African American Art and Critical Discourse Between World Wars

MARY ANN CALO
Colgate University

For African American artists, their struggle for inclusion has often been met with various strategies to justify their continuing marginalization.

Lowery Sims

The lovely thing about art criticism, perhaps its only redeeming virtue and its best shot at historical transcendence, is that it offers lubricated penetration of the unconscious of the cultural mainstream, of the mechanisms that produce, perpetuate, and render invisible the maintenance of privilege.

Catherine Lord

In The New Negro, his celebrated anthology published in 1925, cultural critic and philosopher Alain Locke marshalled impressive evidence that America was on the threshold of a black artistic coming of age.¹ With the subsequent emergence of an African American cultural intelligentsia, and the flurry of artistic activity we have come to know as the Harlem Renaissance, it seemed an opportune moment to consider the possibility that a characteristically "Negro" art had developed in America and to speculate on its contribution (past, present, future) to the formation of national culture. During the interwar decades, this emphasis on racial distinctiveness created an audience for visual art made by Americans of African descent. However, as an invention of the 1920s, the category "American Negro artist" soon found itself suspended between the rhetoric of cultural

Mary Ann Calo is associate professor of art history and Chair of the Department of Art and Art History at Colgate University. This article is part of her ongoing research on the critical reception of African American art in the 1920s and 1930s.

American Quarterly, Vol. 51, No. 3 (September 1999) © 1999 American Studies Association

580
nationalism and the reality of a segregated society as yet ill-equipped to fulfill its democratic promise.

Within the black community during these years, lively exchanges on the nature of black creativity were consistently framed in terms of a dynamic interaction of race and nationality. But critics writing for mainstream publications underscored the separateness of “Negro art” from the over-arching category “American art.” As exposure to so-called “Negro art” grew, alongside it there emerged a set of critical constructs, rooted in the discourse of racial difference, that collectively functioned to isolate black artistic production from mainstream cultural practice. This article will argue that the critical reception of African American artists during the interwar decades created a foundation for what Charles Gaines has called the “theater of refusal,” a discursive space wherein the marginalization of black artists is enforced through art criticism. As Gaines suggests, African American art understood largely in terms of constructs of racial identity remains fairly resistant to alternate narratives and models of historical analysis, resulting in a critical practice that “punishes the work of black artists by making it immune to history and by immunizing history against it.”

I

The artistic production of the “New Negro,” as described by Locke, sought both to affirm a positive racial identity and to claim a place for black artists in American culture. African American writers such as Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the creation of great art was a mark of racial maturity; they proposed that the black population would gain greater respect because of the demonstrated talent of its artists. In its headier moments, the leaders of this so-called Negro or Harlem Renaissance believed in the capacity of artistic expression to alter deeply ingrained assumptions of black inferiority and eliminate prejudice, a phenomenon scholar David Levering Lewis has referred to subsequently as “civil rights by copyright.”

Paralleling the Harlem Renaissance and its aftermath was the forecast of a renaissance on a national level that would eventuate in the creation of an authentic American art. Apologists for the Harlem Renaissance and the American Renaissance alike called for the development of unique artistic idioms that would reflect specific cultural identities. In the context of both movements, the interwar decades were
characterized repeatedly as periods plagued by confusion and uncertainty as American artists struggled towards mature expression. Claims were made on both fronts for the eventual emergence of a coherent culture that would embody individual expression as well as collective racial/national identity.4

Historians of the Harlem Renaissance have long recognized the interdependence of these respective phenomena. For example, Nathan Huggins, in his seminal history of the Harlem Renaissance, understood the creative dilemma of the African American as a variation on the larger problem of American creativity.5 At the root of intense cultural self-consciousness, Huggins argued, both in the black American community and the majority population, were lingering self-doubt and defensiveness about the presumed inadequacy of the peoples in question. Just as America hoped to overcome its sense of cultural inferiority in relation to Europe, black America hoped to do the same in relation to white America. These sentiments echoed through the writings of Alain Locke, who consistently positioned the creative efforts of black Americans within this program of national self-discovery and self-definition.

More recently, George Hutchinson argues that the goals of the Harlem Renaissance, as they were articulated by Locke and others, must be understood in the context of heated battles over the relationship between race, nation and culture which dominated the intellectual landscape of the early twentieth century.6 His thesis, that African American writers and artists recognized and indeed negotiated their strategic relationship to the discourses of cultural nationalism, augments Huggins’s observations. While Huggins located the Harlem Renaissance within the climate of pervasive anxiety about America’s cultural provincialism, Hutchinson stresses its seminal role in the systematic program to define the spirit of the nation and control its public meanings, a program that was, in part, directed towards alleviating this anxiety.7

Despite these obvious affinities, African American art of the interwar decades has remained largely invisible in mainstream histories of the period. In her catalog essay for the 1987 exhibition, *The Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, Mary Schmidt Campbell noted that the historical legacy of the Harlem Renaissance has been contained within the limiting conditions of cultural separatism, a byproduct of legal segregation that has been sustained by ignorance, neglect and critical distortion.8 Although these artists emerged during a time of
intense interest in the creation of an authentic American culture, and were in fact deeply embedded in the struggle for power to articulate its essence, their artistic production remained outside of mainstream discourse. Campbell's observation is echoed by Hutchinson who affirms that studies of American cultural nationalism have ignored black expression, resulting in "the exclusion of blackness from definitions of Americanness."9

As figurative artists whose modernity often presented itself in sociopolitical rather than formal terms, African Americans have certainly been casualties of the widespread critical neglect experienced by many artists of the interwar decades. But neither the limitations of modernist thinking nor its hegemony adequately explain the scant representation of black expression in mainstream histories, which persists even in the face of revisionist scholarship.10 The theoretical coherence of modernism is largely a construction of the post-World War II era; in the early twentieth century any form of expression not obviously conventional or academic was likely to be described as modern. But critics with only vague ideas about modernity felt more secure in their conceptions of national identity; and in the historiography of American art, issues of nationalism are as pressing as issues of modernity.11 If African American art has disappeared from the cultural history of the early twentieth century, it is due to a refusal of its essential modernity and its claim to occupy a vital place in the process of national self-definition, a priority shared by the majority of American artists working during these years.12

II

Prior to the 1920s, there had been little need for white critics to examine their assumptions about black culture. This was altered dramatically by the ascendance, in the American imagination, of exotic notions of blackness that emerged in the early twentieth century, casting the sensuous, intuitive, natural black as the opposite of the calculating, pragmatic and deeply repressed Caucasian. Much has been written on the extent to which this construction of black identity served the needs of white intellectuals seeking an escape from boredom or an antidote to the soulless materialistic culture of their age. For a brief period, this critical literature suggests, white Americans thought they had discovered in Harlem what they lacked in themselves.
To a certain extent, this perception of black difference was encouraged by African American critics such as Alain Locke. Locke's writings made frequent reference to racially specific dimensions of experience and culture which, in America, he maintained, existed as fortunate compliments to one another. For example, in a lecture on "The Negro and Art," drafted for a symposium at Mt. Holyoke College in 1931, he stated:

In white America, the Negro finds the pattern of practical endeavor and discipline, and the mastery of physical and scientific civilization, both for his own good and for the sake of his handicapped brother in Africa, to whom he is a possible missioner of civilization. In black America, the white man has either a base or a noble antidote to Puritanism and its emotional sterility, depending on whether he contacts with the Negro spirit on the low level of primitive animalism or on the high level of fine artistic expression.13

Furthermore, Locke urged black artists to express themselves in characteristically racial terms by drawing on the uniqueness of their experience and on their position as heirs to both an authentic American folk culture and the artistic traditions of ancestral Africa.

Paradigms for the development of a black aesthetic during the interwar decades were not unlike paradigms for the development of an American aesthetic. Locke's ideas about racial expression were, for the most part, consistent with theories of modern American expression advanced by cultural nationalists, a connection he clearly understood and even encouraged.14 In the foreword to The New Negro, he wrote:

America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting.15

Artistic expression was understood by cultural critics of this generation as a function of individual temperament negotiating the context of a specific (national/racial) environment. Significant artistic content could not be prescribed but rather emerged from both personal and communal experience, with the presumption that the artist's unique psyche would necessarily be mediated by broader societal concerns.16

Also, like other critic-advocates of his generation, Locke was a kind of cultural entrepreneur and as such was able to capture the attention of the African American intelligentsia as well as institutions and individu-
als interested in fostering black artistic creativity. He was close to white art patrons such as Charlotte Mason and Albert Barnes, and had strong ties to the Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organization that devoted itself to rewarding artistic achievement among African Americans and to the promotion of black artists.17 More than any other single individual—with the possible exception of James Porter, whose influence will be felt somewhat later—Locke was responsible for shaping the historical understanding and critical appraisal of African American art in the imagination of the interested public.

Locke’s critical position combined American theories of art as expression with turn of the century aestheticism and belief in the civilizing power of culture. (It is worth noting here that Locke’s dissertation advisor at Harvard, Ralph Barton Perry, was Bernard Berenson’s brother-in-law.) 18 The most progressive artistic theorists in early twentieth-century America were Alfred Stieglitz and Robert Henri, both of whose ideas are evident in Locke’s thinking. To an extent, Locke’s perception of black art as uniquely endowed within American culture, because of its resonant spirituality and the broad scope of human experience it embodies, can be understood as the productive fusion of their respective critical positions.19

Henri, with his more obvious concern that human experience and the social realities of American life act as catalyst and raw material of national cultural expression, is traditionally positioned in opposition to Stieglitz. An archetypical modernist, Stieglitz was committed to the importance of formal innovation and aesthetic transcendence, and understood the artist as a vital spiritual force in an increasingly materialistic world. The accentuation of these differences has encouraged a convenient, if somewhat distorted, historical narrative wherein Henri plays champion of American realism to Stieglitz’s advocacy of international modernism. But, for all this presumption of disagreement, Henri and Stieglitz held many similar ideas about the origins of artistic expression. Both preached the importance of modernity, urging artists to resist the pull of the moribund genteel tradition. Each placed great emphasis on individual artistic freedom and the authenticity of artistic emotion; and both were responsive to a cultural climate in which modernism was not incompatible with nationalism.20

To this foundation of American aesthetic and cultural theory, Locke contributed his own emphasis on African ancestral roots as an important stimulus in the formation of black cultural identity.21 Locke’s
promotion of African art, both as a valuable form of expression in its own right and as an inspiration for modern black artists, was intended to instill pride in the racial past and encourage black artists to learn from the technical mastery and expressive power of African sculpture. But the naming of ancestral Africa as a vital dimension of black American cultural identity can also be understood in terms of Van Wyck Brooks’s concept of the “usable past.” The search for a cultural legacy to displace Puritan and frontier values as the formative elements of American experience was a central theme of cultural nationalist thinking in the 1920s.

