Douglass offered an antidote to American culture's vilifying of African American freedom and northern motivation during Reconstruction. As White explained to Stern's publisher, what was really needed was an "affirmative treatment which would show that there were people in the north who fought against slavery because they were morally convinced of the evil of the system."⁷⁴

White mentioned the book to Dietz, who asked him to read it and send him a memorandum recommending it be made into a film if appropriate. He boasted to Stern that Dietz told him "because of the trip Mr Willkie and I made to Hollywood in July, any recommendation that I made right now might have some effect."⁷⁵ However, despite White's usual optimism, nothing came of his proposal. Projects such as these, whilst humoured, were unlikely to be taken seriously by Hollywood. A motion picture of *Drums of Morning* might be noble but if it wouldn't turn a profit then Hollywood

⁷² Letter WW to Philip Van Doren Stern, 25 September 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁷³ Earl Conrad, "Review", *Journal of Negro History* 27 (October 1942): 463-65.

⁷⁴ WW to John Woodburn, editor at Doubleday Doran Co., 24 August 1942. NAACP/LC: VIII 455.

⁷⁵ Letter WW to Stern, 25 September 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

wasn't interested. Although White's plans for an alternative film were never realised, the NAACP remained positive about the *Tennessee Johnson* incident. It claimed MGM "had to remake a great part of the picture" and change the title because of White's protests.⁷⁶ Thomas Cripps argues that, whilst the changes might have been slight, the film marked the "first victory" of the alliance of "government, liberals, and a racial minority".⁷⁷ White was able to use the BMP and wartime rhetoric to put pressure on the studio. He cleverly couched his arguments in the language of the war effort. He knew how worried government officials were about racial antagonism and that they would transfer this concern onto Hollywood. Furthermore, there were liberals in Hollywood who were sympathetic to the broader arguments about the war and were willing to translate some of them into motion pictures. The changes may have been small but for the NAACP they were significant: Walter White's strategy, it seemed, was working.

There were a number of films during the war which gave White cause for satisfaction and which he, at least, felt proved that his intervention was having an effect. These included three war films, all released in 1943, which featured African Americans in uniform: *Crash Dive* (Twentieth-Century Fox), *Bataan* (MGM) and *Sahara* (Columbia Pictures). The film which pleased White most was *Crash Dive*. It featured black actor Ben Carter as Oliver Cromwell Jones, a submarine crew member. Jones is one of the volunteers in a dangerous mission to land on a Nazi-controlled island. He fights bravely and is one of the last to return to the submarine. When the vessel returns to the port and the cheering crowds Jones is standing up top alongside the film's two white stars. It is easy to see why White got excited about such a movie:

⁷⁶ Copy of Board of Directors minutes, 14 September 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁷⁷ Cripps, "Winds of Change", 65.

the black character is treated in a non-patronising way and is shown making a brave contribution to the fighting. There is virtually no mention made of race, apart from a comic aside when the landing party are 'blacking-up' their faces as camouflage and Jones jokes that he is "the only born commando here." White believed that the film was a result of his and Willkie's lobbying of the film industry, writing "that if nothing else comes out of our two trips to Hollywood the time and money were well spent ... I believe the film is going to do a lot of good."⁷⁸ *Crash Dive* was produced by Darryl Zanuck, who was the Hollywood insider most sympathetic to White's arguments. White believed that the film was an indication that Zanuck and his colleagues had responded once he had highlighted to them the issue of racial representation in the movies.

White might have taken credit for the racial liberalism of *Crash Dive* but there is little to suggest he had any direct influence over the film. With *Bataan*, however, it seemed he was able to intervene. There were reports that the studio heeded his demands that a black character remain in the picture, after rumours reached him that the role was to be dropped.⁷⁹ The film tells the story of a small patrol bravely holding up the Japanese advancement in the Philippines. The patrol includes a black soldier, Wesley Epps, played by Kenneth Spencer. Epps dies as heroic a death as any of his white comrades. It was certainly a breakthrough role: a black man dying for his country. However, some of the old stereotypes remain. Epps is training to be a preacher and it is he who is called upon to pray over the bodies of the fallen soldiers. In many of his scenes he is in a state of semi-undress, with his upper torso exposed. Admittedly it is hot in the Pacific but Epps is the only character who is half naked and there are echoes of the savage in the jungle imagery. These factors, combined with a

⁷⁸ WW to Wendell Willkie, 17 April 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁷⁹ Cripps, *Making Movies*, 74.

relative lack of dialogue, subtly serve to make the character less developed and dignified than his white counterparts. The NAACP, however, either did not see or chose to ignore these deficiencies. It endorsed the film and White provided a blurb to be used in the production's publicity. He said that the movie "shows how superfluous racial and religious prejudice are when common danger is faced", and implored "May we learn, too, how dangerous and divisive prejudices are before we lose here the liberty fighting men died for on Bataan."⁸⁰ In this statement White brought out the message of unity, especially racial unity, within the film and used it to highlight the contradiction between America's war efforts and the situation at home. This was something at which White and his colleagues were highly skilled; they never missed an opportunity to hammer home their message.

In the final film, *Sahara*, the black actor Rex Ingram plays a British Sudanese Sergeant who joins Humphrey Bogart's rag-tag patrol laying siege to the Germans in the desert. The only racism Sergeant Tambul faces is from the Nazi prisoner, thus equating racism exclusively with Nazism. He is a valuable member of the crew because he can direct them to a waterhole and is respected by the rest of the men. His death is one of the most dramatic and heroic: he chases and kills the escaping German prisoner before being shot himself. Such an image of black heroism was unusual for the films of the period. However, it is worth noting that Tambul was an African-British not an African American character. Therefore *Sahara* was saluting Africa's role in the war rather than a comment on African American sacrifices. Again, the NAACP chose to see the film within its campaign for better black characters. It

⁸⁰ NAACP/LC: II A 275.

commended Columbia Pictures for Ingram's role, declaring it the "outstanding contribution" toward the objective of improving roles for blacks.⁸¹

It is not difficult to see why the NAACP praised these three films. They all depict a heroic black character and this in itself represented a significant break from the stereotypes which so angered the organisation. The black man was not a servant or a fool but was rather a uniformed member of the armed services making a great sacrifice, sometimes the ultimate sacrifice, for the Allied cause. Looking back, there were discordant notes in these productions. In these films men of all races fight and die alongside one another when in reality segregation meant that the armed services were divided along racial lines. Hollywood was not about to make all-black war films, after all they did not believe there was an audience for such a thing, and anyway, they might have argued, were they not making a greater contribution to morale by showing racial harmony? If there were to be any black faces in war films, they would have to appear in historically inaccurate inter-racial groups. Equally unrealistic was the fact that these groups were pictures of racial harmony. There were no examples of the overt racism which clearly existed in the Army. It would not be until 1949's *Home of the Brave* that the impact of racial discrimination on black soldiers would be openly discussed by Hollywood. Furthermore, none of the black characters in these films demanded anything from their country in return for their sacrifices. There was no mention of a "Double Victory", no calls for fairer treatment of troops or equality back home. They were seemingly content to fight and even die for a country which denied them equality. The NAACP, however, was not concerned about these failings. It wanted the fair representation of African Americans and was pleased that at least these movies showed blacks as citizens who participated in the war effort and proved

⁸¹ Press release, 1 February 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

their equality, even if they did not demand it. Nevertheless, it did subtly try to use the productions to reinforce its larger message about the double standards of the war. The statement from White above in response to *Bataan* is one example of the NAACP linking the films to the principles of racial equality. He and his colleagues constantly reinforced the message that African Americans were essential to the war effort and that in return for their considerable contribution they must be granted full citizenship.

These films indicate that Hollywood was at least making an effort to include black characters in its depiction of the war effort. Not all its attempts, however, met with the NAACP's approval. Canada Lee's role as Joe Spencer in *Lifeboat* (1944) was a disappointment to the Association. Spencer was a steward – a historically accurate portrayal as this was the only position blacks were allowed to fill in the Navy in the first years of the war – amongst a group of survivors drifting on a lifeboat after their ship is sunk by the Nazis. The character was sulky and remained distant from the rest of the group. The “role was a sop, a weak gesture. Absolutely the best that can be said is that it represents some slight departure from the harsher techniques of the conventional stereotypes”, an NAACP staff member complained: “[Spencer] spoke generally only when spoken to, behaving generally after the manner of a steerage passenger rather than an equally beset participant in a grim struggle for survival.”⁸² Roy Wilkins, in place of White who was in Europe, wrote to the Vice President of Fox to express the NAACP's “disappointment” in the production. Although it did not seem to take much to please the organisation, it could not always be appeased by the mere presence of a black face. The executives at Fox were clearly disgruntled by the NAACP's criticism. Jason Joy replied that he was “very much surprised” at Wilkins' “expressed disappointment of the manner in which Negroes have been used in

⁸² Quoted in letter RW to William Goetz, 17 February 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

pictures by our company." He contended that "if Mr Walter White were here, he would substantiate our feeling that we have made a commendable effort to use Negroes in a normal manner, without attempting to exaggerate or minimize their presence." He went on to assert that since White's visit in 1942 Fox had used "approximately fifty Negroes in pictures".⁸³ This exchange indicated the difference in expectations between the studios and the NAACP: Hollywood thought that any black face was an improvement, whereas the Association hoped for characters which showed the best elements of the black war effort.

Lifeboat represented Hollywood's liberal intentions, even if they were sometimes misplaced when it came to the issue of race. The same could not be said for Warner Brothers' cartoon short, *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943). It retold the story of Snow White, using black characters and complete with jive-talking dialogue and bluesy song and dance numbers. The leading lady is a buxom, sexy diva, Prince Chawmin' a zoot-suit wearing playboy and, perhaps most offensively of all, the seven dwarves are black soldiers in uniform. White wrote to Harry Warner, quoting a report by an NAACP staff member, Julia Baxter, who complained that the cartoon "is a decided caricature of Negro life and an insult to the race." She asserted that the "segregation and indignities to which colored soldiers are subjected is in itself damaging to national unity. That they should also be held up for derision by theatergoers is inexcusable."⁸⁴ The NAACP issued a press release calling for its withdrawal but did not take the protests any further.⁸⁵ It was, probably wisely, unwilling to get into a battle over a short cartoon.⁸⁶

⁸³ Jason Joy to RW, 31 March 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁸⁴ Memo Julia Baxter (16 April). Quoted in letter WW to Harry Warner, 28 April 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁸⁵ Press release, 30 April 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁸⁶ It took its protest further when it complained about Universal's *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941). It objected to screenings of the cartoon in 1948 and together with the Jewish Labor Committee

From the NAACP's perspective the picture coming out of Hollywood was mixed: there were promising signs but still plenty of the old stereotypes. In fact, it was a government-made film which really got the NAACP excited about the depiction of African Americans in uniform. As well as monitoring Hollywood, the Office of War Information also commissioned and oversaw the production of films. It commissioned Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series, which was shown to all American soldiers with the intention of explaining American involvement in the war. One film in this series was *The Negro Soldier* (1944), a documentary about the black contribution to American wars. Using a mixture of newsreel footage, reconstructions and staged scenes, the film provided a unique picture of blacks in American conflicts, from the Revolution through the Civil War and the First World War up to the present conflict. It was the first time that black men and women in uniform had appeared on the screen in such numbers. They were shown in training, on the battlefield, with airplanes and on ships. Originally produced as a training film to improve racial harmony within the services, pressure from black organisations led to it being distributed in public theatres. Langston Hughes called it "the most remarkable Negro film ever flashed on an American screen."⁸⁷ *The Negro Soldier* unquestionably provided the most positive depictions of African Americans during the War. Its positive message was embraced by most of the servicemen who watched its preview. The majority of the preview audience (which was composed of 439 black and 510 white soldiers) praised the film. Only 3 percent of blacks felt it was untrue and only 4 percent of whites agreed.⁸⁸

was able to exert enough pressure for the studio to withdraw the picture. See correspondence NAACP/LC: II A 280. On black images in cartoons during the war and the NAACP's protests see Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), Chapter 6.

⁸⁷ Langston Hughes, "Here's a Film Everyone Should See", *Chicago Defender*, 26 February 1944.

⁸⁸ Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 30.

The NAACP was proactive in its support for the film. White called it "an extraordinary documentary picture which will do much to stimulate the morale of American Negroes and to educate white Americans regarding Negroes."⁸⁹ The Association supported the War Department in a legal case brought against the film. The production company Negro Marches On Inc. complained that the War Department's release of *The Negro Soldier* to commercial cinemas was an act of direct competition to private enterprise.⁹⁰ Jack Goldberg, the president of Negro Marches On was worried that it would take away the potential audience for his film, *We've Come a Long, Long Way*, which dealt with similar material. The NAACP criticised his production as an "insult" to the race and filed an amicus curiae brief for the War Department.⁹¹ "The effect of motion pictures on social attitudes is well-recognized," the NAACP brief explained, and the "substantial participation in the war program of Negro Americans has been minimized in the press and in the news reels". Therefore "a valid documentary picture such as 'The Negro Soldier', made and sponsored by the government and offered to motion picture theaters without charge, should be given the widest circulation in the public interest."⁹² The result of the case was a settlement which allowed Goldberg's film a few days to run before *The Negro Soldier* was released.⁹³

The NAACP was clearly thrilled with the film. It hoped the production would teach white America about the historical contribution of blacks to America and prove that they continued to play a role in the country's war effort. To the NAACP the production presented irrefutable proof that African Americans deserved their civil

⁸⁹ Report of Secretary for May 1944, Meeting of Board of Directors. NAACP/LC: II A 144.

