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**IMAGING HER SELVES: BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS, RESISTANCE,
IMAGE AND REPRESENTATION, 1937-1957**

A Dissertation Presented

by

HEATHER ZAHRA CALDWELL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Department of Afro-American Studies
College of Arts and Humanities

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my light and inspiration Nefer Chinua. I wrote with you growing inside of me, asleep in your crib, and pulling at the keyboard from my lap. If I could have written a dissertation as perfect and awe inspiring as you, I could truly change the world. Thank you for sharing your blinding brilliance with me.

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I know that is it customary to first thank the various people and institutions that have assisted in the academic endeavor. This seems wrong somehow. My journey could not have been possible without the support of family and friends. Two special women

deserve singular praise and thanks – my mother, Gene Caldwell, and, my mentor, Dr. Margaret Wade-Lewis. My mother was the true inspiration for my project and is my reason for being. She has been an unpatrolled model of strength and resistance. Academic semantics would do poorly in describing her model of Black womanhood. Dr. Wade Lewis, in life and in spirit, has provided limitless support and encouragement. She has been the true embodiment of a scholar activist. The entire Black Studies Department at the State University of New York at New Paltz, my undergraduate institution, deserves respect and appreciation for any success in my journey. I express my gratitude to elders and mentors who saw my potential as greater than I could see it myself, including Dr. Charshee McIntyre, Dr. James Turner, and Dr. Ronald Walters. How lucky I was to have them in my corner. My circle of sisterfriends aka “the Ladies Salon” supported me through this arduous process: Allia Matta, Rani Varghese, Shelly Perdomo, Hye-Kyung Kang, Cruz Caridad Bueno and Anna Rita Napoleone shared wisdom and love, wiped away tears, read and commented, celebrated successes, and staged needed interventions all while completing their own work. Last, and most importantly, I have nothing but gratitude for my life partner and friend, Deroy Gordon. He has been my number one fan and anchor demonstrating grace, patience, and an unequalled faith in my possibilities and capabilities.

African-American women and their ways of being and the history that they create are really what deserve appreciation and acknowledgement. I hope that this dissertation will make a small contribution to that effort.

ABSTRACT

**IMAGING HER SELVES: BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS, RESISTANCE,
IMAGE AND REPRESENTATION, 1937-1957**

MAY 2015

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This dissertation focuses specifically on dancer Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), pianist Hazel Scott (1920-1981), cartoonist Jackie Ormes (1911-1985), singer Lena Horne (1917-2010), and graphic artist, painter, and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012). It explores the artistic, performative, and political resistance deployed by these five African-American women activists, artists, and performers in the period between 1937 and 1957. The principal form of resistance employed by these women was cultural resistance. Using a mixture of archival research, first person interview, biography, as well as other primary and secondary sources, I explore how these women constructed personas, representations, and media images of African-American women to challenge the racialized, reductive constructions found in mainstream white media and fine art outlets. They simultaneously engaged in “off the page” and “off the stage” political activism during eras that were pivotal within the African-American fight for freedom and

equality. The primary purpose of the dissertation then is to unveil this multi-terrain struggle over Black female agency, equality, image, and representation waged by highly visible African-American artists and performers positioned in popular culture and fine art during this period. I argue that this battle is a fundamental component and sits within the larger long struggle for African-American freedom and equality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1943 the production of the Columbia film *The Heat's On* ground to a halt for three days due to an on-set protest by featured performer Hazel Scott. In a departure from the script, David Lichine, the film's choreographer, had instructed the makeup department to spray oil and dirt onto the aprons of Black women extras and dancers in a scene depicting women seeing their soldier boyfriends off to war. Scott furiously opposed the stereotypical and racist implications in sullyng the white, pressed aprons worn by these African-American women. After all, these characters were seeing off men who were risking their lives in a war being fought to "preserve democracy and freedom abroad" while a battle was needed against the racism, discrimination, and segregation practiced at home. Lichine could not understand how "Negro" female domestics would be dressed in aprons that "looked too new."¹ The choreographer's response suggested that Scott remain detached and aloof to injustices, "What do you care? You're beautifully dressed. What's it to you?" he asked.²

At the time, Scott's foray into film was a relatively new, welcome, and unexpected opportunity. Discovered by Hollywood during World War II, she was an addition to the Black specialty acts that were appearing in films of the moment. After

¹ Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 266.

² Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist From Cafe Society to Hollywood to HUAC* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 83.

Scott was cast in three films in the previous year as “herself,” she was signed to a three-picture deal with Columbia Pictures that sought her out because of her mesmerizing performances as a classically-trained “boogie woogie” pianist. While understanding the power of her own character's image in *The Heat is On*, she became unwilling to participate in a scene that would merely perpetuate the ultimately debasing and stereotypical imagery of Black women as untidy and unsophisticated domestics. She reflected in her unpublished autobiography, “I insisted that no scene in which I was involved would display Black women wearing dirty aprons to send their men to die for their country.”³ Her one-woman strike would last until “black women in the film were given proper costumes and not depicted seeing their sweethearts off to war wearing dirty Hoover aprons.”⁴ Hemorrhaging money by the hour, the studio was forced to relent. With this victory in hand, Scott went further to ensure an affirming image. On the night prior to the final shoot, she called together the Black female extras demanding, “Tonight I want every one of you broads into the hairdresser’s. Tomorrow morning at nine, I want you on this set, immaculately turned out.”⁵

Admittedly, the final cut of the scene still suffers from the limits of Black popular construction in the white imagination. The scene was deliberately marginalized so that it could be cut for more discriminatory southern audiences; for example, it was kept short to less than three minutes in its entirety, and the scene is not integral to the storyline. The

³ Chilton, *The Pioneering Journey*, 83.