III

Before examining the nature of critical discourse brought to bear on African American artists during the interwar decades, a distinction must be made between art criticism and what is more properly regarded as art journalism. By differentiating one from the other, I do not intend to suggest anything about their respective merits, but merely to establish the important fact that they constituted very different vehicles for conveying information about African American art and artists. The vast majority of critical opinion on black art falls into the category of art journalism. Complex issues surrounding race, culture, identity and nationalism in these years were addressed by critics, historians, and artists such as Locke, James Porter, Meyer Schapiro, Stuart Davis, and Thomas Craven, individuals variously grounded in social theory, anthropology, aesthetic philosophy and art history. But journalists writing for the popular press rarely progressed beyond such basic questions as “what is Negro art and why should anyone be interested in seeing it?”

To an extent, this situation reflects the general state of American art criticism during the early twentieth century. With some notable exceptions, a good deal of art writing in America before World War II was a mixed bag of journalism and editorial commentary. Art criticism was not highly professionalized in the United States and American critics with a consistent, recognizable methodology were rare. Essays on art and culture, featured regularly in literary magazines and the popular press, were often written by individuals with very little background in the visual arts. Furthermore, when appraising African American visual art, these critics often leaned on typologies structured around the
musical and literary expression with which they were more familiar. Thus they tended to raise general issues rather than engage in complex critical analysis of specific objects or artists.23

Another impediment to the development of coherent critical dialog about African American art was the involvement of the Harmon Foundation in its promotion. Widely recognized for its tireless and sorely-needed efforts on behalf of black artists, the Harmon Foundation was significant not only because of the scope and duration of its activities, but also insofar as it acted as a powerful determinant of viewer response to their work. The Harmon Foundation group shows premiered in New York and travelled throughout the country, where they were often seen in non-art contexts. Exhibitions were typically sponsored by regional inter-racial councils and race relations committees and displayed in black churches, in libraries and public schools, or in local branches of the YWCA. These circumstances tended to encourage a sociological, rather than aesthetic, way of thinking about the work of black artists.

Also, the aggressive public relations strategies employed by the Harmon Foundation often overwhelmed the art itself, closing down interpretation and constricting the critical frame. Newspaper coverage of the Harmon awards for Negro achievement in the visual arts, and of their annual exhibitions of Negro art, was shaped largely by press releases from the Foundation, preempting the need for further inquiry and analysis. A good deal of writing about African American art during the interwar period was simply Harmon Foundation publicity posing as art criticism.

IV

In spite of, and to an extent in response to, these conditions, a set of issues did emerge from the context of the Harlem Renaissance that provided mainstream critics with a fairly consistent focus when considering the works of African American artists.24 The notions that emerged in the late 1920s were remarkably resilient: Negro art was consistently evaluated during the interwar decades in terms of a priori assumptions about amateurism, primitivism, authenticity and racial uniqueness. Often these qualities were fused into simplistic ideals that then functioned to delimit the expressive field of black artists by creating a concrete set of expectations: authentic Negro art will be primitive because it is the product of amateurs or individuals predis-
posed to the primitive by virtue of their unique racial heritage; such authenticity and uniqueness should be manifest in both the form and content of Negro art. Ultimately, these expectations will prompt critics to express displeasure when the work of African American artists presented itself as similar to, or derivative of, mainstream artistic practices. Even when such practices reflected mutual admiration for many of the same general principles, racial difference was expected to override shared national cultural ideals.

The presumption of amateurism hung like a cloud over the 1920s and 1930s, causing enormous frustration among black artists who strove to demonstrate their technical mastery (and eventually hoped to qualify for the federal assistance that became available to "professional" artists during the Depression). In a well-known 1934 essay, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," Romare Bearden blamed the Harmon Foundation for fostering a patronizing attitude towards black artists by encouraging them to exhibit prematurely.25 This accusation may seem unduly harsh given that the Foundation was also instrumental in establishing the professional credentials of black artists seeking employment on the projects. Nevertheless, the condescension Bearden described was a conspicuous dimension of press coverage of the Harmon Foundation Awards for Distinguished Achievement in the Visual Arts, as well as that directed towards the traveling exhibitions.

The recipient of the first gold medal in 1926, Palmer Hayden, achieved instant notoriety as the "Janitor Who Paints," an image supplied to journalists by Harmon Foundation press releases. Although Hayden had already exhibited his work in group shows sponsored by the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, he was characterized as a remarkable discovery. Articles on Hayden served as opportunities to indulge in sentimental and often florid prose, creating an aura around him that made the nature or quality of his work seem beside the point. The following account, which appeared in one of the New York papers, typifies this kind of coverage:

You wouldn't notice anything particular about 29 Greenwich Ave....But behind those dull brick walls and up three flights of creaking stairs, hollowed out by the footsteps of hundreds of tired feet, lives Palmer C. Hayden. And in a tiny six by six cubicle, lit by a minute dust-covered skylight, there is a dramatic struggle going on. As the one-burner kerosene stove sputters in the corner, the soul of a negro burns higher as he dips his brushes into the lurid paint and transfers it to the clean canvas.26
The subsequent departures of Hayden and bronze-medal winner Hale Woodruff for Paris in 1927 were treated as Cinderella stories, even though Woodruff had attended art school and was by no means an amateur. More importantly, their aspirations to study in Europe were touted as evidence that the Foundation’s program to foster black creative achievement was working, as their trips were made possible, at least in part, by the cash and recognition afforded by the awards. Benjamin Brawley’s refusal of the Harmon medal for education in the same year served to dramatize further the humble status of these artists. Brawley, a well-known educator and writer, declined the second place award because he said he had never done anything but first class work, thus casting in high relief the seeming immaturity of these artists in relation to accomplishments by African Americans in other fields.

The fascination with Hayden’s story had as much to do with the myth of the romantic artist as it did with beliefs about disadvantaged blacks. But it was a compelling image and in the ensuing years newspapers covering the Harmon awards were rife with hard luck stories about aspiring black artists who supported themselves through manual labor, and who showed remarkable creative ability in spite of their lack of experience. Press releases on current award winners always included biographical information or what the Foundation called “human interest” material. Sometimes this was repeated verbatim, but often the information was used selectively, with the emphasis typically falling on the humble circumstances of the artist rather than training or experience.

In 1928, the Harmon Foundation sponsored the first of what would be a series of exhibitions devoted to Negro art. These shows, which originated in New York in conjunction with the Harmon awards, and then travelled throughout the United States, became the primary venue for the exhibition and sale of art made by African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. Although Harmon Foundation press releases continued to shape public discourse about Negro art during these years, especially in more provincial locations, a greater effort was made by the New York critics in response to these shows to evaluate the work in terms of larger debates about the nature of black creativity which were of central concern to the Harlem Renaissance.

The 1928 show stimulated a fair amount of speculation about the future direction of African American art. Informing these discussions are the same issues that occupied critics in literary circles, where they
were clearly articulated and hotly contested. Questions were raised about the relationship between contemporary black expression and black folk culture, about the meaning of Africa to modern American blacks, and about the transmission of racial characteristics across time and place. With very few exceptions, critics writing for mainstream publications expected to see racial qualities in black art and were disappointed when they didn’t. Rehearsing the arguments advanced by literary critics involved with Harlem Renaissance writers, they noted with surprise the technical proficiency of many African American artists, but complained when the work was derivative or lacked what they regarded as pronounced racialism.30

Concerns about the proper representation of African Americans ran high in these early exchanges, especially in literary circles, as African American writers came to terms with the sudden fascination with black life in the 1920s. The respective merits of depicting professional blacks with identifiably bourgeois values, versus the decadence of Harlem or what Du Bois had called the “black peasantry,” figured prominently in these debates. Interest in this question was stimulated by the wave of literature written in the 1920s taking as its subject certain controversial aspects of African American life. In February of 1926, Crisis published a series of questions regarding the portrayal of blacks in art and solicited the opinions of its readers as to the responsibilities of artists for whom the representation of African Americans is a primary theme.31 The questionnaire was aimed primarily at authors, but Locke’s writing raised the issues of stereotype and caricature in the visual arts as well. This interest in representation was coupled with an ongoing discussion about the nature of black creativity.

In the literary arena, these concerns came to a head in the dramatic confrontation of 1926 between poet Langston Hughes and writer George Schuyler on the pages of The Nation. Schuyler argued against the interpretation of black art as expressive of a Negro soul or essence. He referred to the African American as a “lamp blacked Anglo Saxon,” who is more American than Negro. Hughes response, entitled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” became one of the central documents of the period; he located such thinking about racial expression in the regrettable desire on the part of black writers to be white and to write like whites.32 An occasional reviewer of the early Harmon shows shared Schuyler’s skepticism, and was thus unsympathetic to the expectation that black art be performative of racial essence:
This demand on the Negro artist and writer is yet another kind of exploitation; certainly it is absurd to expect Negroes brought up in an American world, in all sections of the world, young—the prize winners, for instance, are all in their thirties—taught in white schools and academies, to make a unique contribution as a matter of course. The night life of Harlem as seen by Winold Reiss and Covarrubias enters their lives no more than does Broadway the lives of white artists; slavery is as remote as the European experiences of the grandparents of most of us.33

However, this reviewer ultimately concurs with Locke’s position that a distinctively racial art will emerge as support for its development grows within both the black community and the majority culture.