⁹⁰ Letter to Committee on Military Affairs, April 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁹¹ Letter RW to Jack Goldberg, Negro Marches On Inc., 27 April 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁹² Court records. Motion for leave to file brief Amicus Curiae by NAACP. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁹³ Cripps, *Making Movies*, pp.114-5. See also Thomas Cripps and David Culbert, "The Negro Soldier. Film Propaganda in Black and White", *American Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1979): 616-40.

rights. However, whilst the NAACP might have hoped that the film would be interpreted as a call for racial advancement, in fact the overriding message was one of maintaining the status quo. *The Negro Soldier* presented a picture of the armed services based on the doctrine of separate but equal, in which African Americans were given the same level of training and opportunities as their white contemporaries. The reality, however, was a collection of marginalised black units that faced prejudice from Army officials, were given inadequate training and restricted opportunities for promotion, and for the most part were limited, at least until 1944, to service or labour duties. Those black soldiers at a preview screening who felt the film was untrue thought that it "over-glamorized the treatment they received in the Army and their role in it".⁹⁴ The filmmakers' intention when making the film was to improve black morale and to ensure blacks supported the war. Therefore they stressed harmony rather than acknowledging potentially divisive racial grievances. The government's agenda was to further the war effort, not to promote racial advancement.

Walter White could have a narrow attitude towards motion pictures and this limited the effectiveness of his campaign. He had a very particular idea of the type of film and the type of black character he wanted to see produced. He was critical of films which featured exclusively black casts. In 1943 he complained that he was "getting more and more disturbed about the Hollywood situation. Mr Willkie and I made it very clear when we were there that neither of us favored the all-Negro picture." He expressed his fear that "when one of these all-Negro pictures fails to make money, Hollywood will drop or greatly diminish its efforts to keep its promises

⁹⁴ Wynn, 30.

to Willkie and myself.”⁹⁵ His comments were most likely in response to news of the production of two all-black musicals, *Cabin in the Sky* (MGM) and *Stormy Weather* (Twentieth-Century Fox), which were released that year. *Cabin* is infused with religious imagery and a dream-like quality and tells the story of a gambler who tries to reform for the sake of his pious wife but is tempted by the Devil and by a sexy younger woman. *Stormy Weather* follows a contrived plot which follows the adventures of Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s character and is really an excuse for a series of song and dance numbers. White’s real concern was that such productions were racial separation writ large. As Donald Bogle says of *Cabin in the Sky*: “Negroes were removed from the daily routine of real American life and placed in a remote idealized world.”⁹⁶ White and his organisation were campaigning for an integrated society, in which African Americans played an equal role. He might also have been dismayed by the ‘entertainer’ stereotype which was reinforced by singing and dancing African Americans. *Stormy Weather* in particular features a fair share of grinning, clowning blacks and even includes a black minstrel skit.

White was closed to the notion that such films in fact provided opportunities for black actors and that they could showcase the talents of the race. His attitude often put him at odds with black critics, who celebrated the appearance of black faces on the screen. White’s attitude towards such films was surprising because at times he was not far from advocating a ‘head count’ mentality; in other words, the more African Americans in movies the better. In an article on White’s visit to Hollywood, *Variety* reported, “Just as Hollywood now puts one out of each 15 persons in a crowd scene in uniform ... so White desires that one out of 10 persons be a Negro in normal pursuits.” *Variety* quoted White as citing as an improvement a scene in *Saboteur*

⁹⁵ WW to Edwin Embree, 4 March 1943. NAACP/LC: II A 279.

⁹⁶ Bogle, *Toms*, 131.

(1942) "in which the crowd viewing the Statue of Liberty included a Negro."⁹⁷ He did not expect African Americans to have starring roles or to be pictured as heroes; he wanted white America to become used to seeing black faces on the screen. What he did object to was what he saw as the continuation of demeaning stereotypes.

There were some signs of progress in the depiction of African Americans in motion pictures. Films such as *Crash Dive*, *Sahara* and *Bataan* included black characters who fought and died alongside their white compatriots, almost as equals. There were other films made during the war which suggested a relaxing of the racial codes which had governed Hollywood's use of black characters. Dooley Wilson had a significant supporting role in 1943's *Casablanca* (never mind that he is stuck at a piano) and *The Ox Bow Incident* of the same year included a black man amongst the group who try to stop a lynching (never mind that the film was an indictment of Nazi mobbism rather than American and so the lynch victims were white rather than black). These pictures gave White and his colleagues cause to hope that Hollywood's attitude towards the race was beginning to change. The NAACP's campaign was helped enormously by the Second World War and America's involvement in the conflict. Throughout the country there was an increase in black consciousness and activism, as African Americans sensed the opportunity to press for advancement. A second wave of mass migration saw almost 1.6 million southern blacks move to the industrial centres of the North and West between 1940 and 1950.⁹⁸ The direct participation of African Americans in the war effort, whether working in the defence industries or fighting with the services, increased black militancy, as the race began to demand the same freedoms at home that they fought for abroad. The Association

⁹⁷ "Negroes Ask for Better Shade in Pix", *Variety*, 17 June 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

⁹⁸ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 94.

benefited directly from these changes. By the end of the war its membership had risen over eight-fold to at least 400,000.⁹⁹

The government was well aware of the stirrings amongst the black community and it was worried that racial conflict and even the appearance of racial disharmony would derail the war effort. The Office of War Information and related departments were thus alert to potentially inflammatory portrayals of African Americans in motion pictures. Walter White was able to use these fears to further his own agenda. He used his position as an influential civil rights leader to gain the ear of government officials, and thus piggybacked on their influence over the studios. He also had direct access to film industry leaders, thanks to Wendell Willkie. The NAACP leader was thus able to form an alliance between his organisation, men like Mellett and Poynter at the BMP and liberals within the studio system. Together they established a more racially tolerant tone which would continue throughout the decade.

There were, however, limits to how much this alliance could achieve. For one thing, the different parties were motivated by different aims. The NAACP, of course, wanted significant and lasting improvements for the condition of African Americans. It saw cultural representations as one way in which this could be achieved, by changing white perceptions of the race. In contrast, Hollywood was motivated by profit. It was happy to produce films with nominal references to Allied war aims if this eased distribution and to include images of heroic (white or black) Americans if they were popular with audiences. Whilst some in Hollywood might have supported the NAACP's aims, they worked within a business driven by audience figures and profit margins, not ideology. The government, on the other hand, wanted black morale to be bolstered in order to strengthen the war effort. Although there were many

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

liberals in the ranks of the OWI who sympathised with the black cause, its head, Elmer Davis, tempered their "hopeful visions of the war" with the "more utilitarian notions of the policy makers".¹⁰⁰ Their work was driven by the practical needs of the government and not by their political beliefs or sympathies. OWI adopted what Deputy Director George Barnes described as "a direct and powerful Negro propaganda effort as distinct from a crusade for Negro rights."¹⁰¹ It wanted to improve morale, to get African Americans behind the war effort. It was not engaged in a fight for racial equality.

Hollywood and the government agencies tried to play down the issue of race. They created films which showed the racially harmonious armed services and ignored the tensions and inequality. Or they removed African Americans from white society altogether and placed them in dream-like settings or back on the stage as entertainers. However, they found that the best way was to minimize the impact of race in the movies was to ignore it altogether. The easiest way to do this was "writing-out", in other words, removing a black character which might cause offence. It was better to have no black faces at all than to have ones which could stir up animosity and therefore damage morale. As a result, membership in the black actors' union fell by fifty percent during the war, suggesting that there was little work available.¹⁰²

Within those roles which remained many of the old stereotypes prevailed. A Columbia University study conducted in 1945 found that of one hundred black appearances in wartime films, seventy-five perpetuated old stereotypes, thirteen were neutral, and only twelve were positive.¹⁰³ Hattie McDaniel was still playing a maid, albeit one infused with more dignity in Selznick's liberal-minded film about the home

¹⁰⁰ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Koppes and Black, "Blacks, Loyalty and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II", 389.

¹⁰² Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 179-180.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 184.

front, *Since You Went Away* (1944). If the black characters were not in the kitchen then they were likely to appear on the stage: black 'entertainers' starred in *This Is the Army* and *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (both 1943). Despite some promising signs, by 1945 little had substantially changed in the motion picture industry when it came to race.

Walter White can be criticised for flaws in his strategy for changing racial stereotyping in film. He frequently gave the impression of being dazzled by the bright lights of Hollywood. He was too interested in fine dining and drinks parties and was easily impressed by celebrity. Much of the attraction of this aspect of his job must have been the opportunity to mingle with the stars. For this is what his campaign in Hollywood boiled down to: luncheons and parties and chatting to important people, backed up with frequent press releases and letters. Kenneth Janken criticises White for his reliance on the "goodwill" of the studio heads. White, he argues, "mistook his access to powerful people for access to power itself."¹⁰⁴ He might have been granted an audience at court but White had no control over how these men wielded their power. Furthermore, he seemed wary of pressing too hard for his demands. Jill Watts argues that "he spent considerable energy cozying up to and even defending Hollywood."¹⁰⁵ In his defence, White knew that he had little leverage and he believed that there was little to gain from antagonising Hollywood with radical demands. He was an experienced lobbyist; he had honed his skills on Capitol Hill and he knew how to deal with large egos. His options were incredibly limited, as they were for all African Americans. He knew that the black community could exert virtually no commercial pressure on the film industry and so he was in a weak bargaining position. He made the most of the opportunities which presented themselves. He

¹⁰⁴ Janken, *Walter White*, 272.

¹⁰⁵ Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 226.

cleverly tied his demands into the broader discourse about the war and its aims. One of the NAACP's strengths was its ability to highlight an issue and put it before the nation's conscience, as it had with lynching. This is what White was able to do in Hollywood: he alerted the industry to the problem and tried to convince them to change.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of White's campaign was one for which he could be held accountable. He virtually ignored black Hollywood during his trips to the West Coast. He was so transfixed with the power and glamour of white Hollywood that he ignored African American actors, screenwriters and filmmakers. Black actors, in particular, were infuriated by the fact that White overlooked them during his visits. They were worried about what his campaign meant for their livelihoods and they resented his interference. In the aftermath of the Second World War, White's plans to keep up the pressure on Hollywood would bring these tensions to a head.

Chapter Six

Blacks, Reds, White: The NAACP's Cultural Strategy, 1945-1955

The end of the Second World War did not signal a cessation in the NAACP's fight against racist images in popular culture. This chapter examines the NAACP's cultural strategy in the years between 1945 and 1955, focusing, as the organisation did, first on film and then television. It considers Walter White's plans to increase the Association's influence on Hollywood and his strained relationship with many of the industry's black actors. It examines whether any improvements were made in the depiction of African Americans in popular culture and asks what impact, if any, the threat of anti-communism had on the liberal alliance in Hollywood. Finally, it considers why the issue of censorship raised its head yet again and the contradictory ways in which the NAACP responded to it.

When Walter White went to Hollywood in February 1942 there had been a glaring omission from his agenda: black Hollywood.¹ He snubbed black actors, local black newspapers and even the local branch of the NAACP.² While he could not ignore local African Americans on his return visit in July, because it coincided with the NAACP's national conference in Los Angeles, he did little to include them in his movie campaign. His omission was not simply an oversight; it reflected his priorities and prejudices. The NAACP gave little indication of being interested in the development of a black film industry. It preferred to work with the mainstream, well-funded white film industry. White might have argued this was because the objective

¹ For an entertaining account of Black Hollywood see Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 2005).

² Cripps, *Making Movies*, 49.

of his work was primarily to shape the opinions of white Americans, who would not go to see black films. Certainly he was a pragmatist who knew that the money and power lay with the white studio executives not with black actors. But this distancing from black Hollywood also reflects the NAACP's attitude towards the motion picture as a form of culture. In the Association's mindset creating films, in other words producing, directing and acting in them, was not proof of a group's 'civilization' or greatness. The motion picture was a form of 'popular' culture and therefore inferior to the 'high' culture of art and literature. It was a powerful medium, with the potential to influence public opinion and therefore race relations, but it did not carry any cultural caché. During the Harlem Renaissance the NAACP held up black artists as examples of racial achievement and argued their talent was irrefutable proof that the race deserved equality. This was not the case when it came to the movies. It did celebrate some of the achievements of black actors, for example Hattie McDaniel appeared on the front cover of *The Crisis* when she won her Oscar for *Gone with the Wind*.³ However, as White's behaviour in Hollywood demonstrates, the NAACP did little to encourage, promote or support the majority of black actors. He did not seek out their opinions or advice and at times belittled their work. White had a strained relationship with a number of black movie stars, with the exception of a select few, such as Lena Horne whose fair skin, good looks and East Coast background only strengthened the arguments of those who claimed his personal prejudices shaped his work.

