



CHICAGO JOURNALS



Smithsonian
American Art Museum

Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints

Author(s): Helen Langa

Source: *American Art*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 10-39

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109305>

Accessed: 26/07/2011 11:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and Smithsonian American Art Museum are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to American Art.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions

Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints

Helen Langa

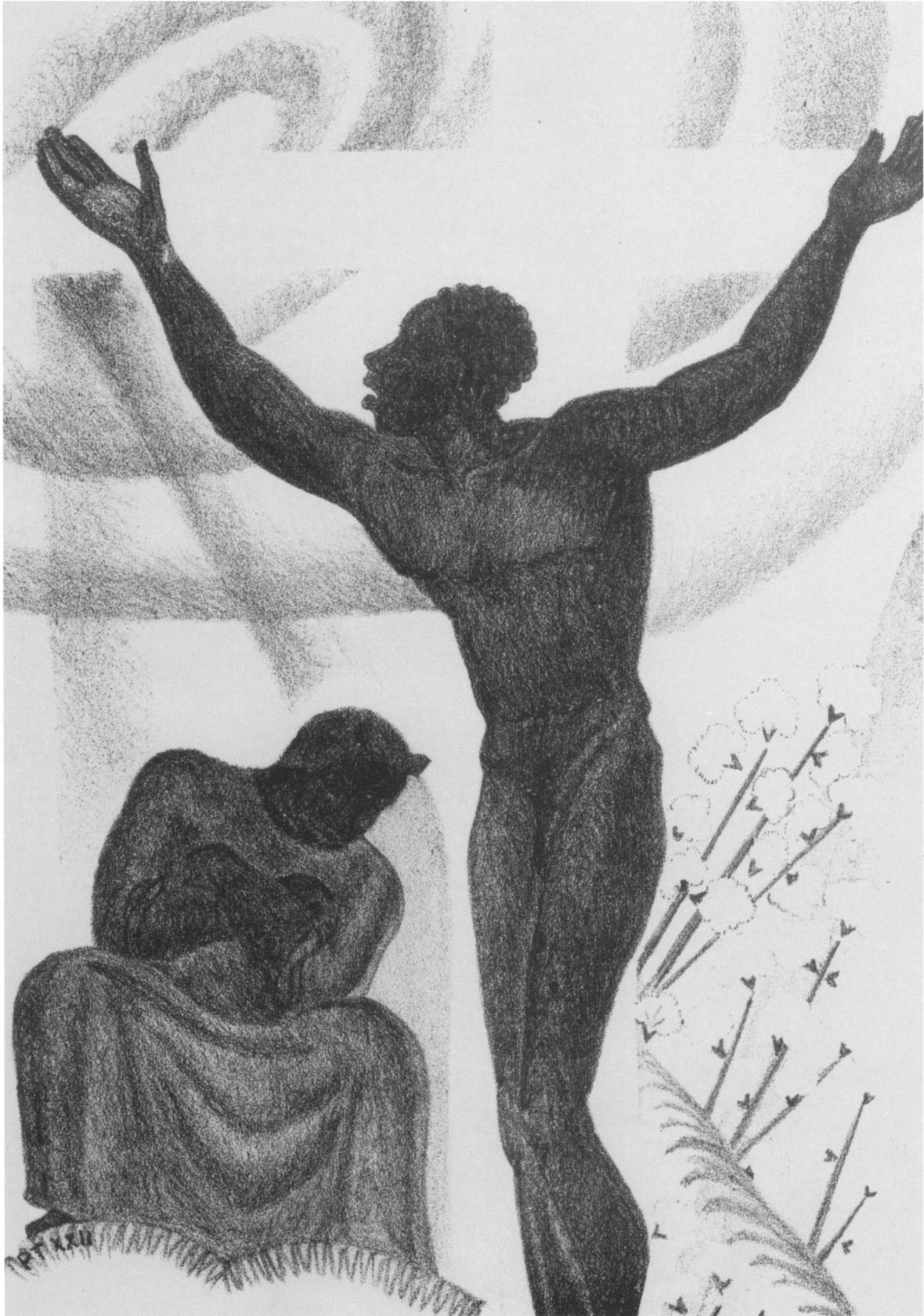
Two art exhibitions protesting lynch violence in the United States were held in New York City early in 1935, both seeking to draw public attention to the horrifying fact that lynching continued to be a serious problem in the fourth decade of the century. Although the number of lynchings had declined from over one hundred each year in the 1890s to ten in 1929, it had risen again to twenty-eight in 1933, and it was clear that lynch terrorism had not yet been eradicated. Lynchings were most common in the South, but they took place in all parts of the country during the interwar decades. While lynch mobs usually targeted African Americans, they also murdered Italians, Chinese, Mexicans, and Native Americans, and attacked women and children as well as men. The terrorizing threat of lynch murder was frequently intensified by the torture, dismemberment, and burning of victims. Through these virulent expressions of racial hatred, lynchers sought to assert the supremacy of white rule not only over their victims but also throughout their communities. Organizers of the two exhibitions hoped that visual art could play a significant role in opposing lynching by increasing public awareness of the problem, and by moving viewers from empathy to active support for proposed legislative remedies. The

title of an introductory essay in one of the two exhibition catalogues even proclaimed “Pictures Can Fight!”¹

The first exhibition, titled *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, was organized for the NAACP by its director, Walter White. It opened on February 15 and ran through March 2, 1935, at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries uptown on 57th Street. White had recently revived the NAACP’s legislative campaign against lynching, which had slowed earlier in the decade, and was seeking publicity and support for the Costigan-Wagner Bill, new antilynching legislation introduced into Congress for the first time in 1934. He conceived the exhibition as a unique way to draw attention to this effort, which supporters hoped would have a better chance of success than earlier legislation because it refrained from holding individual participants responsible for mob violence while mandating prosecution of collaborating local officials and fines for their communities.

The second show, called *Struggle for Negro Rights*, was developed by leftist members of the Artists’ Union and several Communist-affiliated organizations that included the John Reed Club, the International Labor Defense, and the Harlem-based Vanguard group. It was held at the American Contemporary Art

Prentiss Taylor, *Christ in Alabama*, 1932. Lithograph, 22.3 x 15.5 cm (8 ¾ x 6 ¾ in.). Collection of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



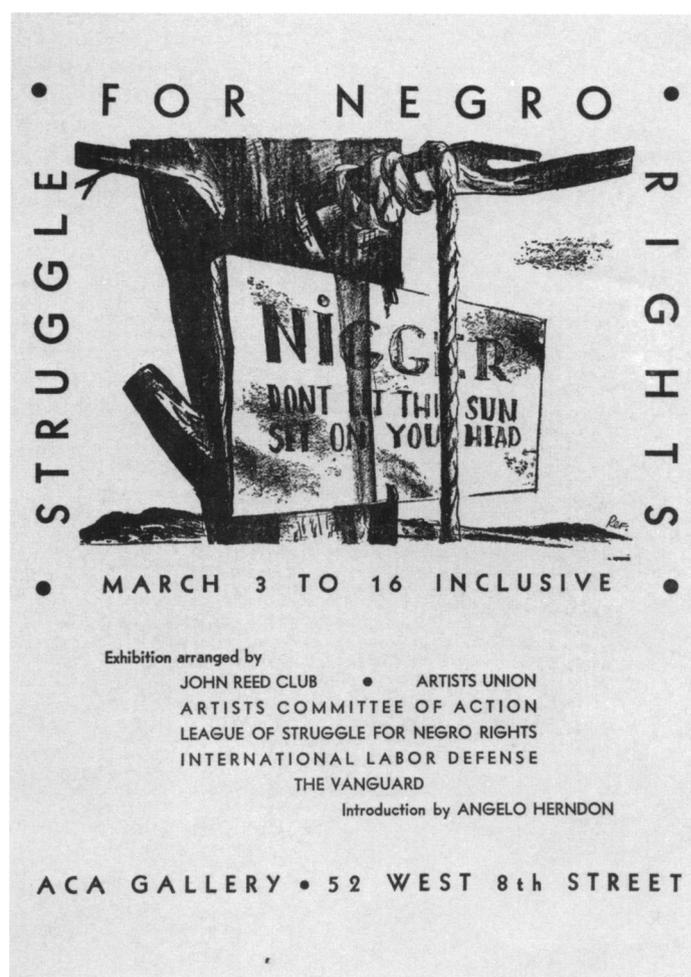
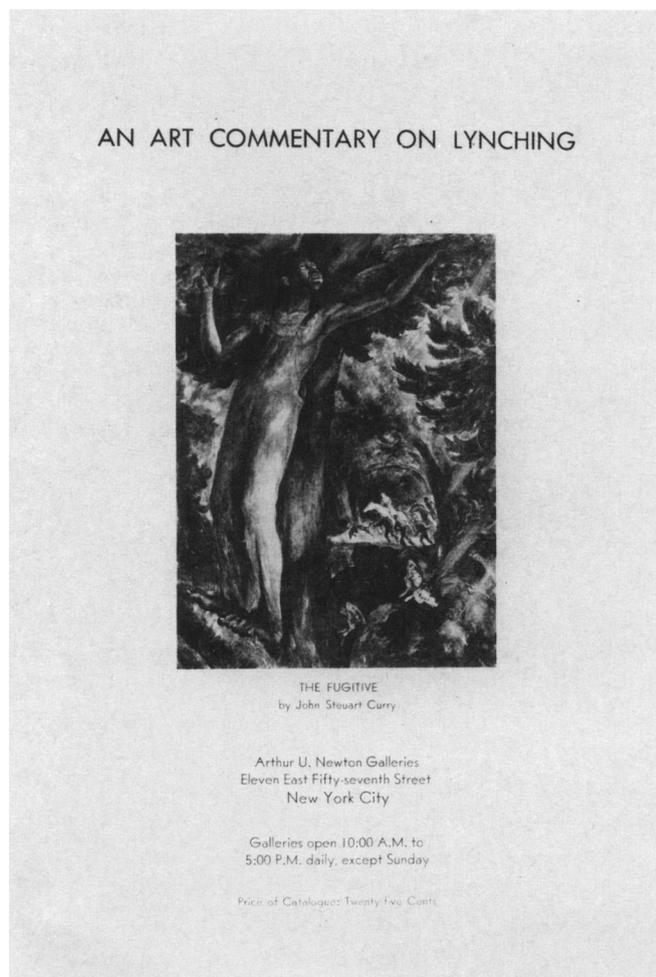
Gallery (ACA) on Eighth Street in Greenwich Village, opening on March 3 and closing March 16, immediately following the NAACP show. The leftist sponsors of the *Struggle for Negro Rights* exhibition (hereafter indicated as *Negro Rights*) advocated support for more radical antilynch legislation titled the Bill for Negro Rights and the Suppression of Lynching, which demanded the death penalty for lynchers and connected the abolition of lynching to broader efforts to expand African Americans' civil equality. Adherents recognized that this bill had no chance for success in Congress, but saw it as asserting a principled stand for justice by insisting that lynching be treated as murder.² Thus, while the NAACP show intended to use the high-cultural associations of art to draw attention to its legislative campaign, the *Negro Rights* exhibition proposed both an alternative political analysis and a critique of the NAACP for elitism and its failure to offer a radical vision.