When these issues were brought to bear on discussions of visual art, the artists’ individual life experiences mediated by the circumstances of their training were presumed to determine the expressive parameters of black art. The 1928 Harmon exhibition occasioned an interesting showdown on the value of artistic training for black artists between George E. Haynes of the Harmon Foundation and the Federal Council of Churches, and Fred Gardner who was Vice-President of the Society of Independent Artists. Gardner registered the familiar lament about the lack of racial qualities in the works exhibited, which he blamed on the artists’ regrettable desire to follow established standards of European culture. Urging black artists to “let their innermost feelings prompt their efforts” he added:

The colored race must possess a vast amount of unrecognized talent which will never be found in the art schools but must be sought for through open non-jury exhibitions in which production is encouraged by hanging all work that is submitted regardless of skill according to technical standards....It is altogether likely that from the latter class a powerful school will eventually develop that will enrich the whole world by its existence as the literature and music of the Negro has already done.34

Haynes defended the Foundation’s policy of enlisting members of the professional art world as jurors for the awards and exhibitions, so as to insure that the work selected would measure up to “universal standards of artistic value.”

Representing the position of the Harmon Foundation, Haynes responded that:

Mr. Gardner seems to be laboring under a common misapprehension about the peculiar talents of the Negro, and seems to be expecting that they are spontaneous gifts of God and need no guidance for development, and that
Negroes should avoid education and the standards of universal values of beauty and in order to have spontaneity in original creation.\textsuperscript{35}

Gary Reynolds pointed out that Haynes’s belief in the existence of universal standards was fundamentally incompatible with the concept of the nonjuried exhibition advocated by the progressive Society of Independent Artists.\textsuperscript{36} What is also at stake here, however, is the doctrine of racial uplift which echoes through a good deal of Harlem Renaissance criticism, especially within the black community. Haynes clearly reacted to these remarks as an assault on the value of educational opportunity for African Americans, sensing in them an insinuation that black artists could not be improved and thus should not waste their time in trying.\textsuperscript{37}

Underlying Gardner’s comments was the Society’s historic commitment to the non-juried exhibition, which had it origins in the views of Robert Henri who promoted the idea of direct, authentic artistic expression unmediated by academic conventions. Gardner’s dismissal of technical standards also echoes the sentiments of the Stieglitz group, and its romantic glorification of the artistic primitive who exists outside of established culture. But this collision of views on the respective merits of professional art education testifies to the impossibility of the black artist’s position during these years, one often exacerbated by the well-intentioned remarks of progressive art critics.

African Americans seeking recognition in mainstream terms, and counting on their work to serve as entry into the domain of high culture, could ill-afford the kind of anti-establishment, outsider position extolled by Gardner. As Houston Baker has explained, the rejection of traditional values so emblematic of western modernism can be located in a specific matrix of race, gender and class privilege, one from which most black Americans were philosophically and practically alienated.\textsuperscript{38} Yet, black artists were often most encouraged in progressive circles quite self-conscious and strident in their contempt for formal mastery and bourgeois values. To Gardner, non-professionalism was a creative advantage; to Haynes it was a regrettable result of circumstance to be overcome.\textsuperscript{39}

The exchange also reveals the extent to which the efforts of the Harmon Foundation, however commendable, contributed to the critical confusion surrounding African American Art. Their official promotional literature insisted that the artists who entered their competitions were judged solely on the technical or aesthetic merits of their works;
but it simultaneously stressed conspicuous racial identity as a criterion of value. Similarly, while Haynes rejected the call for a naïve, unschooled expression among black artists, the Foundation continued to make an issue of the fact that many of their exhibiting artists were in actuality non-professionals.40

Deliberate contrast between the outlook of the amateur and that of the trained professional was not restricted to critical discourse on black artists; it also figured prominently in the cultural nationalist discourse of the era. For example, books such as R. L. Duffus’s The American Renaissance (1928) attempted to explain the growth of popular interest in the arts as a function of grass roots support for the community arts center. This was the domain of the amateur whose primary function was to encourage people in artistic pursuits who gain immense satisfaction from them in spite of their questionable talents. The underlying philosophy here, that art becomes important to a culture only when interest in it is cultivated among ordinary people, was also a motivating force behind the establishment of similar art centers in African American and other communities throughout the 1930s.41

In critical discourse about African American art, the concept of primitivism often served to amplify the creative advantage of the amateur and to underscore the notion of authenticity. Recent scholarship on the cult of the primitive in early twentieth century western culture and art has demonstrated the extent to which the conceptual formation known as primitivism functioned as an effective agent of consolidation in the construction of black difference. In the context of American art criticism, this process was complicated by wide-spread confusion in the understanding and use of terminology, as the word “primitive” came to signify a vast array of artistic qualities and possibilities, some of which had little to do with African American art.42

Regionalist critic Thomas Craven, for example, promoted the idea of a modern Midwestern primitivism linked to the glorification of the American frontier. For Holger Cahill, a collector and early scholar of American folk art, the primitive suggested a genuine “American” character embodied in the work of so-called naïve artists of the premodern period, by which he meant artists who worked outside the boundaries of the professional art world, or without the benefit of formal training. Albert Barnes, who collected European modern art and African sculpture, understood the primitive in terms of delivery from the pragmatic and materialistic impulses of the postindustrial age.
through accentuation of the emotional and the natural, qualities he associated with tribal culture. In art historical discourse, the word primitive was used to describe an artistic phase at its early stage of development. Thus, the concept of the primitive served simultaneously to promote fourteenth century Italian painting, American Regionalism, and European modernism; in discussions of African American art it summoned images of artistic immaturity, black folk culture and African tribal art.

Press coverage of African American art furnishes ample evidence that the ideology of racial primitivism, which often collapsed beliefs about authenticity, amateurism and atavism into a single construct, resulted in a clear preference among mainstream critics for black artistic expression that manifest racial qualities in these terms. Although the fascination with tribal art will, in the populist climate of the 1930s, be displaced by the idealization of folk art, insofar as Africa and rural black culture were understood as authentic subject matter for African American artists, they were welcomed. The popularity in the late 1920s of the painters Archibald Motley and Malvin Gray Johnson can, in part, be explained by this enthusiasm for art which confirmed such a priori notions of racial primitivism.

In March 1928, shortly after the exchange of views between Gardner and Haynes, a lengthy article on Motley written by critic Edward Alden Jewell appeared in The New York Times Magazine. Motley was from Chicago, but became well known to the New York art press after his one-man show at the New Gallery, which provided the focus for Jewell’s remarks and no doubt contributed to Motley’s subsequent fame. Although specifically concerned with Motley, at the core of this essay was a theme that remained constant in Jewell’s criticism of African American art: his desire to see black artists place their uniqueness and racial heritage, their “difference,” at the center of their artistic expression.43

Employing evocative prose, Jewell immediately drew attention to the pictures’ racial themes, especially those on Africa which Motley had made expressly for this show at the urging of the New Gallery director:

Here are steaming jungles that drip and sigh and ooze ... devil-devils watching in the solemn night or poised to swoop on hapless human prey.... Myriad age-old racial memories drift up from Africa and glowing islands of the sea to color more recent ghostly memories of plantation days ... and these memories silt, finally, through negro life in Northern cities of the present, leaving everywhere their imprint and merging with a rich blur of tribal echoes.44
Jewell characterized Motley as an “important link in the chain of Negro culture in this country” whose work demands to be taken seriously, both as self-expression and as an expression of race psychology, wherein “The same fundamental rhythms are found, whether the setting is the jungle presided over by witchcraft or a cabaret rocking to the syncopation of jazz.”

Jewell obviously exploited the primitive vogue to stimulate interest in the show and the artist; but this article is nonetheless distinctive for the extent to which it represents a serious piece of critical writing on a black artist in a mainstream publication. In addition to this predictable focus on exotic racialism, and the recounting of “hard luck and hard work” anecdotes that were ubiquitous in critical notices on black artists, Jewell also discussed the quality and emotional range of Motley’s work, his artistic philosophy, and his influences. Through a skillful weaving of Motley’s own pronouncements on what he hoped to accomplish as an artist for himself and for his race, with statements on the nature of Negro genius quoted from the authoritative texts of Benjamin Brawley, Jewell made a thoughtful attempt to address the complexity of Motley’s position as a black artist working in modern America. Notwithstanding his unmistakable readiness to lapse into unimaginative racial stereotyping, Jewell’s sincere admiration for the artist is evident as he concludes that “in all his work Motley shows an alert mind that draws its material from a sound esthetic fount.”

Mainstream critics looking for racial primitivism in the work of African American artists were especially pleased when they discovered evidence of an emotional sensibility rooted in the southern black folk culture and religion. They were in fact looking for the visual equivalents of the Negro spiritual. Emanating from the widespread belief that cultural sophistication would be the ruination of the “real American Negro,” this sentiment was nearly universal among critics who followed developments in African American art and literature. For many white Americans, the so-called “sorrow songs” were the most familiar, and therefore most representative, form of black expression.

This position accounts for both the cynicism and profound sense of loss with which Locke’s New Negro was sometimes received in critical circles. Describing the anthology in 1926, Leon Whipple called it “an encyclopedia of the Negro as an artist and as a living member of American society,” and expressed admiration for the quality and range of expression it contained. Whipple supported the creative initiatives of
black artists, but he was suspicious of the exploitative attention they received from “profiteers and parasites” for whom the New Negro was a fad, the source of commercial gain or social thrills. And while he applauded black artists’ desire to speak in their own voice, Whipple worried about the preservation of the “Negro soul” in the wake of such modern artistic accomplishments:

[The New Negro] presents its inheritance of which it is so proud as a credential that it may join a tradition and share a mode of life that will deflower and murder that inheritance with the noiseless efficiency of its own machines. The very articulateness of the Negro at the moment in the white medium seems token enough that he is loosing his African soul.

Whipple assumes an almost wistful tone as he describes the drastic transformation of modern urban black Americans who have completely abandoned the soil (soul) of Africa and its extension in the rural South, lamenting the fact that one does not hear Negroes singing spirituals in the streets of New York.