Black actors resented what they saw as White's interference with their livelihoods. Thomas Cripps asserts that they "hated everything about him: his Eastern roots, his liberal friends, his access to hotels and movielots, his neglect of their stake,

³ Front cover, *The Crisis*, April 1940.

even his pinkish pallor and straight hair.”⁴ His strategy in Hollywood was based on eliminating the parts that they had made a living from playing. In an editorial for the *Chicago Defender*, he wrote that there needed to be “a complete break with the tradition of showing Negroes as menials”, because such characters were “cretinish, grinning, Uncle Tom[s]”. Not content with attacking the roles, White went even further and blamed black actors for increasing their offensiveness: “One of the most important elements in that progress will be the behavior of Negro actors themselves in playing their roles with sincerity and dignity instead of mugging and playing the clown before the camera.”⁵ He accused blacks of playing up (or acting down) to the stereotype and producing caricatured performances. There were examples of “mugging” blacks in Hollywood films but African American actors often brought great dignity and humanity to their roles, even if they were cast as servants or comics. White, however, was incapable of seeing beyond the part itself.

White’s snubbing of the black acting fraternity in the spring and summer of 1942 incensed those in its ranks. One of the most scathing attacks came from Clarence Muse. He complained that Walter White, “as a committee of one”, had been “wined and dined in the usual Hollywood fashion” but had “never seen it fit to address the Screen Actors Guild” (the actors’ union, of which he was a member). Muse summarised what he saw as White’s solution to the problem: “There should be only a few black-skinned Negroes, more browns and even more Mulattoes” and “all pictures should have a Negro Lawyer, Doctor and Architect”. Most importantly, “don’t have them too black.” Muse accused the NAACP secretary of wanting the film business to be “white-washed”. It was unfair for Muse, as others would do, to accuse

⁴ Cripps, *Making Movies*, 46.

⁵ White’s article appeared in May 1943. Quoted in Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 227.

the NAACP leader of intraracial prejudice.⁶ He did not call for lighter skinned actors and his demand for more black faces hardly reflected a desire for a “white-wash”. Muse was closer to the mark with his comment about the inclusion of a black professional in every scene. The actor defended his profession and concluded that the “actor must play the part as written” and asserted that “his talent is unlimited when the opportunity presents itself. Negro actors of experience love their business and they want to protect it against selfish ambitions.” Furthermore, he asserted, “Negro actors have progressed and parts are better every year.”⁷ Muse was a former head of the NAACP’s Los Angeles branch and his vitriol suggests a more personal vendetta against White and the Association.⁸ Nevertheless, he expressed some very real grievances shared by a number of his fellow actors who were anxious about what White’s actions would mean for their careers.

Indeed, Muse was not the only black actor to have noticed Walter White’s forays into Hollywood. Some of the fiercest and most personal attacks on the NAACP leader and his plans were made by Hattie McDaniel. An actress who had made a successful career out of playing maids and ‘mammies’, she was almost paranoid in her conviction that White was specifically targeting her. She believed that he was turning black troops against her during his visits to the frontlines in 1945. White was shown a rambling letter she had sent to the War Department and although she does not explicitly name the NAACP Secretary, it is clear her accusations are about him. McDaniel complained that after she had won her Oscar, she “found one of my own

⁶ Remarkably, Walter White was even accused by his own colleague, W.E.B. Du Bois, of preferring the company of whites rather than his own race. See Janken, *Walter White*, 189-91.

⁷ Clarence Muse, “The Trial of ‘Uncle Tom’”. NAACP and William Pickens Purge: As Hollywood Views it”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 September 1942. NAACP/LC: II A 276.

⁸ The first half of the article was an angry denouncement of what he saw as the NAACP Board’s unfair treatment of William Pickens, who had clashed with the Association over its policy during the war, particularly over the issue of segregated training grounds. See Sheldon Avery, *Up From Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900-1954* (Newark: University of Delaware, 1989), Chapter 8.

racial leaders launching a bitter attack against me only for accepting nurse and maid roles" and that she had "continued to be the only person named or aimed at." In a theme she would return to again, McDaniel pointed out that the "instigator of this campaign happens to be one of lighter skin than myself". She stressed her own appearance in contrast and suggested that in the eyes of someone like White she was undeserving of success: "I, even though dark of skin and stout, must have a right to gain my economic security also."⁹ To an even greater extent than Muse, McDaniel's letter suggests her analysis of the situation was clouded by personal dislike of White. Again, however, her comments are proof that black actors felt threatened by what appeared to be White's growing power.

Walter White's plans for the NAACP in Hollywood at the end of the war only antagonised blacks further. He wanted to open a Hollywood Bureau, from which he and his organisation could continue to monitor the film industry and apply pressure to the studios. In the two years since his 1942 visits White had grown increasingly disappointed with Hollywood. He was frustrated that "so little has been done to implement the promises which were made" to himself and Willkie. He praised the "few good spots" such as *Sahara*, *Crash Dive*, and "perhaps" *Casablanca* but, he complained, "the same old stereotypes remain."¹⁰ 1945 and the end of the war saw the studios released from any pressure they had been under by the government and the Office of War Information. Perhaps even more significantly for the NAACP, Wendell Willkie had died and as a result White lost much of his influence with the studios. As he acknowledged, "with the tragedy of Willkie's death in 1944 most of those

⁹ Hattie McDaniel's letter dated 26 July 1945. Enclosed in letter Leslie Perry to WW, 2 August 1945. NAACP/LC: II A 502.

¹⁰ Letter WW to Lena Horne, 16 June 1944. NAACP/LC: II A 303.

responsible in Hollywood for changing the pattern appeared to feel that the pressure upon them had been removed.”¹¹

White believed that if his groundwork was to come to fruition then he needed to renew his assault on Hollywood. He decided that he needed to keep a closer eye on the studios and create an agency to maintain pressure on them. His solution, supposedly suggested to him by “some of the more enlightened producers”, was to establish an “information bureau in Hollywood to which producers, directors, writers and others could turn for guidance.” He rejected the suggestion that such producers help finance it, lest “those who paid the bill would influence policy”, and made plans to raise money to fund it.¹² In August 1945 NAACP head office sent a letter out to 137 members asking for their reaction to a proposed Hollywood Bureau and seeing whether they would be willing to make an annual donation. They received fifty-one replies, with forty-eight approvals and three disapprovals. There were forty-one pledges of financial support, totalling \$717 annually plus a donation of \$1000.¹³ This rather meagre amount was a long way off the \$15,000 annual running costs which White predicted.¹⁴ The pallid response indicates a lack of interest in or mistrust of the suggestion. The NAACP membership obviously felt the Association had more important issues on which to spend its money in 1945.

White had to reassure the American Civil Liberties Union, which had been critical of the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* and was concerned that the NAACP might resort to its old tactics, “that the proposed Hollywood Bureau will in no way be a censorship bureau.” Its functions, according to White, would be to “supply, upon request, exact information regarding the Negro to moving picture companies”; to

¹¹ White, *A Man Called White*, 202.

¹² Letter WW to NAACP supporters, 26 December 1945. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

¹³ Memo Julia Baxter to WW, 11 October 1945. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

¹⁴ Letter WW to NAACP supporters, 26 December 1945.

“offer suggestions for more intelligent and frequent use of Negroes as normal human beings in motion pictures instead of limiting them to comic or menial roles”; and to “supply information by means of the NAACP Bulletin, ‘The Crisis’ and press service on the content of films dealing directly or indirectly with Negroes.”¹⁵ In other words, it would provide the mechanism for the continuation of the work White himself had been carrying out in recent years. The Bureau would allow a more cohesive, formal approach and give the NAACP a stronger representative in the heart of Hollywood. White conveniently ignored the fact that a Los Angeles branch already existed.¹⁶ Members of the black film community had a close relationship with the branch,¹⁷ which may explain why White hoped to bypass it. Furthermore, White wanted direct control of the Hollywood Bureau, which he could not have with the branch. He would not head the new office but his intention must have been to play a key role in its running.

Needless to say White’s plans were not well received by the black actors he once again seemed determined to overlook. White, probably unwisely, decided to announce his plans to open a Hollywood Bureau at a meeting of “all the Negro movie folks”, organised by the NAACP’s Los Angeles Branch in January 1946. He reported on the evening’s events to Roy Wilkins:

Virtually all of them came – with hatchets ... I presented briefly the plan for the Hollywood Bureau and invited comments. And did they come! Clarence Muse, Louise Beavers, and three or four others gave me the works. Fortunately I was in a non-belligerent mood and laughed at their cracks, some of which were to say the least slightly less than good taste. But they

¹⁵ Letter WW to Arthur Hays, 17 October 1945. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

¹⁶ On the LA Branch see Jonathan L. Watson, “The Los Angeles N.A.A.C.P., 1914-49” (D.Phil. diss., University of Sussex, 2005).

¹⁷ Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 243.

overplayed their hand and revealed to everybody that they were interested only in jobs for themselves and to Hell with everything else.¹⁸

The meeting could have been seen as a genuine attempt by White to bridge the gap between himself and the disgruntled actors. However his off-hand dismissal of their “cracks” suggests he was not interested in appeasing or even listening to them. He made no effort to allay their fears and did not seem to recognise their legitimate concerns about how his interference might affect their careers. If White wanted black Hollywood’s help in establishing his Bureau, he did not try very hard to secure it.

The gathering in January was missing a notable critic of White: Hattie McDaniel. She had written to Tom Griffith, head of the LA Branch, to decline her invitation, citing the “tactics” White had used against her in the past. She accused White of speaking to her “with the tone of voice and manner that a Southern Colonel would use to his favorite slave” and repeated the accusation he was “prejudiced to those Negroes of my complexion”. Her comment that “[t]here [are] none of us that would not welcome better parts, but usually groups are portrayed the way they are in actual life and we predominate in the servant bracket”, reflected exactly the sort of attitude White insisted he was fighting against. However, some of her concerns should have struck a chord with the civil rights leader. She claimed that since White had begun “meddling in the affairs of the motion picture industry”, work for African Americans had “decreased some seventy to seventy-five percent.” She went on to explain that because black people had no financial stake in the industry, no one was “obligated to give consideration to increased employment.” As a consequence, “white stars are now playing our roles and loving it”.¹⁹ McDaniel was right to highlight the lack of economic power which made black actors vulnerable. Other than the Screen

¹⁸ Letter WW to RW, 25 January 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

¹⁹ Letter Hattie McDaniel to T.L. Griffith, 20 January 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 502.

Actors Guild, which had shown itself to be more than a little reluctant to become involved with the contentious issue of race, there was no one to speak up for them in Hollywood.²⁰ During the war, opportunities for black actors had been limited and the immediate aftermath held little signs of improvement. Film industry leaders obviously felt that removing black parts altogether was preferable to facing complaints from censors, government agencies (during the war) and civil rights organisations.

White, betraying the arrogance for which he was widely known, dismissed the concerns of black actors out of hand. He wrote to Sterling Brown, who he had in mind to head the Bureau, about "the racket raised on the West Coast by a few of the brethren and sisters who don't want any interference with Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima. This really isn't terribly important how ever much some of them may squawk now."²¹ White pressed ahead with his plans, determined to raise the support and funds needed. He drafted a statement explaining that the need for such a bureau "should be readily apparent to any open-minded person" because since the first motion pictures "the Negro has been pictured, with but few exceptions, as either a selfishly subservient menial or as a comic figure". He claimed the NAACP had never "taken the position that Negroes should never be shown as servants or comedians"; rather, it was its contention "that Negroes should not be limited to these two stereotypes but instead should be pictured as normal human beings playing an integral and important role in the life of America and of the World." White went on to criticise "a few Negro actors and actresses [who] object to any efforts to improve the Negroes picturization in moving pictures. Their fear seems to be based upon a belief that they will not be given work in the films. Such a fear is utterly without foundation." And anyway, he asked, "What is more important – jobs for a handful of Negroes playing

²⁰ On SAG and black actors formation of the Hollywood Fair Play Committee see Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 223, 227.

²¹ Letter WW to Sterling Brown, 20 February 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

so called 'Uncle Tom' roles or the welfare of Negroes as a whole? If a choice has to be made, the NAACP will fight for the welfare of all Negroes instead of a few."²² The statement betrayed White's true feelings on the matter: black actors should be willing to sacrifice their careers for what he saw as the good of the race. Their individual contributions meant nothing and any personal success they might achieve was outweighed by the harm their performances did to racial prejudice.

White's attempts to establish a Hollywood Bureau continued until the beginning of the 1950s when they eventually petered away. It would not be until over half a century later, in 2003, that the Association would eventually open such an agency on the West Coast.²³ The idea seemed doomed to failure from the beginning. There was very little support amongst the NAACP membership for such a plan and therefore the necessary funds were not forthcoming. Hollywood itself was wary of anything which smacked of censorship and, anyway, it had its own battles to fight; having been freed of one form of governmental control with the disbanding of OWI, it would soon face another, more powerful threat, in the shape of anti-communism. Thomas Cripps argues that the plan failed because the NAACP failed to consult with black actors, whose support was crucial.²⁴ Even with their backing, however, it is unlikely that a bureau would have succeeded. By the early 1950s the Association was preoccupied with other, more pressing demands on its resources, such as the legal battle against segregated education.