Artists who participated in the two exhibitions faced the daunting challenge of developing visual images that both portrayed and condemned lynching as racist violence. News reports, sociological analyses, and literary works most often depicted lynch murder as a violent social spectacle, a vicious attack fomented by white perpetrators and focused on a black victim. Many artists who opposed lynching drew on aspects of this scenario, but others sought alternative types of imagery that were less brutal in their details, but were still intended to prompt viewers to a deeper understanding of racism's costs. Although individual artist's choices in approaching the subject varied considerably, consideration of their works as a group suggests that their ideas were modulated by their political and cultural affiliations as much as by empathy and imaginative invention. Such a comparison demonstrates that artists' responses to the opportunity to make art against

lynching were inflected not only by divergent political tactics for achieving racial justice in America, but also by their own racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Artists were also influenced by contemporary cultural discourses that articulated lynching's social impact in relation to concepts of manhood and victimization, religious experience and communal suffering, and interracial solidarity and antiracist resistance.

Divergent Organizational Politics

Artists' choices about their own works often reiterated the divergent political opinions of the groups that organized the two exhibitions. The particular views of each group were evident both in the exhibition catalogues and in the differing ways in which the shows were organized. Even the titles given to the exhibitions suggested two different approaches to engaging public opinion about lynching. *An Art Commentary on Lynching* evoked respectable and somewhat distanced consideration of the theme, while *Struggle for Negro Rights* sounded both militant and exhortatory. The catalogues (figs. 1 and 2) similarly demonstrated the two groups' contrasting goals and strategies.³ Walter White solicited short introductory essays for the NAACP catalogue from Sherwood Anderson and Erskine Caldwell, white writers who were recognized for their interest in rural and Southern themes. Anderson's text argued that "poor white men" lynched Negroes to assert social superiority, and his remarks implied that economic injustice lay behind lynching. Caldwell similarly ascribed lynching to the Deep South's poverty, and argued that it caused a "deterioration" of social values; "the passage and enforcement of antilynching laws," Caldwell concluded, offered the primary means to end "further descent into the slough of barbarism." White also



- 1 Exhibition catalogue cover, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, 1935. Collection of the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa
- 2 Exhibition catalogue cover, *Struggle for Negro Rights*, 1935. Anton Refregier Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

reproduced a lithograph by the prominent white regionalist artist John Stewart Curry to illustrate the catalogue cover. Titled *The Fugitive*, Curry's print portrayed a terrified black man hiding in a tree to escape from white lynchers, who were visible on horseback below. While the essays reflected contemporary sociological explanations that connected lynching to white poverty, Curry's print sharply dramatized black vulnerability. Together both texts and image emphasized the urgent need for national legislative remedies.

The catalogue for the *Struggle for Negro Rights* show set a much different tone and projected a different approach to the issues. The cover featured a lithograph by Anton Refregier, a white

artist well known for his leftist sympathies. By suggestively portraying a crudely racist sign tacked to a tree, with a lynch rope hanging over an upper limb, Refregier's print seems intended to elicit outrage at racist attitudes while avoiding the explicit illustration of racial violence or African-American vulnerability. "Pictures Can Fight!," an introduction to the catalogue, written by Angelo Herndon, also contrasted strongly with the NAACP essays. Herndon was a young African-American Communist whose recent sentencing to twenty years on a Georgia chain gang for organizing unemployed workers (both black and white) in Atlanta had made him widely known in leftist political and cultural circles.⁴ Herndon's essay was direct and provocative. He

condemned the idea that “going to the Big Boss” could end lynching and stated that “the real truth is that we can only stop lynching by struggle,” not only for a more forceful antilynching bill, but also through “mass organization . . . and mass defense.”

The contrasting perspectives suggested by the catalogues of the two exhibitions reflected substantive differences between the NAACP and the Communist left in the early 1930s—differences that resulted in a highly contentious relationship between the two groups. During these years, the Communist party made intense efforts to attract black members, and party organizers attacked the NAACP for class elitism and lack of revolutionary zeal in the fight for civil rights and economic justice. In response, the NAACP rejected Communist organizing as opportunistic, claiming that the Party exploited Negro Americans’ desires for equality only to further Soviet-inspired ideals of class revolution. Despite these opposing claims, both organizations placed a high value on making integrated political activism central to their programs during the 1930s, and both organizations sought support from working-class people, union members, middle-class educators and intellectuals, and church and reform groups in the white and black communities. The differences between the groups were played out in many aspects of their organizational projects, from efforts to introduce new antilynching legislation to struggles over control of the highly publicized Scottsboro case defense. Yet both also sought to exploit the evident injustice of the Scottsboro convictions and publicity around appeals to promote outrage against lynch violence, as well as to enlarge their memberships and maximize their power to produce social change.⁵ However, the NAACP’s focus on respectability and reformist solutions and its appeal to elite supporters contrasted markedly with the Party’s call for

radical transformation of the social system based on class-conscious analyses of the country’s economic and political systems.

The strategies that organizers used to solicit works for the two exhibitions further revealed their tactical and political dissimilarities. Walter White contacted numerous artists individually about the NAACP exhibition and urged them to focus directly on the horror and pathos of lynch violence, even though such images would be painful for viewers. White hoped that distaste for viewing such traumatic scenes would be mitigated by evidence of elite support for the show, and argued in a letter to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney that “even a morbid subject can be made popular if a sufficiently distinguished list of patronesses will sponsor the exhibition.”⁶ John Steuart Curry’s lithograph *The Fugitive* (fig. 3) typified the kind of image that White encouraged. Curry’s tense scene dramatized the extreme vulnerability of rural black men to lynch terrorism. He used a vertiginous view from above to stress the potential victim’s tenuous position and contrasted the two lynchers’ “unnatural” violence with butterflies symbolizing nature’s innocence. Many works in the NAACP show shared Curry’s emphasis on both the terror and physical danger of lynch violence and stressed the virulent hatred of white mobs and the suffering of black victims.

In contrast to White’s personalized approach, leftist artists who organized the opposing exhibition publicized their call for submissions in a flyer that was reprinted as a letter in the leftist journal *New Masses*. They sought to broaden the context of antilynching activism by linking it to issues of civil rights and economic justice. As a result, works in the *Negro Rights* exhibition, as indicated in the catalogue listings, seem to have addressed a range of themes that included interracial solidarity and struggles against



3 John Steuart Curry, *The Fugitive*, 1935. Lithograph, 33.0 x 24.2 cm (13 x 9 ½ in.). National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Adelyn D. Breeskin

a broad spectrum of social problems. Titles were divided about equally between explicit lynching subjects and associated issues, such as the Scottsboro trial, racist oppression in the South, racial solidarity among workers, and the threat to American democracy posed by fascism. Hyman Warsager's drawing *The Law* (fig. 4), shown in the *Negro Rights* exhibition, exemplified its strategic ideals. Here the bound figure of a hanged lynch victim, given just enough detail to be perceived

as a person rather than a silhouette, is thrust toward the viewer and casts its shadow across an ungainly composite building in the background labeled "U.S. Courts." By adding the swastika, classical pediment, Tower of Babel structure, and intrusive tree branches and roots as additional symbols, Warsager encouraged viewers to identify lynching as a crime of "fascist" capitalism, under which communication breaks down and the monstrous growth of injustice penetrates and corrupts the system to its core.⁷ Warsager's image reflected the insistence of leftist organizers that artists expand their focus beyond the literal depiction of lynch violence to persuade viewers that effective opposition to lynching meant resistance to a broad spectrum of oppressive forces in contemporary American society, including both fascism and antisemitism. Despite these differences in approach, however, the struggle against racist injustice was central to both exhibitions.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, New York's vanguard artistic circles fostered very few opportunities for interracial cultural dialogue. Carl Van Vechten, white art critic, novelist, and photographer, was famous for giving racially mixed parties that brought together diverse communities of African-American and white actors, artists, and writers. The jazz clubs of Harlem drew mixed audiences, and the Vanguard group, founded in the early 1930s by Harlem writers and artists, encouraged Harlem intellectuals to interact with white leftists working in related fields. The NAACP also organized events attended by racially mixed groups. Nevertheless, the cultural tensions produced by pervasive beliefs in racial difference were never significantly effaced by these exchanges.⁸