The yearning for contact with “authentic” racial experience of this sort in visual art was satisfied by a series of works based on the sorrow songs undertaken by Malvin Gray Johnson. “Swing Slow, Sweet Chariot,” was awarded the 1929 exhibition prize for best picture in the second Harmon group show and was widely celebrated as evidence of the black artist’s potential to make a distinctive contribution to American culture. Critics were near ecstatic in their praise for Johnson. Assertions that he had captured the true spirit of the American Negro were supported by artist’s own description of his intended sentiment, as quoted in the Foundation press release:

I have tried to show the escape of emotions which the plantation slaves felt after being held down all day by the grind of labor and the consciousness of being bound out. Set free from their tasks by the end of the day and the darkness, they have gone from their cabin to the river’s edge and are calling upon their God for the freedom for which they long.

A lengthy notice in Art Digest referred to the painting as a “significant art world event . . . worthy of the highest traditions in American painting.” The latter claim was reinforced by a favorable (and most unusual) comparison of Johnson’s painting to the work of a well-known American artist, one who was himself thoroughly encapsulated in romantic mythology: “This painting, with its group of old plantation
Negroes, beholding their vision in the sky, is on as mystic and spiritual plane as one of the master works of Albert P. Ryder."49

V

The Harmon Foundation did not begin organizing group shows until 1928 and enjoyed its greatest period of success in the early 1930s. Even though the fascination with primitivism and black culture generated by the climate of the Harlem Renaissance was by then in decline, notices on the Harmon Foundation shows from 1930 to 1933 rehashed many of the same issues that had emerged in the early reviews. In the face of persistent disappointment with the evident lack of authentic racial expression, reviewers continued to regard increased technical skill and the mastery of existing conventions as symptomatic of black artists’ regrettable eagerness to imitate mainstream traditions rather than forging their own. Jewell’s comments in The New York Times exemplify this position. In 1930, he wrote: “Instead of devoting themselves to material of true racial significance, so many of these artists waste their time over art school formulae.”50

The 1930 exhibition showcased the work of prize winners William H. Johnson and Sargent Johnson, thus prompting speculation about the characteristics of an emergent black modernism. William Johnson had just returned from several years abroad and responses to his work can often be read as measures of the reviewer’s sympathy (or antipathy) towards European ideas. Jewell’s review of the 1930 Harmon show suggested that artists such as Johnson were staying abroad too long. Several years later, in 1934, he complained that:

Such racial aspect as may once have figured has virtually disappeared, so far as most of the work is concerned. Some of the artists, accomplished technicians, seem to have slipped into grooves of one sort or another. There is the painter of Cezannesque still-life; there is the painter of Gauguinesque nudes; and there are those who have learned various “dated” modernist tricks.51

These sentiments were echoed by Stanley Olsmtead of the Washington Herald, who cautioned “Paris is a proverbial danger for the racial instinct.”52

Critics of these later shows consistently remarked on the extent to which the works produced by black artists resembled the efforts of their white counterparts, modern or otherwise. Although Johnson’s work
was frequently cited as the best in this show, it also prompted (along with the work of Hale Woodruff) the common observation that the Harmon collection did not differ significantly from that of any other modern art exhibition coming out of New York. This observation was typically intended as a pejorative, but it formed an important component of discussions which foregrounded the recognition of technical parity and an obvious similarity of interests among artists of both racial groups. In their straining after distinctive racial qualities, mainstream critics resorted to cliches about Negro rhythm, spontaneity of emotion, and affinity for bright color. But more often than not, writers concluded that, were in not for the ubiquity of black subjects, the work might “pass” for that of any group of contemporary artists.

Albert Cochrane of the *Boston Evening Transcript* offered this reproach in 1930 directed at viewers who blamed black artists when their work is too suggestive of their white contemporaries:

> It seems a bit unfair, and not a little stupid, to demand that they shall be characteristically racial in their paintings, when we ourselves, regardless of native origins, are eagerly taking orders from Paris and when success is measured by the degree of exactitude with which we can ape her greatest masters.53

Remarks such as these suggest that criticism of African American artists in these years is best understood in the context of shifting interests and priorities among art critics increasingly drawn to cultural nationalist ideals, especially after the onset of the Depression.

In the wake of the crash of 1929, and throughout the decade of the 1930s, American critical discourse was saturated with nationalistic rhetoric. A fusion of ideas from the left and right, sharing the vaguely articulated goal that American art and culture should manifest some organic connection to American life, these multiple nationalisms have come to define the decade. Although in the early years of the Depression, they were more clearly and identifiably partisan, after 1935 cultural nationalism increasingly took the form of an uncritical and even celebratory Americanism, encompassing a wide range of seemingly incompatible political, social and aesthetic ideologies. Extremes on the left and right continued to heard, but Americanist discourse held the center, encouraged by the rhetoric and cultural politics of the Popular Front and the New Deal.54

Cultural nationalism in the visual arts during the 1930s was linked to
the so-called American Scene Movement, an expression used to identify artists who consistently explored subject matter and themes drawn from everyday American life. Historian Matthew Baigell has explained the American Scene Movement as an attempt to "develop a democratic art easily accessible to the ordinary person, capable of moving him along nostalgically, politically, and aesthetically, by means of commonly recognizable images presented in easily understood styles." To a large extent, the American Scene Movement represented a consolidation of romantic cultural nationalism and environmental theories of artistic expression that had been in place since the turn of the century; these were mediated by a populist, egalitarian spirit that was at once anti-elitist and anti-modernist. By the middle of the decade, the American Scene Movement had become a quasi-official national style. It was the preferred idiom of the federal art projects and was promoted by a number of influential critics and publications.

Although artists within the American Scene Movement were extremely diverse in their thematic and stylistic interests, those associated with rural Midwestern life, the so-called Regionalists, enjoyed greater prominence and thus exercised considerable influence on the artistic formations of the decade. By 1935, Regionalism represented a clearly articulated point of view, with representative artists (Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry) and a critic (Thomas Craven) who polemicated on their behalf. The popularity of Regionalism owed much, as Baigell and others have noted, to Craven's strategic appropriation of the American Scene Movement on behalf of the Midwest, thus acquiring privilege of place in cultural nationalist discourse for rural values and frontier mythology. Although in retrospect the agrarian interests of the central Regionalist painters seem to have been exaggerated and even distorted, both by contemporary critics and by subsequent historians, the fact remains that through a series of key works and publications, they captured the imagination and sympathy of the majority culture with greater success than any of their contemporaries within the American Scene Movement.

For African American artists the ascendance of Regionalism on the cultural landscape, and its increasing influence on Americanist ideology, had important consequences. In theory, the American Scene Movement encouraged artists to share their individual sentiments as Americans hailing from a diversity of backgrounds and locales, and in so doing collectively define what it meant to be an American. Within
this model African American artists could continue to pursue the cultural agenda set in the previous decade, weighing personal experience against the particulars of a distinctive cultural environment. In practice, however, Regionalism thrived on the popular belief in agrarianism as the “true” source of American character and virtue, and on its identification with the Midwest as the most “authentic” area of the country. Democratic populism and anti-modernism were cornerstones of American Scene thinking; increasingly these signified a mentality that was pro-rural and anti-foreign, thus altering the discursive field of Americanism in the direction of a nativism more narrowly conceived.

The 1920s had forecast the coming of an invigorated American culture that would be expansive and replete with possibilities. Artistic explorations of national experience in the 1920s emanated from complex understandings of American identity, and it was in this context that black artists made their claims as important contributors to American national culture. The call for a national art during the following decade will, however, be drastically altered by the shrill nativist propaganda of critics such as Thomas Craven. Matthew Baigell has described the process whereby a genuine, and sometimes ambivalent, search for national identity characteristic of the 1920s was transformed in the 1930s into the hardening of a particular kind of identity. African Americans who participated in the Harmon Exhibitions of the early 1930s were thus seeking entry into the American art world as a critical mass during a period of increasingly nativist sentiments. Tribal Africa was very distant from the mythologies of historic America which, in the popular imagination, comprised the nation’s official heritage.

This situation was further exacerbated by the growing antipathy towards European modernism in the 1930s. The issue of aesthetic modernity and its relationship to traditional African art is a recurrent theme in much of the writing about black art in the interwar decades. Remarks on a Harmon exhibition of 1931 by African American artist Selma Day typify the kind of critical confusion which existed in minds of the general public with respect to their understanding of black modernism:

A few of the artists are producing what is called modern art by some, Negro art by others, and still another group will name the same paintings primitive art. I imagine that one often wonders where one style ends and the other begins, and more often questions whether or not any such thing as modern art or Negro art or primitive art really exists.
In *The New Negro*, Locke had underscored the extent to which African tribal art had invigorated European painting and sculpture, helping free it of academic practices, and he claimed that it could be an even more potent stimulant for the African American artist.

While this connection between Africanism and European modernism may have been profitable in the more experimental and aesthetically inclusive 1920s, it could only serve to further marginalize black art in an increasingly xenophobic climate wherein American artists were being advised by critics at every turn to discard European influences as antithetical to their mission of cultural self-definition. An important distinction involving the repudiation of modernism was made by mainstream critics of the era: American artists were urged to purge themselves of foreign influence to cultivate their national identity; black artists were admonished to do so in order to protect their racial uniqueness. In other words, they were instructed to reject European (though not necessarily African) artistic prototypes in order to preserve blackness, not to affirm Americanness.

Locke reiterated his faith in (and preference for) the Africanist tendencies of contemporary black artists in an article published for the *American Magazine of Art* in 1931. Although this essay contains ideas which Locke had advanced throughout the 1920s, their appearance in a mainstream art publication at a critical moment in the ascendance of the American Scene Movement is significant. Locke classified modern black artists as traditionalists, modernists and what he called “neo-primitives or Africanists.” The construction of these categories was symptomatic of his struggle to reconcile issues of form and content, a problem that plagued cultural nationalist discourse as well as efforts to define a racial aesthetic in American art.  

African American traditionalists, as Locke described them, were artists who dealt with racial themes without altering stylistic conventions. He then speculates that such academicism is bound to be eclipsed by the efforts of younger artists open to experimentation with more recent (foreign) models:

> But conservatism on this point seems doomed, since the young Negro artist has a double chance of being influenced by Negro idioms, if not as a deliberate racialist or conscious “Africanist,” then at least at second-hand through the reflected influence of Negro idioms on general modernist style.