The furore over the proposed Hollywood Bureau highlighted the fault lines between White and Hollywood's black community. Both sides harboured deep suspicions and accused one another of undermining their work. The situation was

²² Draft of statement regarding NAACP's establishment of Hollywood bureau by WW, 18 February 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

²³ Thomas Cripps, "'Walter's Thing': the NAACP's Hollywood Bureau of 1946 – a cautionary tale", *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (Summer 2005): 116-25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

exacerbated by White's arrogance and the fragile egos of some of the actors. White was extremely critical of anyone taking what he saw as a stereotypical role. He did not recognise that even when playing maids or slaves African Americans could bring dignity and even subversion to the part. He was insensitive to the fact that their livelihoods and the careers they had spent years developing were potentially being jeopardised by his actions. White should have acknowledged that economic opportunities for blacks were seriously limited and that the film industry provided a shot at wealth for a lucky few. As Hattie McDaniel put it, "Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid. If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one!"²⁵ White was not interested in celebrating the achievements of actors like McDaniel. Unlike the artists of the Harlem Renaissance he did not see them as proof of black talent. Quite the opposite in fact; most of the parts they took simply reinforced white prejudices about the race. This may have reflected a cultural elitism of the part of the NAACP; it could only recognise the artistic value of forms of 'high' culture such as fine art and literature.

For their part, many of the actors' attitudes were shaped by their own prejudices and insecurities. They saw White as an interloper from the East Coast who had come to take away their hard earned status. The actors claimed they too wanted change in Hollywood but at the same time they knew they could not rock the boat. Their position was extremely precarious and although some of them were big stars they were dependent on the good will of white producers and studio heads. McDaniel, Beavers, Muse and the rest were not about to call for an end to the roles from which they made a living. The NAACP Secretary's outsider status gave him an advantage they lacked. It is unfortunate that he decided not to use it in a coordinated effort to

²⁵ Quoted in Bogle, *Toms*, 82.

improve the opportunities for black actors at the same time that he lobbied for the greater good of the race.

It is not surprising that Walter White pressed for the establishment of a Hollywood Bureau in the years after the war. He was disappointed when those tumultuous years which had promised some improvements gave way to a retreat back to the status quo. It must have been all the more galling when the state of American race relations more generally gave some cause for optimism. The war had seen significant increases in black employment, union membership and voting registration. An increasing number of blacks held senior positions and were serving in state legislatures. The NAACP had secured an important victory in *Smith v. Allwright*, April 1944, when the Supreme Court ruled that all-white primaries were unconstitutional.²⁶ Its own membership had grown enormously and it was becoming an increasingly important organisation in national and even international affairs. In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal had published his groundbreaking work, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, in which he predicted that America's democratic tradition would win out over its racism and called for greater federal intervention to improve the status of America's blacks. Race and racism had become national and international concerns.

These slight gains, however, were not reflected in the film industry. Thomas Cripps identifies the period in Hollywood between 1945 and 1949 as one of "thermidor"; "the cooling of ardour that has followed every era of disquiet" when "order seems to matter more than liberty, sameness more than novelty".²⁷ There was

²⁶ See Charles L. Zelden, *The Battle for the Black Ballot: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

²⁷ At the same time, Cripps argues, there were those in the studios who spent the time "refining ideas that might work liberal war aims into a postwar ideology." Cripps, *Making Movies*, 175.

no clearer example of this retreat to the familiar than Walt Disney's 1946 part-animated, part-live-action musical *Song of the South*. James Baskett was Uncle Remus, telling his tales to the young white son of his master.²⁸ The film displayed remarkable technical wizardry but its subject matter had more in common with the 1880s than the 1940s. Watching the contented slaves, happily singing on the plantation one might never know a world war in which African Americans fought and died for freedom (let alone a Civil War which released them from bondage) had taken place. In a memorandum to Walter White, Hope Spingarn, niece of NAACP President Arthur, condemned the film as a "glorification of pre-bellum plantation life" and complained of the "Negrofying" of the cartoon animals, whose body movement and dialect were caricatures of black stereotypes.²⁹ An NAACP press report recognised the "remarkable artistic merit" of the film but regretted that "in an effort not to offend the South, the production helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery" through its "impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts."³⁰ White and his colleagues must have been disheartened to have to yet again take Hollywood to task for its 'southern' retelling of American history.

Equally disappointing was a film produced by someone White might have considered an old ally, David Selznick. In his Western, *Duel in the Sun* (1946), he cast Butterfly McQueen as a maid, Vashti, once again. According to the NAACP reviewer the character "is the embodiment of the stupid undependable servant stereotype". There were two other female roles – a Native American and a "half-breed" – which, taken together, served "to substantiate the contention that colored races are morally and intellectually inferior." The film "is a telling blow at any

²⁸ For a discussion of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus see Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 54-59.

²⁹ Memo Hope Spingarn to WW, 23 November 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 280.

³⁰ Press Release, 21 November 1946. NAACP/LC: II A 280.

program attempting to better race relations through the medium of the motion picture.”³¹ African Americans were back in their proscribed places: the kitchen or the plantation.

It was not all bad news, however; the situation in Hollywood did show some signs of promise. A number of films in 1947 – *New Orleans*, *The Foxes of Harrow* and *The Boy with the Green Hair* – represented what Cripps dubs the genre of “Faint of Heart”. Each film “compromised its race angle on the way to the screen, but together they took steps that stoked the liberal audience’s hope for a political cinema.”³² Even more promising was *Body and Soul* (1947, United Artists), a film about a white boxer who becomes corrupted by greed and the mob. At the film’s “moral and dramatic center was the chiaroscuro performance” by Canada Lee in a supporting role as black boxer, Ben Chaplin, “dancing his ballet of death”.³³ There is no comment on these films to be found in the NAACP files but Walter White must have been encouraged by the slight improvements.

Whilst these films were in production a potential obstacle to the liberal mood in Hollywood began to loom large. Anti-communism, an ever constant force in American life, had gained momentum since the end of the Second World War and it had started to turn its attention to Hollywood. The NAACP was caught in two minds about how to deal with this development. It could see that anti-communism was being used as a stick with which to beat demands for civil rights. In relation to the film industry more specifically it was worried that anything which challenged the status quo, including the racial status quo, would be accused of being Communist. This new mood could threaten the gains made during the war years and curtail the re-emerging

³¹ Memo Julia Baxter to RW, 17 May 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 275.

³² Cripps, *Making Movies*, 208.

³³ *Ibid.*, 212.

liberalism of Hollywood. At the same time, the Association was afraid of being labelled Communist itself.

There is much debate between historians as to the NAACP's attitude towards anti-communism during this period. Manning Marable is extremely critical of the NAACP, and Walter White in particular, for what he sees as their acceptance of anti-communism and for siding with the Cold War liberals such as President Truman. He argues that, in so doing, White, along with A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders, "retarded the black movement for a decade or more."³⁴ Gerald Horne is similarly critical of what he calls the NAACP's move, again led by White, to "virulent anticommunism".³⁵ Carol Anderson claims that the NAACP carried out an internal "witch hunt" and "purged" the Association of "*suspected* Communists".³⁶ In contrast, Manfred Berg argues that such critics of the NAACP "grossly exaggerate the extent to which the association actually joined the anticommunist crusade". More specifically he denies that the NAACP carried out the alleged purge of Communists within its ranks. Berg admits that the organisation was guilty of "opportunism" and that it stayed silent during the violations of the civil rights of Communists. However, it did not "deliberately fan the anticommunist hysteria".³⁷ The tension between seeing the dangers inherent in anti-communism and the desire to protect itself from attack was clearly demonstrated in its reaction to the Hollywood blacklist.

In September 1947 the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) subpoenaed forty-three people working in the film industry to answer questions about

³⁴ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, 2nd ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 32.

³⁵ Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), 57.

³⁶ Emphasis original. Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 167. See also Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 188.

³⁷ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 118, 138-39.

alleged links to Communism. Of these, nineteen so-called “unfriendly witnesses” refused to give evidence. The NAACP was worried about these developments and what it would mean for its work in Hollywood. It was afraid that the crusade would target those who were sympathetic to black causes and who were involved in changing the depiction of the race in motion pictures. Thurgood Marshall found that the NAACP’s fears were being realised. The producers were “scared to death” and were determined to delete from current and future scripts any material that could be interpreted as “Communist propaganda”. The interpretation of Communist propaganda was “anything in opposition to the status quo of the country as demonstrated by the well-known stereotypes” and therefore, Marshall believed, the studios would revert back to the stereotypes against which the NAACP had campaigned.³⁸

The NAACP’s leaders contacted J. Parnell Thomas, the chairman of HUAC, to outline their concerns. They urged him to “guard most carefully against penalizing any producer, writer, director and actor or actress who has worked to change the dangerous stereotype treatment of minorities in film particularly of the Negro.” They explained the harm done by such stereotypes and praised the “thoughtful, patriotic Americans in Hollywood” who had tried to remove them. “Some of these [people] have been charged with being ‘Communist’ because they have tried to live up to the ideal of treating all human beings fairly”. The telegram assured Parnell that “this Association is opposed to Communism, Fascism or any other kind of propaganda of any medium of public communication.” “But”, it explained, “we believe it equally important that responsible public officials should not fall into the equally dangerous error of labeling ‘subversive’ [the] honest American doctrine of freedom, justice and

³⁸ Memo Marshall to RW, 30 October 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

equality.”³⁹ This telegram, which was released to the press by the NAACP, suggests that the Association was not prepared to stand by and let HUAC’s crusade in Hollywood go unchallenged. White criticised the “unconscionable treatment and attempted pillorying of the motion picture industry” in the HUAC hearings. He claimed that it “amounted almost to a legislative lynching” and alleged that “the ‘Communist’ issue is used as a means of expressing vicious anti-Semitism”.⁴⁰

Leslie Perry, of the NAACP’s Washington Bureau, went to the hearings and reported back to White. He found the Committee had not the “slightest interest in fair characterization of Negroes”. His letter to White went on: “You, of course, know the record of many of those cited far better than I do: [Albert] Maltz who wrote ‘A House to Live In’. John Howard Lawson ‘Sahara’. And Robert Rossen who is directing ‘Body and Soul’ in which Canada Lee has a part”.⁴¹ He told White he thought it was “important that we do everything possible to head off and defeat contempt citations not only because most of the writers involved have been conscious of their responsibility to handle Negro subjects with honesty and decency, but also because of the serious threat involved to freedom of speech, thought, expression and political beliefs.” The lawyers of the nineteen men hoped that the NAACP and its branches would send a message to congressmen stating that they opposed the citations of contempt.⁴²

White, however, was getting anxious. He told Arthur Spingarn that while his “sympathy is distinctly with the 19”, several people had told him “that there is no doubt that some of the men who have been cited are unquestionably members of the

³⁹ Telegram to J. Parnell Thomas, 16 October 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

⁴⁰ Over half of the ‘Hollywood Ten’ (those who continued to resist HUAC’s demands to give evidence) were Jewish. Letter WW to Nicholas Schenck, Samuel Goldwyn, MGM, 7 November 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

⁴¹ Perry means *The House I Live In* (1945), a short in which Frank Sinatra’s title song preaches a message of tolerance.

⁴² Letter Leslie Perry to WW, 11 November 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

Communist Party.” He realised that “it is not, as yet, a crime to be a Communist in the United States” but he was clearly worried about the implications of siding with known Communists. He thought “the contempt proceedings contemptible” but he “question[ed] whether this is properly a matter for the Association to take action on.”⁴³ After discussing it with Spingarn and Marshall, he decided the “kind of action” suggested by Perry was “somewhat outside [the] scope of [the] Association’s program.”⁴⁴ The NAACP did not side with the anti-communists but it was reluctant to ally itself with Communists, or even those strongly suspected of being Communist. No matter the principles at stake, it was not willing to threaten the viability of the Association. The NAACP’s reaction to the blacklist suggests that Berg’s analysis of the Association and anti-communism is closest to the mark: the NAACP was sympathetic to those under suspicion but it did what it needed to survive.

As it turned out, in the short term at least, the NAACP’s fears of a devastating backlash in Hollywood were unfounded. A cycle of ‘message movies’ appeared in 1949 and 1950 which dealt with such contentious issues as racial discrimination, passing and race riots. It included *Home of the Brave*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Pinky* (all 1949) and *No Way Out* (1950). These films reflected a re-emergence of the liberal consensus which had been seen during the Second World War. The NAACP was once again frequently involved in either the production or promotion of these films. Outside Hollywood there were indications that improvements in the racial situation were possible. President Truman wanted to court the black vote in the 1948 election; he adopted a pro-civil rights plank and desegregated the armed services. The previous year his Committee on Civil Rights

⁴³ Letter WW to Arthur Spingarn, 13 November 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

⁴⁴ Telegram WW to Perry, 14 November 1947. NAACP/LC: II A 274.

had issued its report, *To Secure The Rights*, in which it condemned segregation and proposed ways in which it could be eradicated, including federal intervention on issues ranging from lynching to voting rights. Human rights had become an international hot topic and the discourse of the American civil rights movement was increasingly being heard on the world stage. It was a period of tension between Cold War conformity and increasing activism. In some parts of Hollywood the latter won out.

These films were prompted, in part, by the racial liberalism discussed above. The issue of civil rights was pushing its way on to the national agenda and Hollywood responded. Furthermore, the growing economic importance and visibility of African Americans as a group within American society meant that they were increasingly seen as a potential audience for the film industry. Hollywood began to appeal to black audiences and also to liberal whites who were sympathetic to their plight. Some of those liberals were to be found amongst the ranks of the movie studios themselves, as they had been during the war. There were some familiar names involved in making the "message" movies, including Daryl Zanuck and Twentieth-Century Fox and MGM. Walter White and his organisation continued to play a role in the liberalising of motion pictures. White kept up his pressure on the studios, by the usual means of persuasion, consultation and complaint. As before, he and the industry leaders did not always see eye to eye over how racial issues should be treated. But the old wartime alliance (now minus the government agencies) produced some significant cinematic representations of race.