In the early 1930s, white artists with ties to the Communist party began to create images that reflected newly



4 Hyman Warsager, *The Law*.
Drawing reproduced in *New Masses*
10, no. 2 (1934): 7

implemented Communist party policies calling for an attack on American racism and efforts to recruit black Americans. A number of artists were impressed by the Party's critique of capitalism's failures, which seemed increasingly valid during the severe economic crisis of the Depression. They joined the John Reed Club, an organization started by the Party in 1929

to foster proletarian radicalism in the arts, and they read *New Masses*, a leftist journal that regularly featured both artworks and articles that called attention to racial issues. The art included drawings that celebrated the ideal of workers' interracial solidarity, such as the May 1931 cover by Nicolai Cikovsky that portrayed a workers' parade on May Day (fig. 5), as well as political cartoons concerning the Scottsboro case, exemplified by Hugo Gellert's drawing in the May 1932 issue referring to anxieties about an upcoming Supreme Court verdict (fig. 6). *New Masses* also ran articles on developments in the Scottsboro trials and published fiction, poetry, and social commentary by African-American writers. The Artists' Union, formally organized in 1934, also promoted solidarity with black artists; in its journal, *Art Front*, various writers asserted the importance of protecting and expanding African Americans' civil rights.

By contrast, very few galleries in New York exhibited works by African Americans during the 1930s. Despite social connections that white patrons such as Van Vechten and Mabel Dodge forged with black musicians and photographers, most African-American visual artists tended to remain within Harlem art circles and rarely interacted with white contemporaries in Manhattan. Moreover, elite journals that published art criticism during this period seem to have been highly insensitive to the problem of racism. Exhibition reviews of works by white artists that portrayed black people, written by established white critics and published in mainstream art journals, frequently made un-self-conscious references to demeaning racial stereotypes. Writers referred to images of African Americans (by white artists) as displaying a typical "happy-go-lucky character" or revealing a "deep spiritual fear of God and 'de debil.'" Even in a 1941 review intended to communicate respectful praise of a major show of works



- 5 Nicolai Cikovsky, *May Day March*. Ink drawing, reproduced on cover, *New Masses* 6, no. 12 (1931)
- 6 Hugo Gellert, *Halt the Execution*. Drawing, reproduced in *New Masses* 7, no. 11 (1932):11

by African-American artists, the writer argued that three stylistically diverse paintings, all illustrated in the article, shared “a distinctly homogeneous quality . . . in the color organization . . . and in certain characteristic treatment of rhythm and form which distinguishes the Negro race.” Such racial stereotyping was an accepted aspect of art criticism during the period. In its “positive” form, it may have reflected idealizing references to a generic “African” heritage in the writing of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, as well as in catalogues published by the Harmon Foundation, which alleged the existence of “inherent Negro traits” that could be expressed in art. However, most of the racial stereotypes found in mid-1930s art criticism were less idealized. Racial prejudice also affected black artists’ efforts to gain professional skills. Charles Alston,

who later taught printmaking for the Federal Art Project at the Harlem Community Art Center, was not allowed to take life drawing classes at Columbia University because the nude female models were white.⁹ Thus, at a time when racial discrimination continued to pervade the New York art world, the antilynching exhibitions offered artists (both black and white) an unique opportunity not only to attack lynch violence but also to protest the cultural politics of racial oppression in American society.

Artistic Choices and Viewpoints

Whatever their organizational and political allegiances, all artists who created antilynch works in the 1930s faced two significant questions. How could they

7 Isamu Noguchi, *Death* (alternate title: *Lynched Figure*), 1934. Monel metal, wood, metal and rope armature, 99 x 74.3 x 53.3 cm (39 x 29 ¼ x 21 in.); height of armature 89 in. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.

literally portray torture, violent abuse, or murder so as to make evident both the horror of these acts *and* their condemnation? And in what other, more metaphorical ways could they convey the impact of such terrible events without emphasizing the vulnerability of their targeted figures? As suggested above, one solution was to illustrate victims' terrorization as forcefully as possible in order to emphasize lynching's unspeakable brutality. A less grisly alternative was the use of symbolic references to critique the racist attitudes of lynchers and the complicitous politics of the legal system. However, these were not the only possibilities, as extant examples and preserved titles of unlocated images suggest. Artists could also focus on the spiritual and psychological suffering of lynch victims or turn instead to communal experiences of grieving and resistance.

Artists who participated in the two exhibitions explored all of these options. The catalogues listed seventy-seven participating artists; thirty-nine sent works to the NAACP show and forty-three contributed to the *Negro Rights* exhibition (five artists participated in both events). However, few historical records, letters, or interviews offer information about artists' intentions in making these images. Contemporary reviewers generally discussed individual examples quite briefly. Many of the works can no longer be located, and some of the artists have been impossible to trace.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is still feasible to assess the specific representational strategies highlighted in each exhibition from works that survive and from titles listed in the catalogues. These offer evidence that artists' decisions about portraying lynching were shaped not only by their individual conceptions, expressive preferences, and differing political analyses but also by their racial and gender identities.

The racial identity claimed by all the artists in these exhibitions cannot always

be determined from biographical sources, but it is likely that the majority of participants in both shows identified themselves as either white or African American (two known exceptions were José Clemente Orozco, the Mexican muralist, and Isamu Noguchi, the Japanese-American sculptor). The seven artists known as African Americans all placed their works in the NAACP exhibition. However, even though Walter White solicited works for the NAACP show from numerous well-known black artists, and Angelo Herndon also optimistically claimed their involvement in his preface to the *Negro Rights* catalogue, a number of leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Aaron Douglas and Archibald Motley Jr., did not participate in either event. Moreover, the names of some participants in both shows (more in *Negro Rights*) do not appear in standard biographical dictionaries of artists or in reference works on African-American art, most likely because these artists were amateurs or students who never developed recognized careers as professional fine artists.¹¹ Thus any analysis that addresses racial differences must be understood as partial, because it is necessarily limited to the comparison of works by known African-American and white artists. Nevertheless, within this context there were significant differences in how white artists and artists of color portrayed lynching-related subjects.

Gender differences also seem to have influenced artists' choices about whether to depict lynch violence and how to approach such a terrible theme. As indicated in the catalogue listings, very few works by women artists were included in either exhibition. Of the seventy-seven artists who participated in the two shows, only four can be identified by name as women, although a few of the other names listed are ambiguous. Since numerous women were active as artists, teachers, and art students in New York



12.12 Boccioni's *Headless Figure*
Muscular, headless, torso and legs
1914

during the early 1930s, this comparative absence is striking. Moreover, judging from listed titles, it would seem that none of the works by women represented lynching scenes literally, but focused instead on ancillary subjects, such as portraits and themes related to the Scottsboro case, or images that validated interracial solidarity or linked lynching to wider social concerns. The relative absence of lynching images by women and the differences between works by black and white artists are both related, I would argue, to the prevailing characterization of lynch violence in media accounts, sociological documents, literature, and the visual arts as a public spectacle centered on the terroristic subordination of black men.