There is a sense of inevitability in his words which weds the future
vitality of Negro art to precisely the kind of art many Americans were being encouraged to repudiate. Partly in response to the increasingly nativist climate within the American Scene Movement, and also in keeping with the widespread admiration for American folk art throughout the decade, Locke’s writing in the 1930s demonstrates a shift of emphasis from the tribal antecedents of African American expression to native black folk culture, but he never abandoned his belief that African art could function as powerful catalyst for black expression.

In the years prior to and immediately following the crash of 1929, the most important challenge to the hegemony of cultural expression linked to the American scene came from the left, which concerned itself with the development of a proletarian culture in America that would further the interests of international communism. By 1935, however, the fusion of progressive impulses under the collective platform known as the Popular Front enacted a crucial transformation of American cultural politics and created a climate in which the triumph of Americanism was insured. A great deal has been written about the absorption into the Popular Front of ideals that had been the mainstay of cultural nationalist thinking since the onset of the Depression. Among the most important was the adaptation of a strategic populism that recast the partisan image of the worker into a more generic configuration loosely recognized as the “people” or the “folk. The ideology of the Popular Front became increasingly flexible as the decade progressed, aligning itself more closely with the rhetoric and spirit of the New Deal, and accommodating a wide variety of its cultural initiatives, from interest in documenting the lives and experiences of ordinary Americans to the recovery and revival of American historical myths and heroes.62

It is generally agreed that the cultural politics of the Popular Front ultimately served to consolidate and advance the interests of American nationalists, especially in their ardent defense of democracy as the protector of individual liberty and enemy of (fascist) political oppression. But it was also in this climate that Locke encountered the most serious opposition to his advocacy of racial artistic expression as a manifestation of cultural nationalism. Popular Front rhetoric tended to de-emphasize racial and ethnic alignments in the interest not only of celebrating the collective identity of the American “people,” but also of ensuring strong opposition to the threat of fascism through national unity. Also, the shift of emphasis from antiforeign to antifascist rhetoric
encouraged resistance to Locke’s advocacy of racialism among artists and intellectuals associated with the Popular Front for whom any reference to racial identity was suspect as fascist and reactionary.

In the African American community, Locke’s promotion of Africanism had already been challenged by historian and artist James Porter, who questioned the wisdom of encouraging black artists in America to express themselves in terms of an African past so remote from their actual experience. Reviewing a 1934 exhibition of African American art at the Smithsonian for the American Magazine of Art, he noted the stylistic diversity of black artists in these terms:

One finds among them excursions into mysticism, cubism, expressionism, Africanism, and the like; but those that merit the closest attention are, of course, the forthright productions founded on the real experience of the artist rather than on foreign modes of expression.63

Porter counted tribal Africa among the foreign influences on the black American artist, a position perfectly consistent with the values of the American Scene Movement, although one not widespread among mainstream critics with a vested interest in the preservation of racial difference.

Porter continued to take issue with the advocacy of racialism in art on political, aesthetic and historical grounds. These views were also shared by mainstream art historians such as Meyer Schapiro, who, at the peak of the cultural nationalist debates in the middle of the decade, identified what he thought to be the fallacy and dangers of insisting that art embodies some kind of racial or national character. On the pages of Art Front, Schapiro along with the artist Stuart Davis, launched a scathing critique of Regionalist art and politics, including accusations that the aesthetic agenda of American nationalists such as Craven was similar to that being advanced in Nazi Germany. This situation caused them to question not only nativist sentiments in the American Scene movement, but also the call for racial qualities in the works of black artists. In a 1936 essay for Art Front entitled “Race, Nationality and Art,” Schapiro argued that appeals to race mask the political realities of class division, transforming minority peoples into “victims for the blind rage of economically frustrated citizens.”64

On the subject of African American art, Schapiro cautioned against the assertion of racial identity through the cultivation of African models, insisting that its end result will be “the segregation of the
Negro from modern culture." These concerns were amplified by Porter who, in a 1937 review Locke’s *Negro Art: Past and Present* for *Art Front*, referred to Locke as a "segregationist." Schapiro, Porter, and Locke all embraced environmental theories of culture that disallowed the notion of racial determinism in artistic creativity; but while Locke stressed the value of reclaiming a distant racial past, Schapiro and Porter emphasized instead the matrix of socio-cultural and historical conditions of production as the primary determinants of expression. Furthermore, Schapiro identified the nativist position of the Regionalist with a clear rejection of certain individuals who wished to be recognized as legitimate Americans and even the justification of their oppression.

VI

Despite its increasingly pronounced chauvinism and the growing hostility on the cultural left towards what was perceived to be the reactionary politics of the Regionalists, Locke himself continued to believe that the American Scene Movement would actually help black artists enter the mainstream. Schapiro and Davis represented an internationalist position in American cultural politics, which decried provincialism and minimized antiforeign rhetoric. But the widespread support for Americanism within both the Popular Front and the New Deal made this majority position far more compelling for Locke. Also, African Americans figured only tangentially in these debates about race, nationalism and culture, which, as the decade advanced, were more specifically concerned with combating European fascism than American racism. From Locke’s point of view, the greater visibility of African American subjects in the work of mainstream artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry was evidence of a more appreciative understanding of black culture and its vital contribution to American life.

It was in the context of his attempt to situate black artists within the American Scene Movement that Locke most effectively articulated his vision of a black aesthetic mediated by cultural nationalism. As historian Jeffrey Stewart explains, Locke was not always consistent in his efforts to locate black culture in relation to American culture as a whole. Stewart characterizes Locke as a critic with acute sensitivity to the constant mutations of cultural discourse, a quality which has led to the not infrequent (but somewhat misleading) observation that the
conditions of the 1930s brought about a fundamental change in Locke’s thinking. The catalog essays for the Harmon shows of the early 1930s reveal, rather, a subtle but very strategic shift of emphasis as Locke worked towards the integration of black artists into a cultural mainstream preoccupied with “Americanism.”

Prior to 1931, the Harmon catalogs had been essentially illustrated checklists, but in 1931 and again in 1933 Locke contributed substantial essays which sought to position the works in an explicit critical and historical frame. The essay of 1931, entitled “The African Legacy and the Negro Artist,” rehearses arguments that formed the cornerstone of Locke’s criticism in the 1920s, and that had been repeated in his article on African American art for the *American Magazine of Art* during the same year. He emphasizes the importance of African art as an inspiration and instructive model for contemporary black artists who sought to avoid the sterility of academic art and create something unique and characteristic:

> African art, therefore, presents to the Negro artist in the New World a challenge to recapture this heritage of creative originality, and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new, racially expressive art. ... In this downfall of classic models and Caucasian idols, one may see the passing of the childhood period of Negro art, and with the growing maturity of the Negro artist, the advent of a truly racial school of expression.70

As has been demonstrated, in the spiteful climate of the 1930s, Locke’s support for such expression struggled against strident demands for a unified national culture increasingly inhospitable to the protection of ethnic or racial autonomy, as well as insinuations that racialism in art was tantamount to fascism. Thus, his writing for the remainder of the decade often shows considerable caution in its assertions of racial difference.

For example, Locke’s essay for the 1933 Harmon catalog, “The Negro Takes His Place in American Art,” emphasizes instead the collective purpose that unifies all American artists. Given the universal call for an American art embodying American experience, artists of both races, he reasoned, now had a vested interest in the thoughtful and accurate portrayal of African Americans.71 The common ground over which the races meet is that of the Negro theme, and Locke contends that the black artist’s relation to his subject does not differ greatly from the relation of his white fellow artist to the same material. In this essay, Locke also submits that the time has come for “frank and objective
“comparison” between artists of both races who have taken up this theme, boldly suggesting that the most effective way to measure the progress of the black artists, or properly evaluate the handling of Negro themes, is through exhibitions organized irrespective of race.\textsuperscript{72}

Locke’s call for integrated exhibitions, repeated throughout the 1930s, went largely unheeded.\textsuperscript{73} Notwithstanding the insistently inclusive rhetoric introduced by the federal relief programs in the arts, separate exhibitions remained the norm and, with a few notable exceptions, black artists were poorly represented in the sweeping surveys of contemporary American art organized at the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{74} In contrast, historically black institutions, such as the Howard University Art Gallery, began in the 1930s to create inclusive contexts for African American artists by exhibiting their work alongside that of the majority culture.\textsuperscript{75}

For the remainder of the decade critics sympathetic to the goals of cultural nationalism continued to seek \textit{a priori} notions of racial difference in black art while simultaneously calling for a distinctive national art liberated from its dependence on foreign models. While regional differences were considered inevitable and even desirable in this paradigm of American culture, within mainstream criticism the discourses of manifest racialism and national identity remained clearly separate. The emergence of African American artists as a collective presence was virtually ignored in the numerous publications advocating cultural nationalism throughout the 1930s, even by writers such as Edwin Alden Jewell who had demonstrated a sustained interest in, and familiarity with, the development of African American art.

In his 1939 book, \textit{Have We An American Art}, Jewell used the critical reception of recent exhibitions held in Paris and London as a means to explore the progress of cultural nationalism in American art.\textsuperscript{76} To answer the questions that embarrass us today but which defined the decade for several generations of historians—Do we have an American art? Should we want one? What is it?—Jewell turned to the reactions of British and French critics who reviewed these shows. These critics, he reported, found American art in the main derivative, warming only to those works which seemed to them embodiments of authentic American life.

The rhetoric Jewell employed to register the disappointment of Europeans with these shows was nearly identical to that which pervades his recurrent complaints about the invariable failings of African American art. He reported that European critics seeking a sense
of American difference went away unrewarded, an observation often rendered with respect to viewers of the Harmon shows. Jewell proposed in this essay that a true American art cannot be forced but will emerge as America’s artists develop the courage to be themselves. This is an interesting comment coming from a critic for whom the ideal of racial expression in African American art was found in paintings of tribal Africa made to order by Archibald Motley, a Roman Catholic artist who grew up in Chicago.