The first of the 'message movies' was *Home of the Brave* (United Artists), a groundbreaking examination of the psychological effect of racial prejudice on African Americans. It used the war setting familiar from the earlier half of the decade to

examine these issues and explored the experiences of a black army private in a white patrol. Walter White praised the film for being honest and dramatic and for telling the story without preaching.⁴⁵ Although it owes much to the war films made during the conflict, *Home of the Brave* does not share the earlier films' rose-tinted view of a racially harmonious armed services. Rather it shows that the army was one place amongst many where African Americans faced persecution and discrimination. The final message of the film, however, is hopeful and promises racial cooperation and integration. After all, the American armed services had been racially integrated only the year before; a sign surely, to Hollywood's optimistic liberals, that change was on its way.

A similarly hopeful ending is offered by *Lost Boundaries* (RD-DR Corp). It was based on a true story, about a 'Negro' doctor and his wife who move to a small northern town and 'pass', gaining the respect and friendship of the white community. White was asked by the producer to read a number of versions of the script and he predicted that the film would "set a new and greatly to be desired yard stick in films to be made in the United States dealing with the Negro."⁴⁶ After seeing a rough cut of the film he was perturbed by the scenes in Harlem (the son runs off to New York to live with African Americans for a time); he complained the neighbourhood was portrayed as a "place of filth, frustration, crime and abject poverty."⁴⁷ It was a complaint which is reminiscent of the debates during the Renaissance, when the NAACP objected to the depiction of Harlem as a working class ghetto. Nevertheless, he must have been won over by the central character: an African American doctor, who is hardworking, successful and patriotic (he signs up to the Navy during the war). For 1949 it was a liberal take on racial issues; after all it was banned in Atlanta,

⁴⁵ Walter White's column in *Herald Tribune*, 13 May 1949. NAACP/LC: II A 276.

⁴⁶ Letter WW to Louis de Rochemont, RD-DR Corp., 25 February 1949. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

⁴⁷ Letter WW to Rochemont, 23 May 1949. NAACP/LC: II A 277.

Georgia, so from an African American's point of view, the producers must have got something right.⁴⁸

Another film in the 'message' cycle was MGM's *Intruder in the Dust*. Again, the NAACP was sent copies of the script. Walter White might not have been able to open his Hollywood Bureau but he had not allowed himself to be forgotten by the studios. Based on William Faulkner's novel, the film tells the story of Lucas Beauchamp (Juano Hernandez), a black landowner, who is wrongfully arrested for shooting a white man and is saved from a lynch mob and jail by a young white boy and elderly white woman. The most impressive aspect of the film is the character of Lucas and the performance of Hernandez: here is a black man who will be cowed by no-one and who refuses to play the 'nigger'. He is assertive, proud and, for 1940s Hollywood, unique.

A film with which the NAACP was even more closely involved was Daryl Zanuck's production, *Pinky* (Twentieth-Century Fox). Pinky, a 'Negro' with light skin (played by Jeanne Crain, a white actress) had been living in the North as a white woman, training to be a nurse. At the start of the film she returns South to her grandmother, Dicey (Ethel Waters). Dicey asks Pinky to look after an elderly white woman, Miss Em, and although Pinky resents it at first she grows fond of her patient. When Miss Em dies she leaves Pinky her house in her will. This is challenged by Miss Em's family, who take the matter to court. Pinky wins the case and turns the house into a clinic and nursery school for African Americans. When Pinky was living in the North she passed as white and when she returns to the South she has difficulty adapting to being 'Negro' again. She is arrested, molested by white men and spoken down to in shops. During the course of the film, however, she learns to accept her

⁴⁸ See Margaret T. McGehee, "Disturbing the Peace: *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and Censorship in Atlanta, Georgia, 1949-1952", *Cinema Journal* 46 No.1 (Fall 2006): 23-51.

race; she rejects her white fiancé and his offer to move North and pass as white and decides she wants to stay in the South and help her people.

The film is based on a novel, *Quality*, by Cid Ricketts Sumner, and the script underwent countless re-writes. In the process a number of the more outspoken black characters were removed, along with some of the radical ideas they expressed.⁴⁹ Zanuck consulted with White on the script and asked the NAACP Secretary and some of his acquaintances to look over it. White reported back that they were disappointed. He explained that if “the story been written around the turn of the century, it would have been novel and even revolutionary.” However, in 1949 “it is dated, inaccurate both as to the thinking of Negroes and intelligent Southern whites, and even dangerous in its advocacy of the status quo. The story pictures every Negro who protests or otherwise attempts to correct injustice as being either a charlatan or a crook or a fool.”⁵⁰ Most of the black parts are close to stock characters. Dicey is a typical ‘mammy’, a religious washerwoman, complete with ample girth and bandana on her head. Pinky could be interpreted as a tragic mulatto: she has to sacrifice the man she loves.⁵¹ Whilst, as with all good passing stories, the heroine learns to accept her race and take pride in her identity, this is brought about through interaction with and the status afforded her (through Miss Em’s will) by whites. Her decision to stay in the South, open a separate institution for blacks and continue living within the rules of Jim Crow, are all a tacit acceptance of the racial status quo.

All this, however, was not apparent to the film’s white producer. Zanuck was furious with White’s response to his script. He sniped that White “disclose[s] no knowledge of the problems of motion picture production” and defended his record

⁴⁹ Cripps, *Making Movies*, 232-39.

⁵⁰ Letter WW to Daryl Zanuck, 5 September 1948. NAACP/LC: II A 279.

⁵¹ Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Encyclopaedia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 165.

when it came to race in his pictures, claiming he had “stuck my neck out time and again.” Zanuck pointed out to White that he had to balance his responsibilities to the stockholders and the public, with the ‘truth’ and success. He argued that movies could not have the same “militant propagandist attitude” as the NAACP. “A motion picture which deals with the Negro minority in the United States must be above all things non-propagandist. All it can hope to do, at its boldest, is to make the white majority experience emotionally the injustice and daily hurts suffered by colored people.” He cautioned White, “You are not going to get everything you want all at once no matter how right the causes may be” and concluded that they would go ahead with the film whether the NAACP liked it or not.⁵²

This exchange highlights the gap between how the two sides continued to think about race and how it should be represented on film. The studios thought any film about racial passing was a daring move. Walter White increasingly wanted more from the movies: he wanted pictures which not only dealt with issue of race but which actually showed the need for a *change* in race relations. A man such as Zanuck, whose liberal conscience made him sympathetic to the black cause and whose business acumen meant he knew it was preferable to keep a group like the NAACP on side, wanted the backing of White but he certainly did not need it. He did, however, hire White’s daughter, Jane, whose comments he found more “constructive”, to work on the script.⁵³

The NAACP might have been disappointed with the film but White and his colleagues could see that it was at least a step in the right direction. When it was banned by censors in the South the organisation came to the film’s defence. Actually, they came to the defence of exhibitor W.L. Gelling, who defied a ban imposed by the

⁵² Zanuck to WW, 21 September 1948. NAACP/LC: II A 279.

⁵³ Telegram Zanuck to WW, 17 September 1948. NAACP/LC: VIII 458.

self-appointed censorship board of Marshall, Texas.⁵⁴ As White explained to the NAACP's legal department, "though the NAACP did not like 'Pinky' [an] important issue [was] at stake" and therefore they "should think about filing brief amicus." It worried White that "[i]f so mild a picture dealing with anti-Negro bias in the deep South can be banned by arbitrary censorship, then all of the gains we have made over the period of the last 20 years can be lost or dramatically diminished."⁵⁵

The film signalled a significant change in policy for the NAACP: in the past it had tried to use censorship to remove harmful images of the race from the screens. The more liberal films of the late 1940s caused it to reassess the situation. White was afraid that the studios would stop making films which dealt with racial issues if they encountered resistance from the censors. Previously, the NAACP had been the organisation trying to persuade the censors to act, even though it knew that the tactic was problematic and that it lost the Association potential allies. When the NAACP had fought its bitter and protracted campaign against *The Birth of a Nation* censorship had been its primary aim. Even as late as 1939 it continued to call for the film to be banned. In April that year Robert Allan, the owner of the Jewel Theater in Denver, Colorado, was arrested for screening the movie. The initial complaint against Allan had been made by the NAACP and his defence in court was conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a sometime ally of the NAACP that was extremely critical of the Association's advocacy of censorship.⁵⁶ Roger Baldwin of the ACLU wrote to White to express his concern about the "old difficulty" which had arisen. He assured White that he and his colleagues could "of course understand why Negroes generally bitterly oppose such a film", but he warned "efforts to ban it are

⁵⁴ His case eventually went to the Supreme Court who in June 1952 ruled against the censors' ordinance. See Bogle, *Blacks in American Film*, 166; McGehee, "Disturbing the Peace", 42.

⁵⁵ Memo WW to Legal Department, n.d. NAACP/LC: II A 279.

⁵⁶ Stokes, 247.

inevitably a boomerang. The precedent established will work against films favorable to Negroes, opposed by the other side.”⁵⁷

Ten years later Baldwin’s warning came true, as some censors turned against Hollywood’s more liberal depiction of race relations. In 1950 the NAACP found itself battling the censors over another of Zanuck’s movies, *No Way Out*. Doctor Brooks (Sidney Poitier) is a black intern at a white hospital. When two white brothers come in with gunshot wounds after being arrested, he treats them both, despite their racial abuse. Brooks diagnoses a tumour in one of the brothers, Johnny, who then dies whilst he is performing a procedure. The other brother, Ray, threatens Brooks and rumours begin to spread that the black doctor killed Johnny. The tension leads to racial unrest and rioting; the local African Americans defend themselves in their ghetto and fight back. Brooks gives himself up for murder in order to force the autopsy which proves he did not kill Johnny. Ray, however, consumed by his bitter racism, still wants revenge: he lures Brooks into a trap, and shoots the doctor, although he only catches his shoulder. As the police arrive Brooks, ever the dispassionate professional, treats Ray’s leg wound and tells him “Don’t cry, white boy, you’re gonna live.”

This time White had nothing but praise for Zanuck’s production. “Having investigated more than forty lynchings and twelve race riots”, he wrote to the studio, “I know from first-hand experience that the violence of human emotions on both sides of the racial fence is exactly as it is pictured in ‘No Way Out’.” He praised the “courage which Twentieth Century Fox has demonstrated”, which “indicates a maturation of the moving picture industry and establishes an example which I

⁵⁷ Letter Roger Baldwin to WW, 25 April 1939. NAACP/MF: Part 11A Reel 34.

profoundly hope others will have the courage to follow.”⁵⁸ It is easy to see why White was so taken with the movie. Brooks is educated, professional, dignified and honourable. When such men and the communities they represent are attacked by racist whites it should surely shock middle-class white Americans. What White did not comment on is that fact that Ray and his family are working class and they resent Brooks for his financial and social success. In the world of *Now Way Out*, it is poor whites who are racist; the white doctors with whom Brooks works are more liberal in their outlook. Nevertheless, it is a film with a strong black, central character and it shows African Americans prepared to stand up for themselves and to fight back.

Unsurprisingly it was unpopular with some censors, including those in northern cities which had experienced their own share of racial tension and rioting. The film was banned in Chicago by the Police Commission, which felt it was “dangerous and may incite violence.”⁵⁹ The campaign against this decision was spearheaded by the NAACP’s local branch, which, along with over thirty other organisations, lobbied the mayor. The national office weighed in too, firing off letters and telegrams and generating publicity over the issue.⁶⁰ The ban was subsequently lifted and the president of Twentieth-Century Fox wrote to White to thank this “friend” of the studio and his organisation for their help.⁶¹ White and the NAACP appeared to have turned firmly against censorship. When censors in Maryland cut scenes from the film White wrote to the Baltimore branch to set out why the organisation opposed such actions. “There are two basic issues involved”, he explained. “The first of these is that such censorship does a lot of harm by denying to moving picture audiences the tremendously powerful impact of the lesson which the

⁵⁸ Letter WW to Malcolm Ross, Twentieth-Century Fox, 26 July 1950. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁵⁹ NAACP Press Release, 24 August 1950. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁶⁰ See NAACP Press Release, 31 August 1950 and letter Nelson Willis, President of Chicago Branch, to WW, 5 September 1950. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

⁶¹ Letter Spyros Skouras to WW, 5 September 1950. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

film teaches." The other "is that if censors can get away with this kind of action, much of the work which Wendell Willkie and many of us have done in Hollywood will be lost because other picture makers will not carry on the progress we have made in recent years for fear of censor trouble."⁶² White was worried that the studios were not necessarily ideologically committed to these message movies; if they faced any threat to their profits, particularly in the form of censorship battles, then they would likely drop the whole project. Furthermore, he seemed to have decided that the principle of free speech needed defending in order for the message of these movies to reach the public.