Images of White Violence and Black Victimization

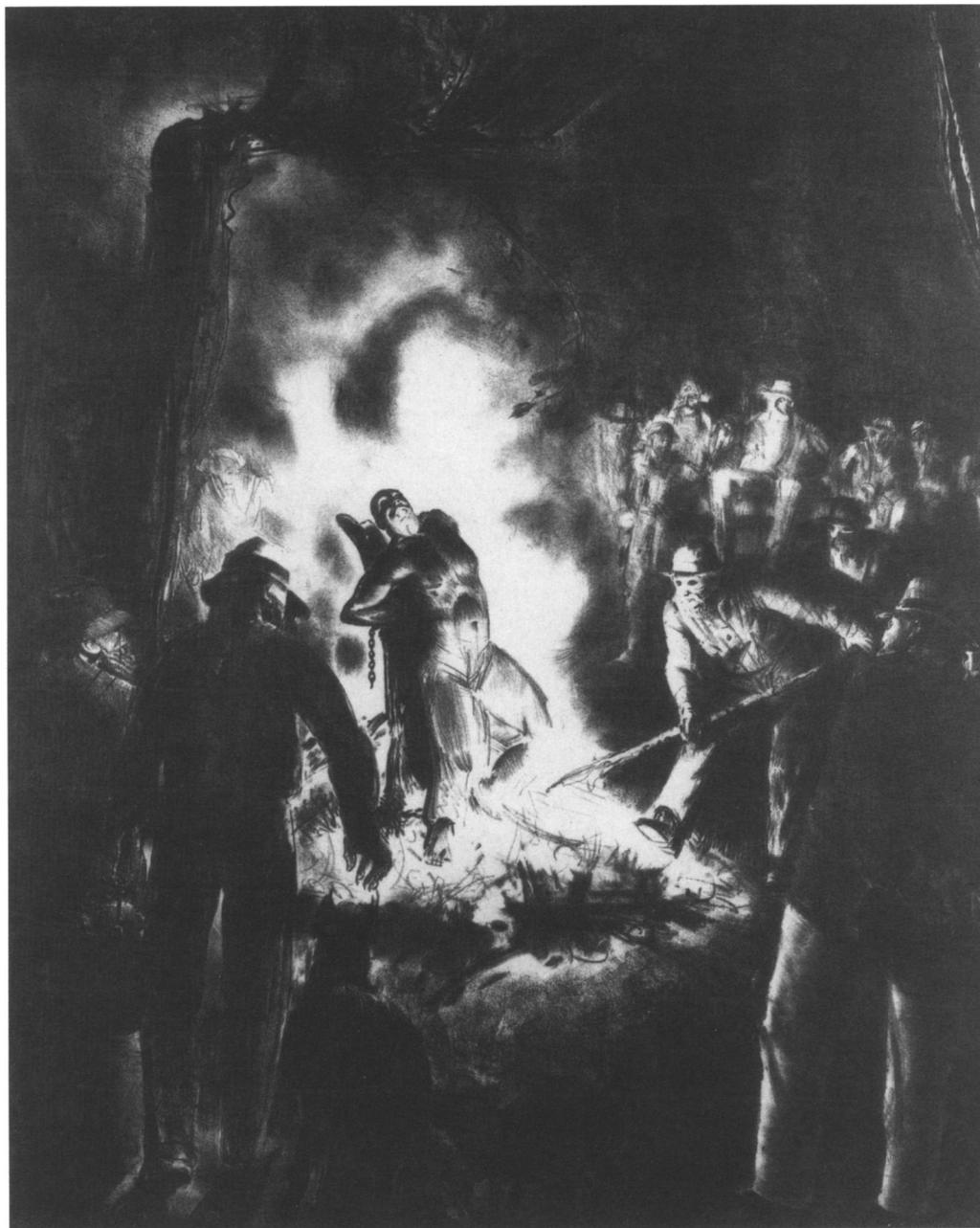
Two critical responses to Isamu Noguchi's *Death* (fig. 7), an excruciatingly contorted sculpture that was exhibited in both shows, suggest that even an abstract figure cast in shiny monel metal could not escape this cultural expectation. After lambasting "the current trend towards rather tortured forms" representing "dark bodies twisted in knotty agonies of death" as verging too closely on propaganda, a displeased *Art News* reviewer dismissed Noguchi's work as a "pendant mass of silvered realism [which] is only a macabre commentary" lacking in true aesthetic merit. Responding with more imaginative discomfort to the same formal qualities, a writer for *Parnassus* praised it as a "gnarled chromium victim jiggling under the wind-swayed rope" that would make "a white man feel squirmy about his color." Neither critic could see past culturally accepted assumptions of a black victim, although Noguchi's isolated figure may well have been intended to *contest* explicit racial associations and render the

experience of lynch victims universally perceptible. Yet to accept the sculpture as symbolizing *human* vulnerability to racist violence was perhaps impossible for most viewers, given a racialized climate of interpretation in which no "black" or, in this case, brown metal figure could be understood as expressing universalized human identity.¹² Furthermore, since the NAACP sponsored the exhibition, many viewers might understandably have assumed that its originating premise was the cessation of racial assaults on African Americans.

Given this ideological context, it is not surprising that many white artists who made antilynching works during the interwar decades focused their condemnatory images on public expressions of racial violence that were directed against black men by white men and believed to be enacted most often in the rural South. Although created a decade earlier, in 1923, George Bellows's lithograph *The Law Is Too Slow* (fig. 8) portrayed this kind of lynching scene in exactly the type of detailed image that White hoped would incite viewers to antilynch activism. The title, the white-hooded men, and the writhing black figure centered in the lurid light of the fire all drew on nightmarish accounts and photographs of lynch violence in 1920s literature and journalism. White believed that such an image could become an effective tool in the fight against lynching. He used Bellows's print as the frontispiece for *Rope and Faggot*, his 1929 book on lynching, and asked Bellows's widow for permission to exhibit it in the 1935 show, reproducing it again on the second page of the NAACP catalogue.¹³

Several other artists focused even more intensely on the horrifying tortures associated with lynching. José Clemente Orozco's 1934 lithograph *The Hanged Men (Negroes)* depicted the charred, contorted bodies of four lynched figures hanging from tree branches over flames.

- 8 George Wesley Bellows, *The Law Is Too Slow*, 1923. Lithograph, sheet: 65.3 x 48.4 cm (25 ½ x 19 in.); image: 45.6 x 37.1 cm (18 x 14 ½ in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of George F. Porter



The pose of the foremost figure is almost identical to that of Noguchi's sculpture *Death*, and both works were most likely derived from a photograph published by the International Labor Defense. Although Orozco portrayed these victims as simplified, silhouette-like figures, their pain is intensely communicated through their distorted poses, forcing viewers to confront lynching on terrifyingly primal

terms. Harry Sternberg's lithograph *Southern Holiday* (fig. 9), titled with grim irony, presented a more detailed image of the aftermath of lynch violence. To shock viewers into outrage and activism, Sternberg depicted the gruesome spectacle of a bound and mutilated black man, either dead or dying, tied to one pilaster of a ruined gateway, which recalls the supposedly ennobling classical



9 Harry Sternberg, *Southern Holiday*, 1935. Lithograph, sheet: 60.6 x 45.4 cm (23 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.); image: 55.2 x 40 cm (21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.). Collection of the Whitney Museum of Art. Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund

heritage of Western civilization. The massed industrial smokestacks behind the figure present a parallel confrontation, between the achievements of modern technology and the barbarity of lynch terrorism, while their repeating phallic shapes create a symbolic contrast to the victim's castration. Sternberg later commented on the sense of shame he felt while working on this image. He observed that although several museums purchased the print, none was ever sold

to an individual.¹⁴ Yet representations of explicit scenes of lynch violence and its terrifying outcomes, exemplified in particularly harrowing form in these prints by Bellows, Orozco, and Sternberg, became the most common thematic trope chosen by white artists to instigate powerful social revulsion against lynching that might encourage legislative and political remedies.

Individual artists, of course, manipulated this approach in various ways to portray different aspects of the terror of lynching. Several white artists in the NAACP show turned from representing the actual lynching to its preliminaries, portraying the physical and psychological punishments white lynchers deployed to harass their victims. Envisioning the next stage of the lynch sequence from Curry's print, Julius Bloch portrayed the helpless Christ-like figure of a black man captured by white lynchers and tied to a tree in a small 1932 painting titled *The Lynching* (fig. 10). Paul Cadmus even more insistently confronted viewers with the mob's eagerness to torment their victim well before reaching the lynch site in *To the Lynching* (fig. 11). Cadmus's own anxieties about contemporary homophobic attacks on gay men may have prompted his nightmarish evocation of the instinct to torture. In a drawing titled *This Is Her First Lynching* (fig. 12), Reginald Marsh documented the avid reactions of the lynch mob itself by entirely omitting any explicit representation of its victim. Marsh's drawing, originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1934 and reproduced again in *The Crisis* in January 1935, evoked outrage by portraying lynching as a grotesquely obscene "communal" activity, whose white participants were so misled by racism that they would bring children to watch a traumatic murder as if it were entertainment. This frightening unraveling of social values was identified as both a cause and an outcome of lynch violence in the two introductory essays in the



10 Julius Bloch, *The Lynching*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 48.3 x 30.5 cm (19 x 12 in.). Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

NAACP catalogue. Marsh dramatized this conception in his drawing by emphasizing the eager participation of white women, usually stereotyped in both art and literature as domestic nurturers who would be expected to reject and condemn

violence.¹⁵ By crowding the figures together as they peer at the unseen victim, Marsh evoked the potential frenzy of the white mob, while the child's uncomprehending expression suggested Marsh's own critical intentions. Although they chose different moments in the sequence of events associated with lynch violence, all of these artists selected episodes from the most violent aspects of lynching to emphasize its function as racially motivated terrorism expressed through public spectacle. While their intention was condemnatory and their works conveyed both anger and revulsion, they also forced viewers to confront the physical and psychological torture of lynch victims and the depravity of lynch mobs in painfully vivid detail.