In sharp contrast to mainstream critics who clearly seemed to lose interest in issues of race as they shifted their focus to patriotic nationalism and the celebration of American culture, Locke’s writing at the end of the decade keeps before the interested public an understanding of black art as racially influenced yet still bound to American art. He did this chiefly by framing his discussions of African American art in terms of the artistic interests of the majority culture. Locke’s catalog essay for the exhibition, “Contemporary Negro Art,” organized for the Baltimore Museum of Art, is a case in point. Published in the same year as Jewell’s Have We An American Art, and no doubt mindful of its almost certain failings with respect to the recognition of African American contributions to the project of national self-definition, Locke used this exhibition as an opportunity to position the work of black artists within the “generally accepted objective to have American art fully document American life and experience, and thus more adequately reflect America.”

The essay begins with the kind of declaration that became commonplace in writing about American art at the end of decade: “Art in a democracy should above all else be democratic, which is to say that it must be truly representative.” As populist sentiments and support for the arts are encouraged, he claims, there is greater hope that this mandate might be fulfilled. In this frame of reference the Negro art exhibition takes on new meaning:

it serves as a declaration of principles as to what art should and must be in a democracy and as a gauge of how far in this particular province we have gone and may need to go in the direction of representative native art.78

Locke then goes on to mention artists of both races who have explored aspects of black culture as part of their mutual immersion in the task of documenting the American scene. This roster includes well-known painters from the early American realist tradition such as Winslow
Homer, Robert Henri, and George Bellows, as well as artists associated with the American Scene Movement, inclusive of both Regionalist and Social Realists. Among African Americans, he draws special attention to the work of Archibald Motley and Malvin Gray Johnson, artists whose popularity and “authenticity” had been established in the late 1920s. The primary significance of the Baltimore exhibition, Locke concludes, is to illuminate the future prospects of the black artists and to demonstrate unequivocally the “complete compatibility between the interests of contemporary Negro and contemporary American art.”

VII

Implicit in all Locke’s writing was an unrelenting conviction that black Americans, by virtue of their distinctive racial heritage and singular experience, were destined to make a unique contribution to national culture at a critical moment in its development. However, because they were more inclined to deal with the artist of African descent in the United States as an “American Negro,” rather than a “Negro American,” mainstream art critics typically did not acknowledge African American art as a vital manifestation of cultural nationalism. During the interwar period, at a time when black expression, especially in music, was a powerful signifier of American culture in Europe, racism and segregation made it improbable that the visual art of African Americans would be so recognized at home.

Although visual representations of American blacks were considered authentic American subject matter, the discussions of democracy and culture that dominated the American art world during the Depression rarely extended to the work of black artists. Instead, African American artists, constantly accused of sacrificing their birthright, were entreated to articulate their difference through archetypal images of suffering, naïveté, or racial primitivism. In an age that merged nationalistic and aesthetic issues, and in which critical discourse about art often lacked sophistication and focus, race seems to have remained the only relevant issue in considerations of African American art.

The failure to recognize black expression as the fulfillment of cultural nationalist ideals during the interwar decades is, of course, in part a function of widespread confusion in these years about the very concepts of culture and nationhood. Such debates were plagued by disagreements about the nature of high art versus mass culture, as well
as by the competing claims of particularism versus universalism in the establishment of American identity, that is, the challenge to reconcile regional and ethnic uniqueness with the striving towards a unified nationalistic consciousness. Furthermore, interest in black subjectivity and cultural expression which emerged in the hot-house intellectual climate of the 1920s could not escape the transformation of cultural nationalist discourse enacted by the economic and political pressures of the 1930s. To assert that the realities of the Depression brought an end to the spiritual yearnings and searching critique of American culture that characterized the decade after World War I has become an historical commonplace. But it is worth recalling here that theorizing about American culture in the 1920s, marked by a romantic cultural nationalism cultivated in the wake of the Progressive movement, often took the form of apolitical intellectual abstractions that favored the inclusion (even celebration) of marginalized peoples.

As Richards Pells has explained in his discussion of the crisis of identity among many American intellectuals after the war:

To have abandoned social action in the traditional sense did not mean that they were surrendering hope for a genuine transformation of American life. Many writers saw artistic experimentation and cultural analysis as preludes to a more fundamental change in the social order. … From this perspective, the world of culture was itself a model community of men sharing the same values, the same feelings of comradeship, the same dedication to the rejuvenation of America through painting, poetry and prose.79

The process of reconceptualizing this “model community” was the task of the 1930s and in this context African American cultural promise will be reconfigured: first by demands for the radical transformation of American society and the creation of a proletarian culture which, though instrumental in encouraging black social activism, also privileged class identity over racial, later by the rhetoric of Americanism and its various mutations, from Regionalist agrarianism to the New Deal and the Popular Front.

In *Negro Art: Past and Present* Locke wrote “everything that Mr. [Holger] Cahill advocates for a program of contemporary American art can be underscored for the advance program of contemporary Negro art.” He maintained that Cahill’s prescriptive for an “imaginative realism” rooted in social reality and modern American experience “might profitably be adapted as today’s creed and gospel for the
younger progressive Negro artist." But critical reaction to emergent racial expression in the Harlem Renaissance and its aftermath cast in sharp relief the persistent status of the African American as a political, social and artistic outsider, whose official role in the national project of cultural and spiritual renewal would remain narrowly conceived. During the interwar decades, by positioning the artistic production of African Americans within a carefully controlled and delimited discursive frame, American art criticism acted as an effective agent of exclusion. The failure to fundamentally alter this frame has resulted in the continued neglect and distortion of African American artists in both American art history and in contemporary art, wherein their work is rarely understood in complex terms that would affirm, to use Locke's words, "how naturally and effectively the Negro artist can range through all the media, provinces and various styles of a common human art."  

NOTES


2. Charles Gaines, Maurice Berger, and Catherine Lord, Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism (Irvine, Calif., 1993). The marginalization of black artists through various forms of critical and historical discourse is a subject of continuing interest in the consideration of African American art. In an earlier discussion about the wisdom of continuing to organize all-black exhibitions, Joseph Jacobs wrote:

The fact that a large number of black artists function within both a white and a black world presents a problem for the white-dominated art establishment, for scholars and critics have difficulty putting the work into proper perspective. More often than not, one aspect of the work is emphasized at the expense of the other, and generally it is the black component that is stressed, with the result that the artist is often divorced completely from the other activities of contemporary art and in effect is eliminated from the history of American art. (Joseph Jacobs, Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of African-American Art [Lewisburg, Penn., 1984], 5)


7. Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 8; and Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 12.


9. Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 14. It is worth noting here that, in separate histories of African American art, discussions of this period typically consider racially specific expressive idioms in the context of mainstream discourse and artistic practice. This precedent was established in the groundbreaking early histories written by Alain Locke and James Porter, and continues to characterize more recent scholarship. I am especially indebted to the work of David Driskell, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson for thoughtful presentation of the issues and challenges facing African American artists during the interwar decades. David C. Driskell, Two Centuries of Black American Art (New York: Alfred A. Knopf for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976) and Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present (New York, 1993).


10. The hegemony of modernism, for example, does not explain why, in 1968, when the Whitney Museum organized an exhibition of American Art in the 1930s it neglected the work of black artists. (In protest, the Studio Museum of Harlem mounted an exhibition called “Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 1930s.”)

The analysis of theoretical modernism as an instrument of exclusion in canonical histories and mainstream criticism has become a major trope in contemporary critical discourse about African American art. See, for example, David C. Driskell, ed. African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View (Washington, D.C., 1995); and Eloise E. Johnson, Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance: The Politics of Exclusion (New York, 1997).

Johnson’s study departs from postmodern critiques of modernism as a universalizing discourse which is inherently exclusionary, and more specifically, from the work of Houston Baker, who reconsiders the “failed” modernity of the Harlem Renaissance in light of the realities of black experience. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago, 1987). It should be noted that the 1999 Whitney exhibition “The American Century: Art and Culture 1900–1950” presented a more
balanced and inclusive history of early twentieth-century American art than past general surveys, in both print and exhibition form.


12. Although interest in African American culture has grown during the last two decades, this lack of visibility within the historical mainstream, and the failure of art criticism to come to terms with the complexity and range of black visual art, continues to vex artists and critics, as well as historians who seek a more representative history of American art. To a degree, this problem can be understood as a function of neglect, but it also unmistakably reflects the priorities and interests of scholars working in the field of early twentieth-century American art and culture. For example, while there is a fair amount of literature on the history of American art criticism and theory, it rarely addresses art or criticism produced by African Americans. Thus the issues which preoccupied American critics and artists during these years have been clearly identified, but these have not been brought to bear on the analysis of African American art.

Also, while scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance is plentiful, it often does not draw large distinctions between artistic activity in different media. Accomplishments in poetry and music tend to be centralized as the most representative forms of artistic expression during the Harlem Renaissance; production in the visual arts has been overlooked until quite recently. A similar condition exists in studies of American culture in the interwar decades, which deal extensively with cultural nationalism but tend to privilege written expression and popular culture, while the visual artists receive only cursory attention.

This is certainly evident in the recent works on the culture of the 1920s and 1930s by Ann Douglas (*Terrible Honesty* [New York, 1995]), Lynn Dumenil (*Modern Temper* [New York, 1995]), Warren Sussman (*Culture as History* [New York, 1984]), Terry Cooney (*Balancing Acts* [New York, 1995]), Michael Denning (*Cultural Front* [London, 1996]), and Richard Pells (*Radical Visions and American Dreams* [New York, 1973]) to mention only a few. All of these authors provide rich and provocative analysis of the period, but their discussions of expression in the visual arts are far less comprehensive than those devoted to literature and music. Growing interest in mass culture has resulted in a fair amount of attention to photography, film and modern design in these sweeping cultural studies, while painting and sculpture, in the main, receive only minor consideration. The seminal work of Charles Alexander (*Nationalism in American Thought* [Chicago, 1969]; and *Here This Country Lies* [Bloomington, Ind., 1980]) is an exception insofar as it does pay considerable attention to visual artists, but, regrettably not to African Americans.