The Baltimore branch seemed to have taken no notice of White's missive on censorship and the following year it came into conflict with the national office over the issue. Trouble flared over *The Well* (1951), a story about racial antagonism in a small town. A little black girl, from a respectable, middle-class family, falls down a well and her disappearance sparks rumours that she has been kidnapped by whites. These accusations lead to racial tension and there are attacks on blacks by whites and vice versa. Before the violence escalates further, the girl is found and the townspeople work together to rescue her. The contentious element of the film within the NAACP was the use of racial epithets. White, having been persuaded by his daughter, defended their use in the film. He believed that context was important and that offensive words could be used to shock and to elicit sympathy from white viewers. It was acceptable when used in a racially liberal film such as *The Well* and against respectable African Americans by vicious white racists. White was, therefore, perturbed to find that the Baltimore branch had contacted the censors and asked for the word "nigger" to be cut from the film before it was shown in Maryland. Writing

⁶² WW to Sidney Hollander, Baltimore Branch, 20 October 1950. NAACP/LC: II A 278.

“as secretary” of the Association, he “urge[d]” the chairman of the board of censors that “no deletions be made”. He thought that the “moving story of how both white and Negroes succumbed to prejudice and fear” was “one of the most important motion pictures ever made in the United States.” “Certain words like ‘nigger’”, White explained, “which are objectionable in normal circumstances are used in the film completely within their proper context in demonstrating the basic prejudices of persons who use such epithets.” He argued that to “remove them because of hypersensitivity would be the most regrettable step and one which would give falseness instead of truth to the film.”⁶³

The Baltimore branch was furious with the way in which White had undermined its actions, by writing directly to the censors “without consultation”. The branch president, Carl Murphy, explained that for “many years” they had “protested the use of epithets applied to colored people in moving picture films”, as well as “in newspapers, the radio, and on television”. (So too, he might have pointed out, had the national office.) He said that while the national office “has a right to disagree with the local branch on this matter”, White’s telegram was “an unwarranted interference with our local affairs”.⁶⁴ A meeting of the NAACP’s Board of Directors decided, however, that it was not a local issue. They felt that the branch’s actions were wrong, that in “depicting a vicious person, the vicious person must use vicious language”. Furthermore, a decision on how to proceed should be taken nationally.⁶⁵ It is not surprising that the Baltimore branch was left confused by the national office’s attitude towards censorship. At the same time that it was warning the branch not to be

⁶³ Telegram WW to Chairman Maryland Board of Motion Picture Censors, 12 November 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 276.

⁶⁴ Letter Carl Murphy to Dr Louis Wright, Board of Directors, 4 December 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 276.

⁶⁵ Copy of Minutes of Board of Directors meeting, 10 December 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 276.

“hypersensitiv[e]” about racial epithets, it was in the middle of a skirmish to get a popular, groundbreaking all-black television programme removed from the air.

The show in question was *Amos 'n' Andy*, which had started out on the radio but was developed into a television programme.⁶⁶ When it first aired on American screens in 1951 the NAACP launched a campaign against it. The national office and the branches lobbied the network and the show's sponsors, demanding that the programme be removed. The consistency in the NAACP's attitude towards culture and racism is seen in the arguments made against the show: blacks are made to look foolish, lazy and dishonest and this cultural representation would have a damaging effect on how the race was seen and treated by white America. Perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the incident is that the reversion to censorship, so similar in many ways to the fight thirty-five years earlier against *The Birth of a Nation*, suggests that, despite some progress, the NAACP's options were still very limited. The issue of its reaction to *Amos 'n' Andy* is further complicated by the fact that not only did many whites object to the NAACP's methods but also many African Americans were fans of the show.

Amos and Andy began life as Sam and Henry, a couple of characters devised by two white vaudeville entertainers, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, for their radio show in 1926. These characters were ‘Negro’: Correll and Gosden used southern black dialect and accents in a form of oral blackface. When the show moved to television in the 1950s, all the characters were played by African Americans. The

⁶⁶ The fullest account of *Amos 'n' Andy* on radio and television is Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001). On black protests against the show see Thomas Cripps, “*Amos 'n' Andy* and the Debate Over American Racial Integration” in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 25-40; Lorts, “Black Laughter/ Black Protest.” On Amos and Andy on the radio see also William Barlow, *Voice Over*, Chapter 2.

stories centred on Amos and Andy, two southerners who had moved north to seek their fortunes and had opened a taxi company. They told of their trials and mishaps, loves and dreams. Amos and Andy were surrounded by a cast of different black characters. By the time the television programme went into production, the most important character was actually Kingfish, a conman who was always trying to trick Andy out of his money. From the NAACP's perspective the world of *Amos 'n' Andy* was populated by African American stereotypes, from Sambo to Mammy.

There is nothing to suggest that the NAACP had any issue with the show whilst it was on the radio, nor when Correll and Gosden appeared in blackface as the characters in their movie *Check and Double Check* (1930).⁶⁷ Other African Americans, however, were quicker to spot its dangers. In 1931 the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched a petition to demand that the Federal Radio Commission ban the show.⁶⁸ But the results were mixed because many African Americans apparently enjoyed listening to the adventures of Amos and Andy. Amongst those who defended the radio programme was Roy Wilkins, who was then editor of the *Kansas City Call*. He said it was "clean fun from beginning to end" and had "universal appeal".⁶⁹

It was not until the programme transferred to television in 1951 that the NAACP was prompted into action. Television, in the eyes of the NAACP leaders, was a new and dangerous medium, in much the same way that the motion picture was thirty-five years earlier. The visual nature of the medium made it so powerful.

"'Amos 'n' Andy' on television is much worse than on radio because it is a picture, a

⁶⁷ This is not to say it ignored radio as a medium completely. In the records are a number of letters from the public and Association members complaining about the use of racial epithets, derogatory comments or the treatment of blacks on radio shows. The NAACP would then follow these up with the broadcasting companies. However, this was usually a frustrating experience; sometimes it turned out people had simply misheard, or the networks claimed not to be responsible for the broadcasts of local stations. Many of these cases were dealt with by local branches rather than the national office, because they concerned local radio stations. See correspondence, NAACP/LC: II A498.

⁶⁸ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 41-43.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Ely, 170-71.

living, talking, moving picture of Negroes, not merely a story in words over a radio loudspeaker.”⁷⁰ The NAACP was convinced that seeing racial stereotypes had a much greater effect on people’s prejudices than hearing them (or indeed reading them).

The Association’s arguments against shows such as *Amos ‘n’ Andy* and *Beulah* were much the same as they were against other forms of racial representation. *Beulah* was another programme which had transferred from radio to television. It was based around a black maid and the white family for which she worked and it ran on ABC between 1950-53, with Ethel Waters and later Louise Beavers in the title role. The NAACP objected to the show’s depiction of African Americans but it concentrated its efforts on *Amos ‘n’ Andy*.⁷¹ According to the Association, the depiction of “the Negro and other minority groups in a stereotyped and derogatory manner” served to “strengthen the conclusion among un-informed or prejudiced peoples that Negroes and other minorities are inferior, dumb and dishonest”.⁷² *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was “a gross libel on the Negro and distortion of the truth” and it portrayed “Negroes as amoral, semi-literate, lazy, stupid, scheming and dishonest”.⁷³ The casting of black actors only made matters worse because the “vicious propaganda is more likely to be accepted as true”.⁷⁴ (Although surely the NAACP would have objected even more vociferously if the roles had been performed by whites in black face.) The NAACP was worried about the effect of these degrading depictions of African Americans on racial prejudice. “Millions of whites will think the race is the same as on the show” and “[m]illions of white children” will learn about the race from watching. The concern was that as “most whites never meet Negroes personally”

⁷⁰ Emphasis original. Letter to branches, 15 August 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁷¹ See letter WW to Walter Lancaster, 30 April 1952. NAACP/LC: II A 499.

⁷² Resolution, 42nd Annual Convention, Atlanta, June 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁷³ Telegram WW to Blatz Brewing Company, 6 July 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁷⁴ Fact sheet on why NAACP opposes *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, n.d. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

they would base their opinions on these representations.⁷⁵ Walter White explained that such depictions upset African Americans because they were the only images of blacks to appear on television. If “Negroes [had] been permitted to appear more often in television as normal Americans with the same ambitions to achieve first class citizenship as others” then “we could take shows like ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ and ‘Beulah’ in our stride.”⁷⁶

One of the aspects of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* which most upset the NAACP was its depiction of the black middle class. For years the Association had been calling for the inclusion of professional characters in popular culture but this was hardly what it had in mind. The majority of the characters give the appearance of being middle class: they are well dressed and live in comfortable homes. Their ‘respectable’ appearance is, however, subverted by their language and their actions, as in the case of Kingfish and Andy. Both these men speak with a heavy dialect many NAACP members would have associated with working-class blacks and Kingfish in particular “rejects most of the middle-class values that viewers (black and white) held dear.”⁷⁷ Kingfish’s attorney, ‘Lawyer’ Calhoun is as unscrupulous as his client. The show presented his profession as “slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics” and black doctors as “quacks and thieves”, the NAACP complained.⁷⁸ It is not surprising that, at a time when the black middle class was growing in number and visibility, the Association’s leaders were disgruntled by this mockery of their aspirations and achievements. Thomas Cripps argues that by focusing on the misrepresentation of the black middle class, Walter White “appeared to concede that the CBS show had been

⁷⁵ Letter to branches, 15 August 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁷⁶ Letter WW to Harriet Van Horne, 30 July 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁷⁷ Lorts, “Black Laughter/ Black Protest”, 99.

⁷⁸ Letter to branches, 15 August 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

accurate in its depiction of the black lower classes.”⁷⁹ But, in fact, the NAACP criticised the portrayal of the whole of the race. It complained that the show “holds up 15,000,000 native Americans to public ridicule”.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it was more perturbed by the caricature of the group from which its leadership and membership were largely drawn.

Black public opinion was divided over *Amos 'n' Andy* on the television, as it had been when it first started on the radio. Many continued to follow their adventures and were bemused by or resented the NAACP's campaign. They thought it was humorous entertainment and they enjoyed seeing black faces on television. The black scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. recalled watching the show as a child; “*everybody* loved *Amos 'n' Andy*”, he remembered: “What was special to us was that their world was *all* colored just like ours.”⁸¹ Billy Rowe, the show business columnist at the *Pittsburgh Courier* (the newspaper which had campaigned against the radio show) thought it a “cute and amusing show.”⁸² An editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* criticised the NAACP's campaign. It said the show was entertaining and enjoyed by black audiences. Furthermore, it provided jobs for “talented Negro actors who otherwise have too few outlets for their ability.”⁸³ Many black actors themselves, unsurprisingly, supported the show. Clarence Muse, White's old adversary, praised it as an “artistic talent” that was based on “real Negroes you and I know.”⁸⁴ Actors hoped that the show would increase opportunities for other blacks in the profession. They resented the NAACP's interference, as they had in Hollywood in the previous decade. This controversy shows the NAACP's distance from the world of show

⁷⁹ Cripps, “Debate over American racial integration”, 33.

⁸⁰ NAACP advertising copy, sent with letter 10 September 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁸¹ Emphasis original. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 22.

⁸² Quoted in Ely, 217.

⁸³ Clipping, *LA Sentinel*, 23 August 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 499.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Cripps, “Debate over American racial integration”, 33.

business, both physically and in terms of attitude. Even more damning was the assertion of Almena Lomax in the *Los Angeles Tribune* that "Walter White has got the NAACP way out on the limb in this matter."⁸⁵ The NAACP's cultural campaigns had long antagonised black actors but now it seemed to have lost touch with the wider black community. Melvin Patrick Ely's research indicates that a person's class did not play a significant part in determining how they felt about the show. Middle-class blacks were just as likely to enjoy it as they were to complain.⁸⁶ The NAACP appeared to have misjudged the mood of its own constituency.

To the NAACP's mind the images in *Amos 'n' Andy* were a continuation of the harmful stereotypes it was committed to eradicating. By a strange coincidence the first broadcast of the television programme took place during the NAACP's national convention in Atlanta, June 1951. The convention's delegates sat together to watch the opening show. They were, for the most part, perturbed by what they saw and passed a resolution condemning shows such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and resolving "to utilize every means at its disposal to discourage the presentation of such shows." The resolution urged the branches to protest to the sponsors and radio and television stations. If necessary, it warned, they would resort to boycotts of those sponsors, stations and networks.⁸⁷ The national office immediately expressed its grievances to CBS and the show's sponsors, Blatz Brewing Company and its owner Schenley Distillers. CBS sent Sig Mickelson to meet with White to discuss what could be done to resolve the issue. The NAACP Secretary agreed to attend a screening, with officers from the NAACP and other black and white allies, including Edwin Lukas from the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Those from the NAACP decided that nothing could be done to improve the show. Henry Lee Moon, the Association's director of

⁸⁵ Quoted in Ely, 217.

⁸⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 221.

⁸⁷ 42nd Annual Convention, resolution. June 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

public relations, found that the "root of the trouble" lay "in the established 'Amos 'n' Andy' pattern which in my mind can be no more cleaned up and made acceptable than, say, the word 'darky.'"⁸⁸ To the NAACP, the complete removal of the programme from the air was the only solution.