Few artists, however, actually depicted the most violent assault on black male identities and bodies associated with lynching—the practice of castrating lynch victims. In a study of lynching portrayals in American literature, literary scholar Trudier Harris argued that castration represented the symbolic extreme of lynching's "unmanning" of black victims, functioning as a ritualized rejection of any black man's claim to either social or bodily autonomy. "Lynchings became . . .," she argued, "the final part of an emasculation that was carried out every day in word and deed." Most artists seem to have judged portraying this degree of violence as beyond the limits of aesthetic acceptability. Of extant works from the two exhibitions, Noguchi's and Orozco's abstracted figures lacked genitals, and Bellow's print was ambiguous; only Sternberg's lithograph signified this ultimate denigration of black manhood by splashing blood. Sternberg's decision to make this reference explicit may have been prompted by news reports, in October 1934, of the lynching, castration, and dismemberment of Claude Neal in Florida. A participant in the event published a photograph recording the

- 11 Paul Cadmus, *To the Lynching*, 1935. Graphite and watercolor on paper, sight: 52.1 x 40 cm (20 ½ x 15 ¾ in.). Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase



mob's depredations on the victim's body as a commemorative postcard, which was reproduced in the November issue of *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP, to encourage antilynch activism. Sternberg's print, however, represented only the consequences of castration, but a contemporary drawing by the young African-American artist Charles Alston presented

this act in all its horror. In a darkly furious charcoal drawing (fig. 13), Alston portrayed a large, grimacing white lyncher holding up the evidence of his castrating attack on a recumbent black victim. His image clearly referred to the viciously oppressive power of white racism in the unequal confrontation of these two figures. Alston most likely



12 Reginald Marsh, *This Is Her First Lynching*, 1934. Drawing in black ink and Conté crayon reproduced in *The Crisis* 42:1 (January 1935): 13. Originally published in *The New Yorker* (8 September 1934)

created his work for the *Negro Rights* exhibition, but it was not displayed. Even the militantly leftist jurors may have been hesitant to include it, judging it too violent and hostile for either their own comfort or for public exposure.¹⁶

In contrast to White's belief that explicit representations of lynch violence would most effectively increase public outrage, organizers of the *Negro Rights* show, as discussed earlier, encouraged artists to link lynching to other aspects of social and economic injustice. Titles

listed in the catalogue, such as *Unite Against Lynching*, *Militant Mourners*, *Workers to the Rescue*, *In the Black Belt*, and *Sharecroppers Meeting*, suggest that a number of artists who contributed to the show turned away from the literal depiction of lynch terrorism. Instead, they addressed themes that evoked both empathy and resistance, and in some cases offered heroic images of workers and protesters for racial equality. Although the majority of works in that show cannot be found, one example of this alternative tactic is Louis Lozowick's lithograph *Hold the Fort* (fig. 14), which addressed the ideal of class and racial solidarity in the context of a labor protest. It depicted a powerful black striker holding back an aggressive policeman to protect a fallen white comrade.¹⁷ However, the titles of other works in the exhibition, such as *The Lynchers*, *Death in Alabama*, *Caught*, or *That's the Man*, demonstrate that some artists did turn to scenes of explicit violence.

As with works from the NAACP show, the above examples from the *Negro Rights* exhibition strongly suggest that common beliefs about the crime of lynching led many artists to produce violent images that centered on a terroristic public spectacle of black male humiliation and torture. The most muted version of this iconography was the darkly silhouetted, hanged figure that symbolized lynch violence in works ranging from political cartoons published in *New Masses* to contemporary murals by Aaron Douglas and Diego Rivera. This type of figure, whether wholly simplified or given minimally recognizable features, avoided the horrifying depiction of individual suffering seen in more detailed works, yet its dark form, while not excluding reference to white victims, reified the connection assumed between lynch violence and black bodies.

Two other conventions for depicting lynching tended to stress the fright and suffering of its victims, again always



13 Charles Alston, untitled drawing, ca. 1935. Charcoal on paper, 61 x 43.2 cm (24 x 17 in.). Kenkeleba Gallery, New York

identified as African American. One version centered on a muscular but lanky black man preyed on by a white mob (as in Curry's print or Bloch's painting), awkward and terrified in hiding or already captured and surrounded by tormenters. This rustic figure, often shown in overalls, suggested the Southern rural location that most people associated with lynch violence, and his vulnerability was surely intended to incite pity in viewers. A second, contrasting scenario presented the victim as an handsome and

heroically powerful male figure (as in Bellows's and Sternberg's prints), either stripped or partially naked, but always either constrained by bonds and struggling, stoic, or contorted in death. These images of ennobled but ultimately powerless black male bodies introduced more conflicted meanings into the pictorial symbolism of antilynch activism.

Such figures might be linked to issues already raised by earlier portrayals of black men in late-nineteenth-century American sculpture. In recently published studies, both Michael Hatt and Kirk Savage argued that, given prevailing theories of racial difference, the most significant cultural markers of white manhood—self-control and universally recognizable aesthetic integrity—could not be transferred to representations of the bodies of black men. Bodies “other” than white could be seen only in racialized terms, and thus could never be viewed as symbolic carriers of universal meaning, nor refer to a fully self-directed social identity. It is highly likely that similar conceptions continued to shape visual representations in the 1930s. On one hand, reviewers seemed unable to see the tortured victim in Noguchi's sculpture as a universal expression of the horror of lynching. On the other, many white artists struggling to portray the shocking injustice of lynch violence felt that one solution was to picture heroically masculine black men (the figures always suggest racial specificity in their features and skin tones) forcefully subdued by constraint, violation, and castration. These idealized figures, however, communicated a complex and not entirely coherent set of messages. It is certainly reasonable to read them as signifying the artists' admiration for masculine potency and beauty despite “racial” differences. Their muscular bodies might also have evoked the powerful proletarian workers depicted in some forms of leftist art in the early 1930s, which projected hopes that a social

14 Louis Lozowick, *Hold the Fort*
(alternate title: *Strike Scene*), 1934.
Lithograph, 27.7 x 22.5 cm (10 7/8 x
8 7/8 in.). National Museum of
American Art, Smithsonian
Institution, Gift of Adele Lozowick



revolution would ultimately overcome lynch terrorism. From a different perspective, Neoplatonic philosophy associated idealized male nudes with moral virtue and spiritual truth. Thus these figures could also have asserted the dignity and purity of irrationally targeted victims, thereby resisting claims that the purpose of lynching was to punish criminal acts. Yet despite the potentially positive spin that such readings suggest, these images also worked against the very concepts

they ostensibly sought to represent: their emphasis on victimhood unmanned those whose rights they were intended to defend. Such representations of black male bodies, exposed in noble yet helpless inadequacy to the viewer's gaze, still emphasized racial subordination. Although these images were consciously meant to elicit outrage, one must ask whether their negative aspects served, perhaps unconsciously, to assuage lingering traces of white racial anxiety.¹⁸



15 E. Simms Campbell, *I Passed Along This Way*, 1935. Charcoal on paper, reproduced in *The Crisis* (April 1935): 102

How Else?

Yet how else should artists who wished to focus directly on the effects of lynching rather than its broader political contexts have conveyed its horrors? It is notable that only two of the seven African-American artists who took part in the NAACP exhibition portrayed explicit violence,¹⁹ and both found unusual ways to emphasize the victim's suffering. Four of the other five, along with several white artists, turned to images of grieving and religious metaphors as an alternative symbolic vocabulary. This strategy allowed them to downplay both frenzied white violence and demeaning black victimization. It permitted them to stress instead the dignity of black victims as well as the spiritual anguish felt by African-American communities (and sympathetic whites) in response to lynch violence. Religious analogies, particularly themes derived from Jesus' Crucifixion, enabled these artists to develop images that avoided the explicit terror of lynching scenes, highlighted emotional suffering, expressed communal grief, and also

evoked black Americans' historical dependence on Christian faith to endure injustice.

In a charcoal drawing titled *I Passed Along This Way* (fig. 15), E. Simms Campbell portrayed Jesus struggling uphill under the cross, while behind him loomed the shadowy figure of a black lynch victim. This stark image so effectively conveyed the pain of lynching to the editors of *The Crisis* that they reproduced it as the frontispiece for the March 1935 issue containing a review of the NAACP show. Prentiss Taylor, a white artist with close ties to the black community in Harlem through his friendship with Langston Hughes, also referred to the Crucifixion in his lithograph *Christ in Alabama* (frontispiece).²⁰ Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson had already explored this symbolic connection in poetry; Aaron Douglas gave it visual form in his 1927 drawing *The Crucifixion*, an illustration for Johnson's 1927 book titled *God's Trombones*. Religious references to Christian themes could also be read as condemning white lynchers' failure to live up to their own claims of Christian identity. Moreover, such references muted the overt expression of black anger at white oppression. This strategy may have seemed appropriate for works contributed to an exhibition that was intended to solicit white support for the NAACP's proposed antilynching legislation.

Images centered on Christian references drew mixed criticism from contemporary reporters, whose responses tended to reflect their communal and political affiliations. The New York *Amsterdam News*, an African-American newspaper, cited Campbell's image *I Passed Along This Way* as one of the most moving pieces in the NAACP exhibition. However, leftist critic Stephen Alexander, writing for *New Masses*, strongly denounced references to Christian suffering

and transcendence in a review influenced by leftist demands to link lynching to more inclusive struggles for social change. Alexander condemned the NAACP show as giving the “general impression of *pleading* for reform” [emphasis in original], and praised the *Negro Rights* exhibition for its emphasis on “fighting pictures.” Yet he faulted artists in both shows for not making works that sufficiently “explained” lynching, asserting that “most of it is chalked up to God or human nature” in the NAACP show, and that in the *Negro Rights* exhibition even the most powerful images often only served to arouse viewers’ indignation. He called for works that would “attack the social forces responsible for lynching” and carry the fight “to a higher political level” rather than politely appealing “to the good impulses of our ‘better people.’”²¹ Alexander’s condemnatory perspective, however, failed to recognize the significance of images that spoke to the grief as well as the outrage aroused by lynch violence.