16. For a discussion of theories of modern American realism in the interwar decades


In her study of American art criticism of the 1920s, Susan Noyes Platt described the institutional context in which modernist values and paradigms were articulated as “the interlacing of commercial, philanthropic, and philosophical motives.” Due to the lack of curatorial expertise and theoretical sophistication among mainstream museums and critics in America, dealers such as Stieglitz and Marius de Zayas both sold modern art and positioned themselves as authoritative critical voices on its behalf. Platt, Modernism in the 1920s, 33.

A similar climate of trade stimulated by advocacy surrounded the promotion of African American art. Although the Harmon Foundation was not a commercial operation, one of its stated goals was the achievement of financial self-sufficiency among black artists, and works in the traveling shows were offered for sale. The Foundation nominally committed itself simply to excellence of expression and the cultivation of black creative ability, but the purity of these goals was bound to be undermined by its multiple roles. It functioned as both museum and agent, as benefactor and critical authority. Opponents of the Harmon Foundation then and since have regarded such conflicts of interest in a white agency occupied with the promotion of African American art as a hindrance to the artists’ subsequent growth and development.

18. For a discussion of Berenson’s influence on modern critical traditions see Mary Ann Calo, Bernard Berenson and the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia, 1994).


Henri was one of the few American artists (along with Winslow Homer) praised by Locke in his later writing for their serious portrayals of African American subjects. Hutchinson notes that Locke initially considered including Henri’s sketches of black subjects as illustrations for the Survey Graphic issue on Harlem that formed the basis of The New Negro anthology. See Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 254.

20. Charles C. Alexander, Here This Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), xii.

21. See esp. “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in The New Negro. Locke’s promotion of an African ancestral legacy in black American culture is one of the most important, and controversial, ideas to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance. For an

22. While this initiative has proven to be enormously important in the subsequent development of African American art and culture, it was a radical strategy fraught with risk in the interwar decades, especially given the presumption of concrete social and political gains emanating from the Harlem Renaissance climate of cultural renewal. Huggins pointed out that many black Americans were ambivalent and uncertain about the question of what Africa should mean to them; "nor was it easy for some to understand how identification with Africa would win them acceptance as full American citizens." Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 80–81 and 41.

Hutchinson, on the other hand, does not consider this process of identification as incompatible with the values of cultural nationalism: "The desire to 'recapture' the African heritage and promote pan-African consciousness coexists with pride in African American culture as both 'mixed' and uniquely 'American.'" Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 184.


24. Gary Reynolds's essay "The American Critics and the Harmon Foundation Exhibitions," is an excellent introduction to the critical issues which surrounded art made by African Americans as they were manifest in reviews of the Harmon Foundation Shows. See Reynolds, in Against the Odds, 107–119.

Erma Meadows Malloy's dissertation, "African-American Visual Artists and the Harmon Foundation," (New York, 1991), which covers much of the same material, contains useful insights into Harmon's motivation for supporting black achievement, as well as into the consequences of the Foundation's activities. Malloy examines Harmon's ideological stance (developed in conjunction with the Charity Organization Society Movement) as a philanthropist associated with a particular vision of social improvement enacted through the rewarding of individual achievement among disadvantaged peoples (rather than the encouragement of structural change). Her conclusions, that the Harmon Foundation reinforced traditional inequalities of race, wealth and power by constructing the black artist as a distinct category, and then marginalizing his/her work through the promotion of racial themes and a separate black aesthetic, echoes the concerns of contemporary writers such as Wilson, Sims, Conwill and Gaines.

Both Reynolds and Malloy drew extensively on the large collection of press clippings contained in the Harmon Foundation Papers, which also served as the basis for my research. My understanding of the critical reception of African American art has been greatly enriched by their work.


One article on Hayden begins with an admission that the writer knew nothing of the artist's work but presumed that, as a Harmon award winner, it must be worthwhile. The news was clearly the artist's story. "Up From the Depths," Troy [New York] Record, 9 Dec. 1926, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 113.

27. Stories about Hayden's and Woodruff's departures for Europe were used as opportunities to plug the awards program, thus creating anticipation for the following year.

Woodruff, winner of the second place award in 1926, set sail for Europe in September 1927. Descriptions of his trip were more specific to his artistic goals, such as his desire to study the old masters and attend the Academy Julien in Paris. Although
he too had worked as a janitor, Woodruff’s formal training diminished the potential to exploit his story for a human interest angle. Also, his trip was partly financed by the sale of his own pictures, in combination with outside support from the Harmon Foundation award and Otto Kahn.

See especially the New York Sun, 3 Sept. 1927, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 109.

28. Brawley’s action received extensive press coverage in reports on the Harmon Awards for 1927. See Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 110.

29. In 1928, John T. Hailstalk emerged as another popular amateur. Hailstalk’s “discovery” by a New York dealer was widely publicized in articles with headlines such as “Negro Novice Wins Over Noted Artists; Elevator Man’s Painting First Sold.”

The papers recounted an exchange between dealer Thomas Russel and Hailstalk who, in his capacity as handyman, had on occasion carried paintings from the elevator into the gallery where Russel worked. Having seen some of the modernist works exhibited in the gallery, Hailstalk allegedly claimed he could do better, even though he had never picked up a brush. Russel challenged him to make good on this claim, and Hailstalk proceeded to paint a country landscape in what Russel later described as a “primitive” style. Russel stated that Hailstalk had “out-moderned the moderns;” he placed the painting on display in the gallery with works by John Singer Sargent and other well known professional artists, then sold it to a collector interested in children’s art.

This exchange capitalized on the common conflation of the primitive with the modern, and the philistine view of modern art as a hoax. But the end result was condescension to Hailstalk as an “un-schooled” amateur, who, although preferred to the professional, is of interest largely as a curiosity.


These issues were also addressed by writers for the black press who followed the Harmon shows. See esp. Gwendolyn B. Bennett, “The American Negro Paints,” Southern Workman, March 1928, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 110.

31. Many of the respondents were prominent literary figures such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Walter White, Jessie Faucet, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and Carl Van Vechten.


37. Coverage in the black press of the successful sculptors Elizabeth Prophet and Augusta Savage, both of whom struggled against overt racism in their efforts to obtain artistic training, exemplifies this outlook. In an article entitled “Can I become a
Sculptor? The Story of Elizabeth Prophet,” the author describes the artist’s triumph over adversity and concludes:

Miss Prophet has not finished her work. She has scarcely begun it: but she stands today as one of the most promising figures in American sculpture without regard to color or race, and as such she should be an inspiration to every American artist, who handicapped by color, is turned aside by poverty and prejudice. Only remember this thing. Elizabeth Prophet never whined or made excuses for herself. She worked. She never submitted to patronage, cringed to the great, or begged of the small. She worked. She is still working. (Crisis 39 [Oct. 1932], p. 315)

39. This remains one of the most troubling issues in terms of mainstream considerations of black artists. See, for example, Conwill, “In Search of an ‘Authentic’ Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African American Artist,” and Cornel West, “Horace Pippin’s Challenge to Art Criticism,” in Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America (New York, 1993)
40. Scholarly opinion as to whether or not the Harmon Foundation deliberately promoted essentialist notions of a black aesthetic is by no means uniform. Reynolds stressed Haynes belief in the universality of artistic standards, embodied in the make up of the juries for the awards. But the Foundation literature sent mixed and even conflicting messages. They were concerned about the technical proficiency of African American artists but also aware that their greatest potential for stimulating interest in “Negro art” was to identify it as distinctive.

Molloy states unequivocally that the Foundation actively encouraged its exhibiting artists to make characteristically racial art and certainly Locke’s close association with the Foundation supports this. However, Harmon Foundation catalogs and publicity materials represented both the universalist and essentialist positions, and sometimes placed them in conversation. Press packets for the traveling shows, for example, included quotes from reviews of past exhibitions in which both the affirmation of characteristically racial artistic qualities and the mastery of prevailing conventions are mutually acknowledged.


African American artists seem to have sought a compromise position in this debate about the value of training. In an interview with the Boston press on the occasion of an exhibition of her work at Vose Gallery, Elizabeth Prophet affirmed her belief in the eventual triumph of innate ability, but also stressed the importance of sound training: “It is foolish to talk of the danger of destroying talent by training.” “Sculpture That Has Something To Say,” Boston Sunday Herald, 6 Nov. 1932, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 119.

Augusta Savage, who was noted for her work as an art educator in the context of her own studio and the Harlem Community Art Center, stressed the need to teach young art students the essentials without allowing academic conventions to rob their work of its freshness. “Exhibition of Negro Art at Adult Education Project in Harlem YWCA,” New York Herald Tribune, 15 Feb. 1935, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 120.

Although the programs of the Harlem Community Art Center were very successful and have been widely acknowledged for their contribution to the development of modern African American art, in press coverage of community art centers established to nurture black artistic talent, racial difference tended to be both essentialized and celebrated, as well-meaning teachers described their efforts to cultivate “native” sensibilities. This was especially true when (unlike in Harlem) the art centers were staffed primarily by white instructors. The object was to rid students of reliance on
established convention and thus work which displayed pronounced racial qualities generated great satisfaction among instructors who professed that:

These people have as distinctive an art-taste as the Egyptians and Greeks. It is our belief they can express it in other arts as beautifully as they have in their music. We believe they can develop it best unhindered by the formalities of technique. If they were taught to paint according to rules, the important thing, the representation of an object as viewed emotionally, would be thwarted and eventually would become impossible. Hence, except for basic points, we do not advise them about their drawings.


42. The bibliography of primitivism is vast. For a discussion of the intersection in the early twentieth century of the ideologies of the primitive and the folk as they were brought to bear on African American art, see esp. Eugene Metcalf, “Black Art, Folk Art and Social Control,” Winterthur Portfolio 18 (winter 1983): 271–289

43. One exception to Jewell’s typical remonstrations of black artists for failing to cultivate their uniqueness was his admiration for the work of Albert Alexander Smith. In a 1929 review, he referred to Smith alternately as an “American painter” and a “Negro painter” of extraordinary talent, who has been influenced by Velasquez without sacrificing his originality. Although some of Smith’s best work dealt with racial themes, Jewell remarked that he did not restrict himself to such themes for “he is first an artist” and “the wide earth is his theater.” “To Suit Many Tastes,” The New York Times, 6 Jan. 1929, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 121.