The Association's battle over *Amos 'n' Andy* had much in common with its campaign over three decades earlier against *The Birth of a Nation*. It was overseen by the national office but with work done by the branches to tackle the issue at a local level. It used some of the same tactics: letters of protest, publicity for the cause, pressure on relevant bodies and alliances with other groups. The ultimate goal was the same: the complete removal of the offending article from public view. It could not turn to censorship boards but it did appeal to the network as the producer of the show. The greatest difference to the campaign in 1915 was that it also targeted the show's sponsor. It appealed to and threatened the company whose money lay behind the production. White warned Blatz's brewers, "No one of the fifteen million American Negroes who spend annually today in excess of twelve billion dollars which includes Blatz Beer and other Schenley products can fail to resent such libel" as appeared in *Amos 'n' Andy*.⁸⁹ The mass boycott did not materialise, although in Milwaukee, the hometown of Blatz, the local branch formed an alliance with local businessmen and other organisations to boycott the product.⁹⁰

The threatened boycott of Blatz Beer was indicative of the growing importance of African Americans as consumers. Radio stations had already identified blacks as a potentially valuable audience and the assumption was that television would follow suit.⁹¹ What is more, within a few years the increased economic power

⁸⁸ Quoted in memo from WW, 10 July 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 499.

⁸⁹ Telegram WW to Blatz Brewing Company, 6 July 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁹⁰ See correspondence, NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁹¹ Cripps, "Debate over American racial integration", 29.

of African American communities would be a key tool in the civil rights movement, with boycotts of all areas of life, from public transport to restaurants and shops. Blacks' strengthening economic status gave the NAACP potential leverage to appeal to television's commercial interests, a tool that had not been open to White when he first tackled show business in the early 1940s. On the other hand, the increasingly complicated world of corporate interests made White's tactic of personal persuasion less effective. There were a whole range of parties to which he needed to appeal, which stretched the limits of even the NAACP Secretary's talent for lobbying. However, the pragmatic approach of the NAACP continued to be an asset. It had always appealed to the self-interest or other considerations of the relevant parties, as well as making moral or ideological arguments. If the NAACP could not persuade someone of the justice of their argument then they could always turn to expediency.

The NAACP's demand that the show be immediately removed from the air alienated some allies, as its blanket call for censorship had done in the fight against *Birth*. The ACLU agreed with the NAACP's concerns about the programme but it cautioned it about the dangers of limiting free expression.⁹² In the atmosphere of the 1950s demands for censorship were too close to the tactics of the anti-communists for comfort. The American Jewish Committee was also ideologically opposed to censorship. It had another reason to shy away from an all-out attack on *Amos 'n' Andy*. The president of the show's sponsor, Lewis Rosentiel, was Jewish and a major contributor to the AJC. The Committee was therefore reluctant to criticise the programme too strongly. Edwin Lukas urged White and his organisation to accept a compromise and to work with CBS to make improvements to the script. The AJC went so far as the question whether the NAACP's attitude to the affair "border[ed] on

⁹² Lorts, "Black Laughter/ Black Protest", 118.

anti-Semitism". It wondered whether "the failure of the Association to protest the show when it was on the radio and under gentile sponsorship" compared to its attitude towards the programme on television was proof of bias. White, of course, was quick to assure the Committee that this was far from the case.⁹³ Jewish organisations and individual Jews had long been allies of the NAACP. During his foray into Hollywood White had repeatedly turned to Jewish movie producers as sympathetic allies. However this brief incident suggests that it was not always an easy alliance.

CBS cancelled *Amos 'n' Andy* after the second series due to falling audience numbers and the withdrawal of sponsorship. It is not clear whether this was the result of pressure from the NAACP, as such achievements are difficult to measure. As was so often the case, the Association was able to make a nuisance of itself; it caused a public relations headache for CBS and Blatz. But it did not have a mandate to carry out a sustained or successful campaign. In contrast to the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* when the majority of African Americans and liberal whites shared the NAACP's disgust for and fear of the film, in the case of *Amos 'n' Andy* many whites and plenty of African Americans enjoyed the show. This disunity was a major flaw in the NAACP's campaign. As Ely argues, the NAACP "could not convincingly claim to represent an Afro-American consensus, and its threat of a boycott thus rang hollow".⁹⁴

Any sense of pleasure at the show's cancellation would have been short lived: CBS syndicated *Amos 'n' Andy* to hundreds of local television stations and the programme continued to be shown on televisions all over America until 1966. The NAACP had failed in its attempt to enforce the complete removal of the show. More importantly it had not been able to convince the public, including large sections of the black community, that the programme was harmful to the race's advancement. An

⁹³ Letter Gloster B Current to Pearl Mitchell, 17 July 1951. NAACP/LC: II A 498.

⁹⁴ Ely, 226.

unintended consequence of the controversy stirred up by the Association over *Amos 'n' Andy* was that it would be 1965 before a network television series would again feature a black actor in a central role (Bill Cosby in *I Spy*). Ely suggests that the fact images of blacks as comics and fools became too contentious for sponsors and networks marks a victory for the NAACP.⁹⁵ Certainly, the organisation proved once again that African Americans would not take these cultural slights lying down.

The first half of the 1950s marked a period of transition within the NAACP. Walter White's controversial marriage to a white woman, Poppy Cannon, his ill-health and his desire to move on to new challenges dampened his enthusiasm for his NAACP work.⁹⁶ Roy Wilkins took over the Secretary's administrative duties and replaced White on his death in March 1955. White had been the one who had spearheaded the efforts in Hollywood and his demise marked the end of that chapter in the NAACP's cultural work. Wilkins continued to be concerned about representations of the race in popular culture but, as the upheaval of the civil rights movement swept through America, it no longer constituted a significant part of the Association's work. It was not until 1963 when Herbert Hill, the NAACP's labour secretary, went to Hollywood to demand better job opportunities for blacks that anything like White's earlier campaigns were re-started.

The decade prior to White's death saw a continuation of the NAACP's cultural strategy. It continued to argue that cultural representations affected the social and political status of African Americans. White's campaign in Hollywood encountered difficulties: he clashed with black actors, his proposed Hollywood Bureau did not materialise and anti-communism threatened his progress. Nevertheless, he maintained

⁹⁵ Ely, 240.

⁹⁶ Janken, *Walter White*, Chapter 11.

relationships with some of the key people in the industry and acted as a consultant on a number of films. He was rewarded with a spate of liberal films which dealt sympathetically with racial issues. Such movies were the exception rather than the rule: the majority of Hollywood films paid no attention to race. Nor were these films themselves without faults. However, they marked what must have been a satisfying culmination of White's campaign. Of course, he alone cannot take the credit for Hollywood's moment of relative enlightenment. He and his organisation were just one of the many forces – which included the legacy of the Second World War, the liberal conscience of those in the industry, the small improvements in race relations more generally – that pushed Hollywood to this moment. Nevertheless, he was able to continue to exert pressure on the studios and he acted as a constant reminder that African Americans were paying attention to how they were represented in American culture.

There were a number of positives to be taken from the NAACP's cultural campaigns by the 1950s. The film and television industries were beginning to take notice of African Americans, even if it was not always in ways of which the NAACP approved. The black community was becoming more visible in American life. It also was, from the point of view of these industries, growing in commercial and economic potential. This gave the NAACP a better bargaining position than it had ever had before. On the other hand, the NAACP's on-going preoccupation with white-owned media meant that its influence was limited. The NAACP's cultural strategy had for a long time alienated many black actors. Its attitude towards actors who took what it considered to be harmful roles reflected a cultural elitism and a narrow view of how culture could be used in the struggle for equality. At the beginning of the 1950s the Association found itself out of tune with many other blacks as well, including its

middle-class constituency. When Walter White went to Hollywood in the 1940s he had the backing of the wider black community but this was not the case by the next decade. The NAACP's attitude towards *Amos 'n' Andy* betrayed an unsophisticated view of culture. It assumed that stereotypes must always be negative and that caricatures of the race would always have a detrimental effect on white attitudes. It did not consider the fact that the humanity and dignity of some of the characters could counteract the more offensive stereotypes or that an all-black television show could bring indirect benefits to not only individuals but also the race as a whole.

The NAACP's strategy really came unstuck when it came to censorship. It discovered that the principle could be used against black interests and it found itself opposing the action of censorship boards across the country. In an era when free speech was under threat from the conservative forces sweeping across the country, censorship became an increasingly discredited notion in liberal circles. The problem the NAACP faced, however, was that it had still not found an effective way to deal with offensive stereotypes when they appeared in a new medium. When television introduced black characters the Association was forced to resort to its old tactic. Although it was careful not to refer to its campaign in such terms because it knew that it alienated many people and that it opened it to charges of hypocrisy, its demands for the complete removal of programmes such as *Beulah* and *Amos 'n' Andy* clearly amounted to censorship. This incident highlights the limitations of the NAACP's approach. The censorship issue was one through which the NAACP found it hard to plot a consistent path. It required a more sophisticated theory of culture than the Association was able to deploy to fully explain all the factors at stake. After over thirty years of battling negative images of the race it was back where it started: complaining bitterly about a popular representation of African Americans which it

believe retarded the advancement of the race. When a new form of media came along and an industry developed in which blacks had no stake or influence, the NAACP had to resort to protests after the fact. It was dishearteningly reminiscent of the fight against *The Birth of a Nation*. The NAACP's cultural strategy, it seemed, had come full circle.

Conclusion

This study of the NAACP's cultural campaigns ends where it started, with the NAACP vigorously protesting what it saw as the demeaning portrayal of African Americans in 'mainstream' white American culture. There were similarities between the NAACP's protests against *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1951. On both occasions the Association was faced with a new medium and a growing industry in which African Americans had no power. It was so worried about the potential harm of these depictions of the race that it could see no alternative but to call for their complete removal from public view. It worked as a pressure group, launched public campaigns against them and appealed to the relevant bodies for action. It had only very limited success in both cases: *The Birth of a Nation* was banned in some places but usually only temporarily; *Amos 'n' Andy* was dropped by the national network but continued to be shown locally for another decade.

On the other hand, there were significant differences between these two incidents. The picture in 1951 was much altered from the one in 1915. The NAACP itself was almost unrecognisable as an organisation: its membership had grown from 5000 in 1915 to over 400,000 by the end of the Second World War¹; African Americans held all the senior staff positions; it had developed a national and even international reputation and had access to some of the highest reaches in society, including, at times, the presidency. More widely there had been important improvements in all areas of black life, from politics and voting rights, through to employment and union membership. Incidents of lynching had fallen from sixty-nine

¹ Stokes, 169; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 110.

in 1915 to only one in 1951.² The courts had struck down segregated housing ordinances, segregation in interstate bus travel and the all-white primary. This is not to overstate the position of African Americans in the early 1950s, with the seismic achievements of the civil rights movement yet to be realised, but rather to highlight the changes since 1915.

Furthermore, as cultural representations of race there were considerable differences between *Birth* and *Amos 'n' Andy*. The television show might have upset NAACP sensibilities but its images were not as offensive of those of Griffith's film. The most notable absence was the black man as uncontrolled beast and violent rapist. In *Amos 'n' Andy* blacks are depicted as lazy, foolish and scheming; they are figures of fun that the audience is encouraged to laugh at as well as with. But in *The Birth of a Nation* they are presented as not only intellectually inferior but also as dangerous, driven by a lust for sex and power. In addition, in the 1950s there were alternative black images in popular culture. They had not yet made their way to television but motion pictures had seen a gradual improvement. By 1951 African Americans had appeared as doctors, law students and brave soldiers; issues such as discrimination, passing and racial violence had been dealt with sympathetically. All of this was a far cry from *The Birth of a Nation's* message of black savagery.

These improvements in the depiction of African Americans reflected the changing racial situation but they also suggested that the NAACP's campaign had been successful. Walter White was able to convince some movie producers to change the way their films portrayed blacks. He was helped enormously by the forces of the Second World War and the racial liberalism of some elements of Hollywood, but personally, he certainly played a part in bringing the issue before the industry and the

² Figures from table in Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 6-7.

nation, maintaining pressure on the studios and trying to ensure black interests (as he saw them) were upheld. The campaign was not without its difficulties or setbacks, nevertheless the change in strategy from protesting and threats to lobbying and persuasion proved to be effective. The NAACP benefited from these campaigns as an organisation. They provided a cause for African Americans to rally behind and high profile skirmishes with, for example *The Birth of a Nation*, brought the Association to the nation's attention. They also raised the profile of its leaders and helped forge new areas of civil rights activism.

When assessing its cultural campaigns, the NAACP could be criticised for adopting what was a cautious and conservative tactic when conditions for African Americans at the start of the twentieth century were so desperate. Art exhibitions, poetry anthologies and a campaign to change the content of movies might have seemed like a triviality when blacks were being denied even the most basic of human rights on a daily basis. However, it was precisely the volatile nature of race relations which encouraged the NAACP to adopt such a stance. The NAACP did not intend its cultural campaigns to work in isolation; they were devised to complement its legal and legislative programmes. Justin Lorts links its protest against *Amos 'n' Andy* with its victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He makes a number of connections between the two events and concludes that the Supreme Court's decision "vindicated" the NAACP's cultural strategy: "At the core of the court's opinion was the finding that segregation in schools, like racist images on television, created a sense of inferiority that prevented blacks from attaining full equality in American society".³

This conclusion can be applied more generally to the NAACP's cultural campaigns during the forty years preceding *Brown*. The Association knew that when

³ Lorts, "Black Laughter / Black Protest", 138.

it put cases before the courts, or lobbied politicians, its work was undermined by a culture which continually reasserted that blacks were inferior. The fight to secure the passage of anti-lynching bills made explicit use of the arts but all of its cultural work can be seen as laying the groundwork for more substantial change. In altering the way African Americans were represented, it forced white America to confront the truth about the racial situation. If offensive stereotypes were removed, whites could no longer hide behind culturally reinforced claims of black incompetence, savagery or contentment in order to deny African Americans their civil rights.