Black artists in the NAACP show did not entirely shy away from condemning lynching as a violent social spectacle, yet their images conveyed significantly different meanings when compared to works by their white peers. Samuel Brown’s watercolor, *The Lynching* (fig. 16), was as explicit as many works by white artists, but his idiosyncratic choice of a viewpoint above the head of the lynched figure suggested a uniquely empathetic conception. It brought viewers face to face with the man’s agony while minimizing their view of his tortured body. At the same time, the violent white crowd was reduced to tiny jeering spectators far below, creating a very different expressive emphasis.

Hale Woodruff also created several works that combined references to black victimization and Christian redemption. In the linocut print titled *Giddap!*

(fig. 17), Woodruff included a threatening white crowd and placed his black protagonist in a highly vulnerable position, bound and about to be hanged. However, this portrayal is distinctly different from other treatments of such scenes. The man’s body is clothed, not stripped naked, and his stance is upright and dignified, even if bound, not obviously fearful nor sagging in death. The artist added highlights on his collar bones and sternum to suggest a cross, implying that Christian belief would sustain his dignity during his terrible ordeal. Woodruff’s depiction of this figure powerfully communicated his desire to preserve the dignity of the subject. His iconographic choices also implied that black men functioned as morally innocent scapegoats in white men’s violent efforts to enforce their social control. Woodruff called a second print *By Parties Unknown* (fig. 18), referring to the highly suspect failure of white Southern leaders to identify lynch mob participants. The dilapidated building in this image might be interpreted as a white church; however, its ramshackle state mitigates against this reading. Recent scholarship rejects conflict between poor white and black communities as the primary cause behind lynching, suggesting instead that lynch violence served primarily as a type of “state-sanctioned terrorism” to assert white social control and enforce white solidarity across class divisions.²² It seems more likely that, by depicting a lynch victim left on the steps of an impoverished black church, Woodruff meant to suggest lynchers’ additional insult to the dignity of the African-American community.

Perhaps the work by an African-American artist that most poignantly evoked the awfulness of lynching while avoiding literal representation of physical suffering was Wilmer Jennings’s linocut *At the End of the Rope* (fig. 20). This image might be read as a eulogy for all

16 Samuel Brown, *The Lynching*, 1934. Watercolor over graphite on paper, 77.48 x 52.1 cm (30 ½ x 20 ½ in.). Public Works of Art Project on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

African-American lynch victims. Amid a picturesque arrangement of exotic wild plants and tree trunks that suggest both a Southern and an ideal, ancestral African location, Jennings portrayed a severed head resting on the ground, eyes closed, horribly still in death. Once a viewer noticed the vertical coils of a rope camouflaged among the branches, that silent head powerfully conveyed both horror and excruciating grief.

Overall, the works contributed by these African-American artists to the NAACP show, as well as works that adopted alternative perspectives in the *Negro Rights* exhibition, demonstrated that portraying lynching as a spectacle of public violence was not the only way to address the issue, even if it seemed highly effective in stirring up opposition to lynching, the goal of both exhibitions. These surviving images from the two shows strongly suggest that artists' representational decisions were substantially affected both by their political ideals and by racially inflected perspectives that led artists to stress significantly different aspects of lynching's social and emotional implications.

Gendered Constraints

As mentioned earlier, women's contributions to the two exhibitions were unusually limited: there were only six works by women out of a total of 105 works in both shows. Yet the paucity of antilynching works by women raises rather than invalidates questions about the role of gender in the construction of antilynching images. The lack of works by women cannot be attributed to either women's invisibility in the New York art world in the early 1930s or to their lack of interest in antilynching organizing. Both black and white women played active roles in opposing lynching in the 1930s. At the same time, various sources corroborate

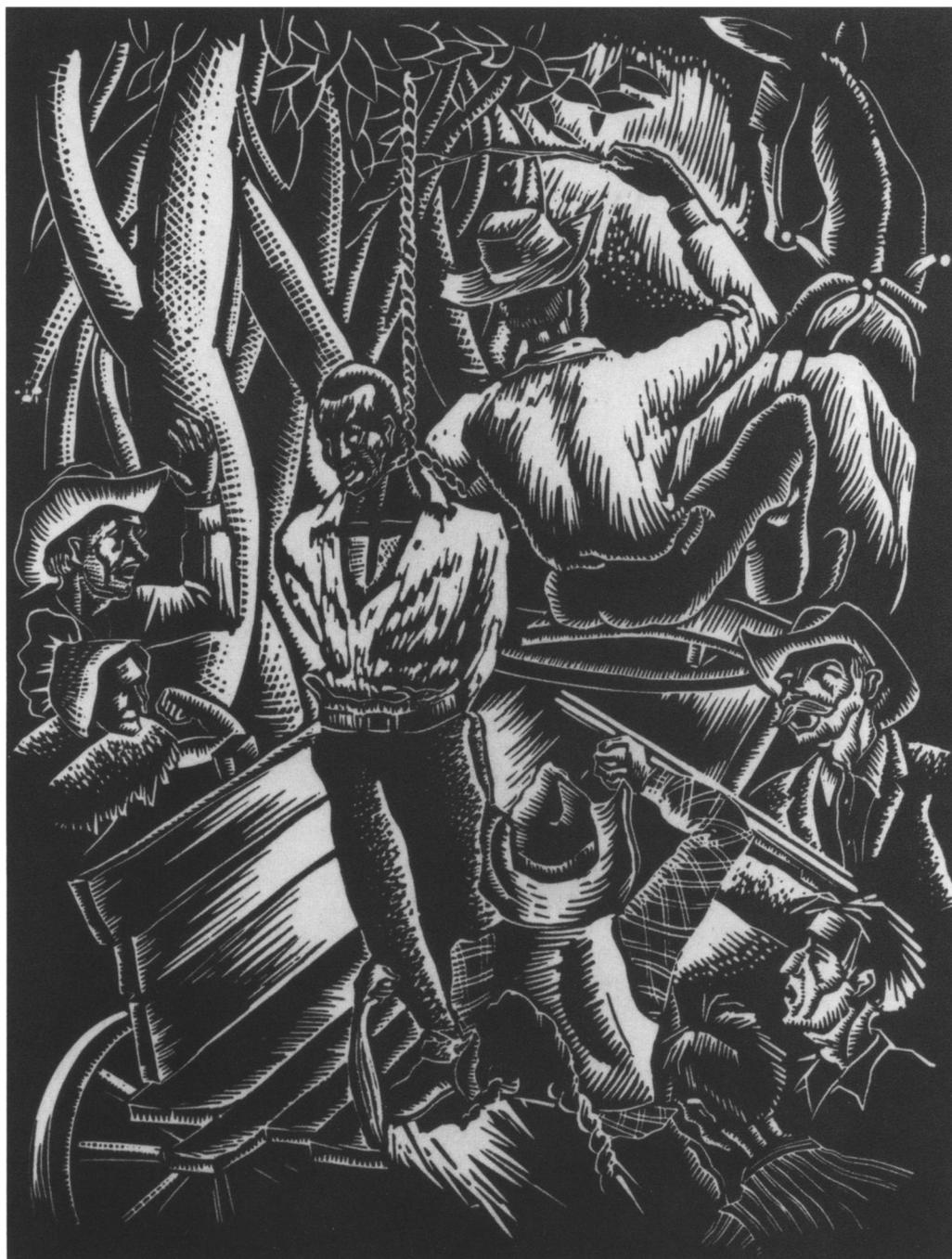
women's involvement in the visual arts, making it evident that numerous competent female artists might have contributed images to the two antilynching shows, yet they did not.

Why was this the case? One explanation might be the failure of exhibition organizers to solicit works by women artists. Women may have been poorly represented in the NAACP show because White, in seeking out respected contributors, overlooked women artists even though he solicited the support of women patrons. Peggy Bacon, the one woman to participate in the NAACP show, was well known in New York art circles in the 1930s, but there were certainly other women of equivalent reputation whom White could have invited. But organizers' disregard for women's accomplishments cannot be blamed for the relative absence of women from the *Struggle for Negro Rights* exhibition. Works were publicly solicited, and although the show was juried, the exhibition included pieces by many relatively unknown contributors, yet only three participants were women. If the sparse number of images by women in the *Negro Rights* show cannot be attributed to organizers' biases, then what other causes might explain their absence?

A more plausible answer might be that women artists who considered making works to condemn lynching found their representational options undercut by complex social constraints on feminine propriety. These constraints were related to socially constructed expectations of gender difference in two overlapping contexts: in response to violent social acts, and in both looking at and representing male bodies. The tensions posed by these expectations mitigated against women's use of the visual vocabularies that, in the works of their white male peers, delineated lynching as a violent racist spectacle centered on the bodies of black male victims. As Elizabeth Alexander stated in a recent essay on



17 Hale Woodruff, *Giddap!*, 1935.
Linocut, 22.9 x 31 cm (9 x 12 in.).
Kenkeleba Gallery, New York



racist violence in American culture, “black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries.”²³ However, the symbolic forms used for these literary, theatrical, and visual representations were complex and historically specific.