47. Ibid., 518. Not surprisingly, this nostalgia for the “old Negro” was especially pronounced in the south. A writer for an Alabama paper offered the following commentary on “The Old Servant” by Edwin Harleston:

such an old figure upon which we gaze with dimming eyes because we know she is a remnant of a by-gone era—loyal, gentle, faithful—toil-warn hands Iying in her lap—hands that have gentle in many ministrations—and an old bosom on which perhaps little white heads have lain. As we look we can almost hear a quavering sweet voice which may have sung to the slow rock of a chair, “Go to Sleep, Mammy’s Lil Baby Boy. (Emma L. Roche, “Negro Painters’ Work Shown in Mobile Exhibit,” Mobile Register, 26 July 1931, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 118)

49. “‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ Will Be Popular,” Art Digest 3 (Jan. 1929): 5–6.
51. The New York Times, 6 May 1934, sec. 9, p. 7. These sentiments were shared by William Auerbach-Levy, who wrote:

If not a great artist by a standard which does not take account of the temperamental differences of race, then one may at least hope for signs of greatness, of originality and strong feelings in Negro terms. But, with one exception, the work is disappointingly
like canvases at any ordinary art show. There is the same imitation of this or that school. ("Negro Painters Imitate Whites," New York World, 5 Jan. 1930, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 116)

On occasion such comments functioned as a springboard for editorializing on race relations. A writer for the Oakland Tribune observed that it was still too dangerous for African Americans to be unguarded in their self-expression:

Some who have viewed the exhibit have expressed disappointment that a distinct Negro school of art was not represented instead of simply universal art. In answer to this question, the writer will state that when the American public will begin to treat the American Negro citizens everywhere as human beings, and will cease to lynch either his body or spirit and cease to treat or speak of the Negro as a joke, then the unfettered soul of the Negro will unloose itself and give to the world a masterpiece of art and music. (Oakland Tribune, 23 Nov. 1930, Harmon Foundation Papers, Box 116)


54. Terry Cooney’s characterization of the ideological contradictions of the decade as a “balancing act” is especially apt here:

The image of the 1930s as a decade when writers and artists turned toward politics and the people draws attention to a number of important strains in the cultural life of the period. . . Especially during the second half of the thirties, strains of radicalism, documentary recording, and nationalistic feeling became intertwined in sometimes improbable ways, helping to mold and to confuse lingering impressions of the decade. (Terry A. Cooney, Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s [New York: , 1995], 130)


56. For a discussion of the chronic impulse to simplify Regionalist art and politics, see esp. James M. Dennis, Renegade Regionalist (Madison, Wisc., 1998); Erica Doss, Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism (Chicago, 1991), and Cecile Whiting, Antifascism in American Art (New Haven, Conn., 1989).

57. As Charles Alexander explains:

In retrospect what seems most striking about the intellectual-artistic 1920s is not a general disinterest in politics and ideology but an enormous diversity and fecundity, an intense occupation with the full realization of the creative potential of both individuals and the whole society. The post-World War I decade, it now becomes clear, featured a continuing ardent quest for a rich and recognizable American culture. (Alexander, Here This Country Lies, p. 153)


60. Susan Noyes Platt observes that as a critic, Thomas Craven, for example, was less preoccupied with broad theorizing about American culture than with the reconciliation of an American artistic form and content. This was also true of Locke, whose theorizing about emergent Negro art, or what he called a “racial idiom of expression,” addresses (but does not effect) such a reconciliation. Although he defined Negro art as “the proper development of the Negro subject as an artistic theme,” the terms of classification he employs are largely stylistic. See Locke, Negro Art: Past and Present (Washington, D.C., 1936), 12. I am grateful to Susan Noyes Platt for making available to me in manuscript form portions of her book on American art criticism in the 1930s,
Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism and Americanism: A History of Cultural Activism During the Depression Years (New York, 1999). In this work, Locke’s cultural criticism receives careful consideration as both participant in, and distinct from, the dominant discourses of the period.

Most of the cultural movements of the interwar decades suffered from this chronic failure to make coherent connections between form and content. In this intensified political climate, proletarian art, Regionalism, Social Realism, Negro art, Popular Front art and the New Deal, were united in what they opposed but too woefully divided by conflicting priorities and agendas to arrive at a reasonably concise vision of what form the most desirable or representative art should take.


62. Michael Denning has challenged conventional wisdom that the romantic populism of the Popular Front represented a capitulation to majority sentiments that brought about the eventual collapse of radical politics in the United States. To embrace this view, Denning argues, is to confuse populist rhetoric with populist politics: “There was not a radical break between the ‘proletarian movement’ of the early 1930s and the Popular Front; the politics of the Popular Front was not populist, but remained a class-based labor politics.” By linking his analysis to the labor movement rather than nationalism, Denning credits the Popular Front with an enduring legacy that most historians have denied. Michael Denning, Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (London, 1996), 124–125.


64. Meyer Schapiro, “Race, Nationality and Art,” Art Front 2 (Mar.1936): 10–12. For further analysis of the Art Front assault on Regionalism see Dennis, Baigell, and Whitting.


For further discussion of these exchanges in Art Front and their importance in terms of familiarizing Americans interested in the visual arts with issues of central concern to African American artists, see Bearden and Henderson, A History of African American Artists, 232–234.

67. In Negro Art: Past and Present, Locke also emphasized the importance of acquiring a historical perspective before judging the accomplishments of black artists in terms of an ancestral legacy which had been virtually destroyed by slavery. The African American artist seeks to recapture his ancestral gifts “in the medium and manner of his adopted civilization and the modern techniques of painting, sculpture and the craft arts. But when this development finally matures, it may be expected to reflect something of the original endowment, if not as a carry-over of instinct then at least as a formal revival of historical memory and the proud inspiration of the reconstructed past” (Negro Art: Past and Present, 5).

Debates about the existence of a “black aesthetic,” which often turn on the
presumption or disavowal of an African cultural legacy, are deeply embedded with racial politics. As Lowery Sims points out: “Within the African American community itself the acceptance or denial of distinct aesthetic values and canons based on race or national origin correlated with long-standing debates over assimilationist or separatist stances with regard to American society as a whole” (Sims, “Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans,” 588).

68. Locke was very aware of the fact that while African Americans had played a relatively prominent role in the cultural politics of the 1920s, their position in the 1930s ran the risk of becoming less central as the grounds shifted first to revolutionary politics and later to celebrations of generic Americanism. He was convinced that blacks would have their greatest chance to stake a cultural claim within the later. Looking back on the dual tendencies throughout the decade towards Regionalism and what he called “Proletarian realism,” Locke wrote:

   The former of course is more congenial to the retention of the notion of racial idioms; the latter, over-simplifying the situation in my judgement, discounts and ignores almost completely in its emphasis on class status and class psychology, the idioms of race. (Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” Journal of Negro Education 8 [July 1939]: 521–529, quoted from Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., The Critical Temper of Alain Locke [New York, 1983], 454)


71. Locke, “The Negro Takes His Place in American Art,” in Exhibition of Productions by Negro Artists (New York, 1933). Bearden and Henderson explain the changes in these Harmon catalog essays as a response to anxiety, on the part of Foundation administrators, that advocacy of Africanism would be perceived as tantamount to black nationalism. They also claim that Locke wanted to reassure black artists that his argument need not be understood as a restrictive mandate. Bearden and Henderson, A History of African American Artists, 245.

In Negro Art: Past and Present, published in 1936, Locke’s Africanist and Americanist arguments are given equal weight in an extensive chronicle of black art which also includes discussion of African tribal art and European modernism.

72. “[T]he question of distinctive racial idiom or aptitude is purely theoretical and academic until such broad scale comparisons can actually be made” (Locke, “The Negro Takes His Place in American Art,” 12).

In 1939 Locke reiterated these sentiments when he wrote: “In art it is color not the color line that counts; and that not so much the hue of the author as the complexion of the idiom.” Locke also makes reference in this essay to an emerging model of African American cultural hybridity that is expanding the study of racial expression to include a greater diversity of influences from within the black diaspora. Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” quoted from Stewart, The Critical Temper of Alain Locke, 454.

The recent work of historian Richard J. Powell manifests a similar vision in its emphasis on racial expression in twentieth-century art that has arisen from a constellation of individuals who are neither exclusively black nor American. See esp. Powell, Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century (London, 1997); Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance (Los Angeles, 1997); and The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism (Washington, D.C., 1989).

73. Locke would have preferred integrated exhibitions, but he continued to believe that all-black shows were important until such things could be realized. He was involved in the organization of a number of important Negro art exhibitions at the end
of the decade and complained when the large expositions in New York and San Francisco did not have them.

74. One such exception was the exhibition of 1935 “An Art Commentary on Lynching.” For a discussion of this exhibition and the attending political context see Marlene Park, “Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s,” Prospects 18 (1993): 311–365.

The inconsistencies of promise and practice with respect to racial inclusiveness in the federal art programs have remained largely unexamined in the art historical literature on the New Deal era. Jonathan Harris, for example, asserts that in project discourse “‘Negro,’ ‘citizen,’ and ‘artist’ were terms of equivalence. “In the interest of sustaining the ideological hegemony of New Deal reform and populist nationalism, a conciliatory rhetoric of “difference without antagonism” prevailed in discussions of race. Jonathan Harris, Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America (New York, 1995), 51

But in practical reality, antagonism did exist between the interests of black participants in these programs and those responsible for administering them. While historians of African American art tend to agree on the positive outcome of the projects from the standpoint of providing encouragement and financial support for black artists, Rena Fraden argues that presumptions of equality guaranteed by their democratic spirit and anti-discriminatory policies were by no means taken for granted. Rena Fraden, “Feels Good, Can’t Hurt: Black Representation on the Federal Arts Projects,” Journal of American Culture 4 (1987), 21–29.


76. Edward Alden Jewell, Have We An American Art (New York, 1939).

77. Locke, foreword, Contemporary Negro Art (Baltimore, Md., 1939), n.p.

78. Ibid.


80. Negro Art: Past and Present, 120. Locke’s remarks were made in reference to Cahill’s introduction to New Horizons in American Art (New York, 1936).

81. Locke, foreword, Contemporary Negro Art.