At the heart of the NAACP's cultural campaigns was the belief that representations of African Americans affected the attitude of whites towards the race and therefore impacted on how blacks were treated. It hoped that in changing these cultural representations it would therefore be able to alter the treatment and status of blacks in American society. This principle has been criticised by scholars. Writing about the NAACP's Image Awards, which began in the late 1960s, K. Anthony Appiah argues "there's no guarantee ... that a score of movies with good Negroes in them will change the mind of a single bigot."⁴ The same could be said for "good Negroes" in books, drawings, television programmes or any other form of culture. The NAACP placed a lot of faith in the assumption that encountering examples of well-mannered, respectable blacks would eradicate racist attitudes. Similarly, it could be guilty of overvaluing cultural attainment. It put too much faith in the idea that racist whites could be dragged out of their ignorance by an appreciation of black artistic talent.

However, the NAACP was not alone in advocating such an approach. In her study of African Americans and radio during the Second World War, Barbara Savage

⁴ K. Anthony Appiah, "'No Bad Nigger': Blacks as the Ethical Principle in the Movies", in *Media Spectacles*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.

explains that there is a long tradition amongst African Americans of believing that images can carry and reinforce political meanings. She claims there is an "enduring and unrecognized strand of African American political thought that focuses on ... the development of politically compelling images to advance black political and economic interests."⁵ Appiah may well be wrong to dismiss the NAACP's principle as simply including a few "good Negroes" in films. The NAACP's cultural strategy challenged white society's construction of African Americans. The Association acknowledged that culture could be used as a political and social weapon. It was being used in such a way by white America to deny blacks their full civil rights and therefore it was not misguided to hope that this trend could be reversed and have the opposite effect. Other groups also placed an emphasis on culture and cultural representations. For example, the Communist Party adopted similar tactics to the NAACP when it held an anti-lynching exhibition. Many on the Left shared the belief that culture could effect social change. Even the actions of HUAC affirmed a belief in the power of culture.

A change in cultural representations alone would not grant African Americans full equality, however. In fact, the greatest flaw in the NAACP's cultural policy was the way in which it conceived of racism. It believed racism was an anomaly which existed principally in people's minds, whereas racism is also structural and exists in the institutions of society. This is what African Americans came to realise during the civil rights movement and is why they struck at these institutions to bring about racial equality. Nevertheless, they did not abandon the principles which guided the NAACP's cultural campaigns. Civil rights activists during the sixties used black cultural forms as part of the political struggle. They used different forms and they

⁵ Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 10.

used them in different ways – for example, there was more emphasis on black empowerment through culture and little interest in using the arts to affect white opinion – but they continued a tradition which saw the political in the cultural.⁶

The cultural campaigns of the NAACP reveal much about this organisation and the attitudes of its leadership towards racial inequality, class, strategies and culture. The Association has been accused by its critics of advocating assimilation, the complete integration of African Americans into white society. It might be expected that this assimilationism would be consistently applied to culture. David Levering Lewis argues that the NAACP, as ‘Talented Tenth’ African Americans, “embraced an ideology of extreme cultural assimilationism.”⁷ Certainly, Walter White advocated a form of assimilation when in Hollywood. He wanted black characters to be incorporated into mainstream pictures. According to White, they should appear alongside white characters and thus depict the integrated American society for which the NAACP was striving. However, during the Harlem Renaissance, the NAACP, through the work of its senior officials and its magazine, embraced cultural pluralism. It celebrated what was unique in black literature and art but at the same time it wanted black culture to be accepted by whites and for it to find a place within the wider American culture. It did not support a separate black culture but nor did it want black culture to lose its distinctiveness. This pluralism (as opposed to complete assimilation) reflects the NAACP’s wider stance. Although there were some differences of opinion between individual officials over instances of voluntary segregation, the Association rejected the social, economic and political separation of

⁶ See, for example, Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

⁷ David Levering Lewis, “Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s”, *Journal of American History* 71, No. 3. (December 1984): 543.

the races and it promoted a society in which African Americans could celebrate their identity and heritage and, at the same time, be accepted by white America.

Megan Williams writes that “[h]istorically, the NAACP has worked to gain civil rights and achieve integration by ... adopting the dominant culture’s values of middle-class respectability and morality.”⁸ This general statement is substantiated by its cultural campaigns. It encouraged the depiction of decent and reputable African Americans. Such images were considered to be more ‘American’ and therefore more acceptable. They also challenged decades old stereotypes of blacks as lazy and incompetent which were used to retard the race’s economic and social advancement. The black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in his scathing indictment of the “Black Bourgeoisie” argues that African Americans created the illusion of a prosperous middle class in order to be accepted by the white world. He claims that in the segregated cities after the First World War “a class structure emerged which was based upon social distinctions such as education and conventional behavior, rather than upon occupation and income.”⁹ Frazier suggests that African Americans could attain middle-class status by *appearing* middle class. The NAACP, which was preoccupied with the *image* of the race, wanted to show whites that African Americans could embody middle-class values and behaviour. In other words, even if they were not economically middle class they should be presented in the arts and popular culture as educated, professional, moral and hardworking in order to be accepted by white America.

The NAACP thus pushed for images of middle-class blacks in the arts and popular culture. For example, in *The Crisis* Du Bois published a variety of depictions of African Americans that, whilst not always middle-class, tended at least to embody

⁸ Williams, “The Crisis Cover Girl”, 201.

⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Collier, 1962), 23.

the “middle-class values” of respectability, dignity and hard work. This strategy suggests that the NAACP was an organisation run by and for the black middle classes. Certainly, there is a sense that in adopting and encouraging such representations the NAACP deliberately reflected its membership. But the tactic was implemented with the *white* middle class in mind. These were the people the Association believed could be most readily persuaded that the race deserved full citizenship and that also had the power to facilitate black advancement. So the NAACP pushed for cultural representations that it felt would secure white support. For example, many of the anti-lynching plays included middle-class black characters in order to elicit sympathy from whites. Similarly, the NAACP wanted the inclusion of respectable black figures in motion pictures in order to stress the similarities between the two sections of American society. It also used those ‘high’ cultural forms which it believed were most highly valued by the middle classes and therefore more likely to impress them. The use of art, literature and theatre in the anti-lynching campaign, for example, was a deliberate attempt to reach middle-class whites and persuade them to back anti-lynching legislation.

Although white America was the primary target for the NAACP’s cultural campaigns, much of this work reached and was intended to reach black Americans. During the Renaissance in particular, the creation and publication of black culture was intended to instil racial pride amongst African Americans. Du Bois published photographs, short stories and sketches which featured black people. This helped forge a sense of a black collective identity, which was crucial in sustaining the fight for civil rights. The NAACP wanted the removal of derogatory stereotypes from American culture not only because of their effect on whites but also because of their impact on African Americans; degrading images of the race damaged black self-

esteem. Black America needed to be motivated and ready for the battle for racial equality and culture provided a way of raising morale, highlighting issues and forging a common bond.

It is clear that the NAACP did not respond to all forms of culture in the same way. The most striking difference was its attitude towards 'high' and 'popular' culture. Although the Association did not use these terms itself, a distinction can be seen between how it approached forms such as art and literature and others including film and television. The former were, the NAACP believed, valued by middle-class whites. It encouraged and celebrated African Americans who created works of literature and art. The NAACP saw the creation of such culture as a sign of a group's civilization and as proof that African Americans should be treated as equals. In contrast, film and television were seen as having a great influence on public opinions but no artistic merit. Therefore most black actors were not held in the same esteem as writers or painters. The NAACP, broadly speaking, gave greater freedom to these artists than it did to actors, whom it criticised for taking stereotypical roles.

The Association could, at times, display an unsophisticated view of culture. For example, it did not seem to acknowledge any difference between genres. It did not recognise that *Amos 'n' Andy* was a comedy and therefore presented a light-hearted look at not only African Americans but life in general. In contrast, *The Birth of a Nation* claimed to be a historically accurate epic. The two thus presented African Americans in very different ways but the NAACP failed to distinguish the differences and treated them in the same way. In relation to film and television it followed a simplistic notion of what constituted a 'negative' image and what was a 'positive' image. Usually working-class equalled 'bad' and middle-class 'good'. Jane Gaines is critical of the NAACP's very concept of challenging stereotypes. She argues that

because stereotypical characters are not seen as 'real' the inference is that there is an alternative 'real' type. Those who argue they have been "misrepresented" actually "borrow the same ideological strategy used against themselves". She explains, "[t]o argue that 'real people are not like that' is to answer one empirical claim (the self-evidence of racial characteristics) with another (the self-evidence of how black people really are)." The 'positive' image offered as a substitute by the NAACP was an idealization and therefore also a stereotype.¹⁰ The NAACP, in its campaigns against cultural representation, ended up advocating stereotypes of its own.

The Association's view of why culture mattered could be equally limiting, particularly during the 1910s and 1920s when, with the exception of its struggle against *Birth*, it focused its attention on its narrow world of liberal, interracial New York. During the Harlem Renaissance NAACP leaders saw their cultural strategy bringing success to their own circle of acquaintances. Black authors were being published, black artists sold paintings and this brought financial rewards and respect from whites. Men such as James Weldon Johnson and Walter White assumed that these advances could bring improvements for other African Americans; they believed that this strategy could be replicated and also that the 'Talented Tenth' would uplift the race, because their achievements would reflect on the rest of black America.

There were changes over the decades in how the NAACP approached and used culture. These differences reflected, in part, the wider racial and national context. For example, when Walter White went to Hollywood he was prompted and assisted by the upheaval of the Second World War and the opportunity it provided to press for advances in all areas of black life. The NAACP's use of the arts in the anti-lynching campaign of the in the 1930s reflected the growing demand for federal intervention on

¹⁰ Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 260-261.

this issue, which meant the Association believed it both needed and could benefit from public displays of both white and black abhorrence of the phenomenon, such as the art exhibition. In addition, the Association was feeling pressure from the Communists and felt it needed to reassert itself as a champion of both black rights and black culture.

During its first three decades, the NAACP had made much use of cultural forms such as literature, fine art and theatre. By the 1940s the arts had dropped from its cultural agenda. Instead, it focused on forms of culture with a mass audience, particularly motion pictures and television. This reflected the growing confidence of the organisation and its desire to reach a national audience. Of course, ever since *The Birth of a Nation* it had been concerned about 'popular' culture but in 1915 it instigated a reactive campaign, whereas in the 1940s the NAACP was more proactive in its use of mass media. Moreover, African Americans as a group were becoming more visible and their voices were beginning to be heard. The film and television industry began to take greater interest and the NAACP wanted to exploit and monitor this opportunity.

The NAACP continued to pursue its cultural agenda beyond the early 1950s. In 1967 the Beverly Hills branch established the Image Awards to celebrate the achievements of blacks working in the industry and to highlight the discrimination they still faced. The award ceremony has now become a star-studded, primetime event. By the 1980s the NAACP had come to focus on the lack of opportunities for blacks in the entertainment industry and the subsequent effect this had on the type of work which was being produced and the faces that appeared. This concern has continued in subsequent decades. In 1999 NAACP President Kweisi Mfume

complained that there was a “virtual whitewash” on national television.¹¹ Then in 2003 the Association published a report into the film and television industry which focused on the lack of opportunities for ethnic minorities behind the scenes. It found that African Americans and other ethnic minorities were still underrepresented in almost every area of the television and film industry. The report argued that “when it comes to forming ideas, reinforcing stereotypes, establishing norms and shaping our thinking nothing affects us more than the images and concepts delivered into our lives on a daily basis by television and film.”¹² The principle that culture affected the social and political position of African Americans still guided its work.

In February 2009 a cartoon by Sean Delonas in the *New York Post* caused consternation at the NAACP. It showed policemen shooting dead a chimpanzee with the speech bubble, “They’ll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill”. The newspaper explained that the chimpanzee was a reference to a recent story about someone’s pet chimp on the rampage. To others, including the NAACP, the cartoonist’s point that the stimulus programme was so stupid it could have been written by a monkey invoked racist imagery and was therefore a racist attack on America’s first black president, Barack Obama, whose fiscal stimulus package was before Congress. The NAACP protested and forced an apology from the newspaper’s owner, Rupert Murdoch.¹³ The election of America’s first black president signalled progress for African Americans. It would have been almost unimaginable to the founders of the NAACP in 1909 that a hundred years later a black man would be sworn in to the highest office in America. But the publication of this cartoon, as well

¹¹ Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 68.

¹² NAACP, “Out of Focus, Out of Sync: A Report on the Film and Television Industry”, (2003), 3. <http://www.naacpimageawards.net/hollywoodbur.html>

¹³ Cartoon by Sean Delonas in *New York Post*, 18 February 2009. Press release, “NAACP protest of racist Post cartoon spreads to 55 cities”, 5 March 2009. <http://www.naacp.org/news/press/2009-03-05/index.htm>

as numerous other offensive images in American culture, demonstrates that culture continues to undermine black achievements and to exacerbate the very real racial inequalities which still exist. As always, the Association would not let such offences go unchallenged. A century after it first published the work of black poets, picketed cinemas and educated movie moguls, the NAACP is still fighting racism in culture.

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