In the 1930s the social meaning of lynching was explained by competing ideologies that emphasized white manliness and aggression as well as racial hostility. White lynch mobs frequently defended their acts as demonstrating the “masculine” virtue of violence directed



18 Hale Woodruff, *By Parties Unknown*, 1935. Linocut, 22.9 x 31 cm (9 x 12 in.). Kenkeleba Gallery, New York

toward achieving so-called “communal justice.” They also claimed they were providing “manly” protection for white women. However, women themselves, both black and white, contradicted this claim. Ida B. Wells, at the turn of the century, had indicted white lynchers for “unmanly” lack of control. Jessie Daniel Ames and members of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, a white women’s organization founded in 1930,

also rejected outright the idea that racial terrorism was innately protective. Nevertheless, lynch violence provided white male participants with a spurious sense of communally validated manliness while also violating black men’s sense of masculine self-sufficiency and mocking their rights to claim either self-control or social empowerment. As Trudier Harris has suggested, lynching was the most extreme form of an emasculating process carried out in the daily cultural enforcement of black subordination to white social authority.²⁴

All artists who sought to address lynching themes, therefore, had to confront these contradictory discourses on manliness and unmanliness. It was difficult to develop visual images that avoided prevailing racial and gender stereotyping. When artists focused either literally or symbolically on violence done to the bodies of black men, they ran the risk of reinforcing white viewers’ stereotypes of racial “otherness” even as they ostensibly worked to combat them. It may have been this very dilemma that discouraged some of the leading visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance from participating in the exhibitions.

Women artists encountered more complex issues in working with lynching themes than their male peers. Detailed graphic depictions of lynch violence would have transgressed middle-class values that still idealized women as essentially moral figures, expected to deplore and shun violent events. Harris analyzed contemporary literary texts that may have reflected the effects of this cultural expectation. Black male writers often constructed detailed descriptions of lynch victims’ mutilation and death, while black women writers rarely referred to such details and generally avoided narrative emphasis on lynchings as public spectacles.²⁵ Thus black male writers pursued a strategy different from that

19 Wilmer Jennings, *At the End of the Rope*, 1935. Linocut, 29 x 21.6 cm (11 ¼ x 8 ½ in.). Kenkeleba Gallery, New York



of their peers in the visual arts (perhaps because of significant differences between verbal and visual representations). Black women writers, however, seem to have shared a reluctance to directly address lynch violence with the few white women artists who contributed works to the

antilynching shows, and perhaps also with those who did not participate at all. The evidence suggests that it was not racial sensitivities but gender conventions that provoked this difference: as both writers and visual artists, women were subject to cultural expectations of

feminine propriety that inhibited certain kinds of representational choices.

Similar unwritten yet culturally powerful prohibitions relating to gender propriety also curtailed the possibilities of women's representation of male bodies. In earlier periods, women artists had been expected to confine their subject choices to portraiture or the domestic and pious themes deemed appropriate to their sex. In art schools, women were excluded from academic study of the male nude until the late nineteenth century, and were at first only allowed to gain such training in sex-segregated classes. Even at the liberal Art Students League in New York, mixed-sex life drawing classes were not held until 1926, and the option of single-sex classes was retained into the early 1930s. Women artists who joined the Federal Art Project in the later 1930s created murals, paintings, and prints that included male figures, but they rarely portrayed men as industrial laborers or in other roles that demanded the physically explicit depiction of active male bodies. Furthermore, art historian Tamar Garb has suggested that anxiety on the part of both male artists and the public about women's right to represent men's activities and male bodies, especially when unclothed, was based on two underlying taboos that extended beyond efforts to protect women's supposedly innate modesty. From Greek mythology to twentieth-century psychoanalysis, a woman's direct gaze at the male body has been interpreted as either threatening castration or inviting seduction.²⁶ Both interpretations identify the female gaze as transgressive when cast beyond the conventional boundaries of familial modesty and class-determined social roles. Although the psychological implications and metaphorical risks of looking at male bodies most likely did not resonate consciously with women artists, social practices that encoded such taboos within

patterns of feminine propriety worked to constrain certain behaviors.

At the same time, interracial heterosexual rape and seduction were among the most frequently evoked "crimes" used to justify lynching as retribution. White racists exploited fears of black men's sexual coercion of white women to intensify white mob anger. The literal enactment of castration to "punish" lynch victims who supposedly sought out or responded to a white woman's gaze had been brought to public attention just a few months before the exhibitions, when news reports of the lynching and castration of Claude Neal made national headlines. Although a white male artist, such as Harry Sternberg, could express outrage by explicitly evoking this horrifying act, such imagery would have been much more shocking if created by a woman. An antilynching drawing made in 1939 by Ruth Egri, a white woman artist, depicted a lynched black figure hanging from a tree, but simply portrayed the victim as a dark silhouette.²⁷

Southern historian Jacquelyn Hall has proposed that another, generally unacknowledged, source of lynch violence, as it functioned to assert white male control over Southern society, was anxiety over the direction of white women's sexual desires. Any white woman's direct gaze at a black male body was thus linked on multiple levels to the threat of societal disruption, if not individual destruction. Yet during the early 1930s, both the NAACP and the Communist party in New York actually fostered a social version of this type of looking, in the process of facilitating greater interracial comradeship. The Party even encouraged interracial heterosexual relationships as evidence that party members were overcoming racial prejudice. In these contexts, some white women artists may indeed have felt more freedom to look with desire at black men

and, as a corollary, to reject the dominant, demeaning ways of portraying vulnerable lynch victims. Black women artists, sensitive to cultural stereotypes that denied respect and admiration to men of their own race, would also have had grounds for rejecting such portrayals. All women artists were theoretically free to draw from the male nude, to imagine the violated bodies of lynch victims, or to look seductively at men at meetings and parties. However, social and ideological constraints, along with new possibilities for interracial social relationships, significantly complicated their options for responding to lynch violence.²⁸

Fighting Works

It is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of visual images in motivating individuals to participate in struggles for social justice. However, the discomfort and anguish that readers might have felt in looking at illustrations for this article suggest that, even if no national legislation condemning lynching was enacted during the 1930s, the power Angelo Herndon attributed to “fighting pictures” may indeed have credibility. Both antilynching exhibitions were successful in stimulating attendance and gaining a degree of critical attention, although critics’ perspectives were varied. Both shows offered a powerful visual stimulus to viewers to play a more active role in

demanding an end to lynch violence. Despite their political and polemical differences, both exhibitions also fulfilled an important task in urging artists to address a theme of profound emotional, social, and legal significance. Yet neither art nor political organizing surmounted the effects of regional interests, and Congress has never passed federal legislation criminalizing lynch violence.²⁹

The works that have survived movingly demonstrate individual artists’ anguish over the issue of lynching and its terrible costs, but they should also be evaluated as statements that participated in a complex cultural dialogue. This process involved competing forms of political activism that molded the efforts of both organizers and participants to shape viewers’ experiences. It also reflected white artists’ desire to overcome societal prejudices about racial difference and African-American artists’ struggle to deal with the personal intensity of the subject, although neither effort was limited to members of one racial group. Despite these difficulties, many artists were able to draw on prevailing representational conventions in ways that gave scope to both their personal viewpoints and political ideals. For others, the tensions of race and gender differences inherent in this dialogue may have made it impossible to find an acceptable visual form for asserting antilynching sentiments, constraining or even silencing their responses to the urgent social issue that both exhibitions sought to address.

Notes

My research on this topic was facilitated by a grant from American University in 1996.

All references in this article to “racial identities” should be understood as referring to socially constructed concepts accepted at the time as a way of defining social relationships.

- 1 Marlene Park published a groundbreaking article in 1993 that discussed these two exhibitions while also providing a historical overview of antilynching activism in the United States and the efforts of the NAACP to get antilynching legislation passed by Congress. Park’s detailed analysis of Walter White’s role in organizing the NAACP show and her explication of critical responses to the exhibitions made invaluable contributions to the study of these events. See Marlene Park, “Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 18 (Cambridge University Press, 1993): 311–65. My own work on these shows has certainly benefited from Park’s expert research and her continuation of Kristie Jayne’s efforts to locate artworks from the exhibitions. In this article I focus on three new areas of investigation: the organization of the *Struggle for Negro Rights* exhibition and the differences between images shown there and in the NAACP show; patterns of racial as well as political affiliation suggested by artists’ iconographic choices; and the paucity of works by women in both exhibitions.
Statistics on numbers of lynchings are not consistent in historical sources. The numbers here are taken from Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 98–99. For the social effects of lynching, see Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence. An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 19–26. Angelo Herndon, “Pictures Can Fight!,” *Struggle for Negro Rights*, 1935, Anton Refregier Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 2 In the 1920s, protests over the difficulty of ascertaining individual blame had hindered passage of previous antilynch legislation proposed by the NAACP. For more information, see Zangrando, p. 114. For more on the leftist viewpoint, see Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 100; see also Zangrando, p. 114.
- 3 The NAACP catalogue is available on microfiche in the lynching files at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York. A copy of the *Struggle for Negro Rights* catalogue is in the uncatalogued Anton Refregier Papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., in Box 1.
- 4 Naison, p. 75. Herndon published an autobiographical account of his experiences. See Herndon, *Let Me Live* (1937; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1964).
- 5 For more on the NAACP’s view of the Communist party, see Zangrando, p. 99ff. For information on the NAACP’s targeted support, see Zangrando, p. 124. The Scottsboro Case involved the arrest of nine young African-American men, who had been traveling through Alabama on a freight train in March 1931 with a larger group of transients. The nine were charged with the rape of two young white women in the larger group. Within two weeks, the nine men were tried and convicted and eight were sentenced to death. The verdicts were followed by a lengthy series of appeals and new trials. See Naison, pp. 58–59, and Zangrando, p. 100ff.
- 6 Walter White to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, cited by Park, p. 326. To understand White’s organizing efforts, Park drew extensively on his correspondence, preserved in the NAACP archives. See Park, pp. 326–27, 359 n. 70.
- 7 Flyer, Anton Refregier Papers, Box 1; also published in *New Masses* (26 February 1935): 21. Park discusses Warsager’s drawing, pp. 344–45. The drawing was published in the 9 January 1934 issue of *New Masses*, at a time when numerous cartoons and editorial comments linked fascism with capitalist inequities in American society.
- 8 For Van Vechten’s influence, see Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), p. 100, and Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty. Mongel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), pp. 287–291. For the Vanguard group, see Naison, p. 100.
- 9 For the reference to African Americans as “happy-go-lucky,” see Carl Zigrosser, “Modern American Etching,” *Print Collectors’ Quarterly* (1929): 385. For the comment about “spiritual fear,” see “Angele Watson’s View,” *The Art Digest* (1 November 1937): 16. For more on the 1941 show, see “American Negro Art Given Full Length Review in New York Show,” *The Art Digest* (15 December 1941): 5, 16. Similar references to African Americans’ inherent sense of modernist/primitivist visual rhythm and abstract pattern were made in well-intentioned speeches by Federal Art Project officials. See Jonathan Harris, “Nationalizing Art: The Community Art Centre Programme of the Federal Art Project 1935–1943,” *Art History* 14: 2 (June 1991): 257, 267 nn. 28, 29. On idealizing references to African heritage, see David C. Driskell, “The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic, 1920–1950” in David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 59–79; and Mary Schmidt Campbell, “Introduction” in *Harlem Renaissance. Art of Black America* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 50.
For more on Charles Alston’s experience at Columbia University, see Francine Tyler, “Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists’ Union and Its Magazine *Art Front* (1934–1937)” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991), p. 211ff. n. 19.
- 10 Park noted that there is some uncertainty about whether all the works solicited and listed in the catalogues were actually delivered to the exhibitions. See Park, pp. 359–60 n. 74, and p. 391 n. 93.
- 11 Angelo Herndon asserted in “Pictures Can Fight!” that “a lot of fine artists, both white and Negro, refused the

- N.A.A.C.P. invitation and sent their work to the United Anti-Lynch Exhibit." Sources documenting the careers of African-American artists that were published shortly after the exhibitions include Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940) and *The New Negro Comes of Age. A National Survey of Contemporary Artists* (Albany, New York: Albany Institute of History and Art, 1945); and James Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969). None of the artists named in the *Struggle for Negro Rights* catalogue are included in any of these sources.
- 12 M. M. [sic], "An Art Commentary on Lynching," *Art News* 33 (23 February 1935): 13; cited in Park, p. 330 n. 83. For the *Parnassus* review, see J. W. L. [sic], "Current Exhibitions," *Parnassus* 7 (March 1935): 22; cited in Park, p. 330 nn. 83, 84. White Americans have had difficulty accepting that representations of people of color can express universal human meanings. Two important studies of nineteenth-century American sculpture have focused on this issue. See Michael Hatt, "Making a Man of Him': Masculinity and the Black Body in Mid-Nineteenth Century American Sculpture," *The Oxford Art Journal* 15:1 (1992): 21–35; and Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves. Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 8–15.
- 13 Park, pp. 319, 326.
- 14 On the similarity of the Orozco print and the Noguchi sculpture to the photo, see Tyler, pp. 205–206. Diego Rivera also used the same figure in a detail of murals he painted for the New Workers' School in New York in 1933. Orozco's lithograph was included in one of the two portfolios of prints published by the Contemporary Artists Group in New York in 1933–34. Sternberg's comments are quoted in James Moore, *Harry Sternberg. A Catalogue Raisonné of His Graphic Work with Annotations by Harry Sternberg* (Wichita: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1976); see no. 117.
- 15 For more on the psychological as well as physical violence done to lynch victims, see Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness. Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5–23. See also Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence. An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*, pp. 19–23. Marsh's portrayal of women's avid response to a lynching should not be seen as a "carnavalesque" subversion of dominant social practices, because rather than challenging the social hierarchy, lynching reinforced white authority. It functioned as a form of communal terrorism directed towards an already oppressed minority population.
- 16 Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, p. x. Neal was lynched by a mob supposedly numbering 4,000 people. His body was castrated and fingers and toes were cut off as souvenirs by lynch mob participants. Local law enforcement made no effort to stop the lynching or dismemberment. For an account of Neal's murder, see Zangrando, pp. 122–23. For the photograph, see *The Crisis* (November 1934): 5. I thank Corrinne Jennings, curator of Kenkeleba Gallery in New York, for bringing Charles Alston's recently located drawing to my attention. Alston was invited to participate in the NAACP show but refused. Ms. Jennings recounted that her father, artist Wilmer Jennings, remembered that Alston intended to place the work in the *Negro Rights* exhibition, and that he was upset by its rejection. Telephone conversation with author, 25 March 1998. See also Park, p. 332 n. 88.
- 17 *Hold the Fort* is the title given in the *Negro Rights* catalogue, but Park believes this is the same work as the print now known as *Strike Scene*. See Park, pp. 344, 364 n. 114.
- 18 Hatt and Savage (see Note 12) both discuss the tensions involved in representing heroic African-American male nudes in art and their relation to white racial anxieties. On these issues, see also bell hooks, "Representing the Black Male Body," *Art on My Mind. Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 202–205.
- 19 Of the forty-nine works listed in the NAACP exhibition catalogue, nine were by seven African-American artists: Henry Bannarn, Samuel Brown, E. Simms Campbell (two), Allan Freelon, Wilmer Jennings, Malvin Grey Johnson, and Hale Woodruff (two). Freelon's drawing titled *Barbecue—American Style* was described in an *Amsterdam News* review as showing "the distorted figure of a Negro burning at the stake, while a crowd of whites, including children, are looking on" and seems to be an exception to this reluctance. However, in a letter to White, Freelon noted that he showed only the feet of the crowd. Letter in NAACP papers; cited in Park, p. 361 n. 86.
- 20 Campbell's *I Passed Along This Way* was reproduced in *The Crisis* 32:3 (March 1935): 1. Hughes and Taylor founded Golden Stair Press together. *Christ in Alabama* was one of four illustrations Taylor made for Hughes's book *Scottsboro Limited*, which they published in 1932. See Ingrid Rose and Roderick S. Quiroz, *The Lithographs of Prentiss Taylor* (Bronx, New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), pp. 11–17. I thank Liza Kirwin of the Archives of American Art for bringing this catalogue raisonné to my attention. Hughes's involvement with the Communist party later in the decade led him to vilify Christian beliefs in his late 1930s works. Two other images that referred to the Crucifixion in their titles were Malvin Grey Johnson's *The Crucifixion* and Fred Buchholz's *We Too Knew Calvary*.
- 21 J. T. [sic], "Lynching Art Show Lauded," *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 February 1935; cited by Park, p. 332 n. 89. Stephen Alexander, "Art," *New Masses* (19 March 1935): 29; also cited by Park, pp. 343–44.
- 22 Park saw the building as a white church, and interpreted Woodruff's message as "literally laying the blame at the doorstep of Southern poor whites who professed to be Christians." See Park, p. 338.
- 23 Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and look at this?' Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *The Black Male. Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 92.
- 24 On Wells, see Gail Bederman, "Civilization, the Decline of Middle-Class

- Manliness, and Ida B. Well's Anti-Lynching Campaign (1882–94)" in *Gender and American History Since 1890* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 218. For women's rejection of lynch terrorism as protective, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," *Southern Exposure* XII:6 (November/December 1984): 64–65. Numerous scholars have discussed emasculation as the intended message of lynching; see, for example, Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, pp. x–xiii and 189, and Hall, p. 62.
- 25 For the difference in black male and female writers on lynching, see Harris, pp. xi and 188–94.
- 26 On the Art Student's League, see Christian Buckheit, "I Knew the League When—," *The League* (Winter 1931–32): 16. Women's experiences with the Federal Art Project are discussed in Helen Langa, "Egalitarian Vision, Gendered Experience: Women Printmakers and the WPA/FAP Graphic Arts Project," eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, Icon Editions 1992), pp. 409–423. On women's gaze, see Tamar Garb, "The Forbidden Gaze: Women Artists and the Male Nude in Late Nineteenth-Century France," in *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture Since the Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 33–42.
- 27 The rape of black women by white men was almost never discussed in 1930s analyses, but Hall argues that historically such rape served as another means for reiterating African American's helplessness against white aggression. See Hall, p. 62. For Egri's drawing, see file labeled *Photographs, Scrapbook #1*, Ruth Egri Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. I would like to thank Mary Murphy for bringing this work to my attention.
- 28 For more on male anxiety about white women's desire, see Hall, p. 65. On the Communist party's support for interracial social relations, see Naison, p. 137. Although the question of homoerotic pleasure and the complex politics of the male gaze should be addressed in this context as well, constraints on space prevent the exploration of these issues in the present study.
- 29 After 1936 the Communist party turned from attacking the NAACP to supporting its legislative efforts, and the NAACP gained allies as Southern newspapers, churches, and liberal organizations also called for a federal law criminalizing lynching. In 1937 and 1940 an antilynching bill was passed by the House of Representatives but defeated in the Senate. During the 1940s, the NAACP turned its efforts to desegregating the military and later focused on the struggle for civil rights in a larger context. See Park, pp. 351–52, and Zangrando, pp. 137–44.