⁴ Dwayne Mack, “Hazel Scott: A Career Curtailed,” *The Journal of African-American History* 91, no. 2 (2006): 155; Chilton, *The Pioneering Journey*, 82-83.

⁵ Chilton, *The Pioneering Journey*, 84.

setting for the musical number places an upright piano conveniently and oddly on a street surrounded by dilapidated tenements. This is apparently an impoverished Black community, complete with hanging clotheslines, and a stray dog. Scott begins her boogie-woogie rendition of the Army's Caisson song as Black dancers dressed in full uniform march in toting guns. Their sweethearts and other community members anticipating their departure eagerly greet the soldiers. After the couples dance to Scott's upbeat rendition, the number turns melancholy as the soldiers exit the stage on their way to war.

Despite such circumstances, the impact that Scott's protest had on the scene was transformative. The female extras wore clothes resembling those of the African-American women that Black moviegoers would encounter in their own communities. In so doing Scott's revision of the scene contextualizes African-Americans as part of a modern world. This same scene staged as proposed would have referenced the unshakable and antiquated Aunt Jemima and Mammy tropes and rehashed Blackface minstrelsy. Scott's response to Lichine affirmed her sense of communal responsibility to accurately represent the Black female image in American popular culture. The overarching negative portrayals of African-American women not only insulted African-American womanhood, they also represented one tool within a contingent meant to subvert Black political and economic power. An inherent political debate and tension existed within all portrayals of African-American women (negative and positive) just before, during, and immediately following World War II. Scott would not allow her individual presentation to be isolated from this larger context. This episode in Scott's career serves as an exemplar of the troubling circumstances activist artists and performers

confronted in tightly oppressive, racialized, and gendered spaces in the US, and abroad, and of the adroit ways in which they chose to navigate them.

After this protest Harry Cohen, the film's producer, promised Scott that she would never make another film, "as long as he lived."⁶ However, Scott was under contract for one additional film for Columbia. She made this last film, *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was released in 1945. Scott explained that after this film was made, "I never did make another picture in Hollywood."⁷ Although her star had been quickly ascending, Scott in time would effectively be barred from American film.

This dissertation is the beginning of a conversation that explores the social and political resistance deployed by African-American women activists, artists, and performers in the period between 1937 and 1957. The principal form of resistance employed by these women was cultural resistance. They constructed alternative affirmative personas, representations, and media images of African-American women to challenge those found in mainstream white media outlets, as well as engaged in progressive political activism during eras that were pivotal within African-American fights for freedom and equality. This dissertation focuses specifically on dancer Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), pianist Hazel Scott (1920-1981), cartoonist Jackie Ormes (1911-1985), singer Lena Horne (1917-2010), and graphic artist, painter, and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012). The primary purpose of this dissertation is to unveil a multi-terrain struggle over Black female agency, equality, image, and

⁶ Margo Jefferson, "Great (Hazel) Scott!," *Ms. Magazine*, November (1974): 26.

⁷ Taylor, *Notes and Tones*, 266.

representation waged by highly visible African-American artists and performers positioned in popular culture and fine art during this period. Further, I argue that this battle is a fundamental component of, and sits within the larger long struggle for, African-American freedom and equality.

The period from the late 1950s through the 1960s has been a dominant focus among scholars of African-American and Women's movement history, and has emphasized the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Second Wave Women's Movements. This has worked to obscure the resistance waged by African-American women in the first half of the 20th century. Crucial examples of resistance took place from the late 1930s to the mid 1950s. According to these periodizations, mid-century resistance has been viewed as either the beginning of what would become known as the Civil Rights Movement, or as the ending of the radical Popular and Cultural Front movements that began in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. The women discussed in this dissertation straddle these eras and operate in a related, but arguably wholly different, social and political atmosphere upon which many scholars have typically focused. In addition to the unique conditions of the mid-century historical moment, their positioning as artists makes them unique subjects for this sort of study. They can be viewed in fact as important bridges between the two adjoining eras and movements.

I have grouped Dunham, Scott, Ormes, Catlett, and Horne together as activists, as I assert that the agency and resistance of these women must be looked at collectively. The cultural locations of these women indeed may appear disparate at first glance; however, by the mid 1940's these women form a web of highly visible women activist-artists and performers. From the late 1930's to mid 1950's they were among the most popular and

nationally visible Black women in their respective areas of cultural production (via film, television, print media, and fine art). Grouping these women links them across imposed boundaries of cultural production (e.g. popular culture and fine art) and false movement periodization joins their contributions with that of other Black women artists and performers in the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. These women were chosen specifically because their impact on Black women's image and representation in national popular culture and fine art, brought about through personal and public social and political activism, ultimately represented significant advances in struggles against racial inequality and injustice, and particularly for Black women.⁸

I posit that Dunham, Scott, Ormes, Catlett, and Horne engaged in a layered politics of resistance as they navigated cultural and political spaces. Three layers denote this activism. The first layer is found in the claiming and manipulating of popular public space. During this time period this was no small feat. Performers and artists who garnered national exposure and attention were white without exception. Each woman maneuvered herself into the public spotlight despite a racist and sexist media environment and projected images and representations that were seldom seen nationally. Once the spotlight was gained, they strategically obtained access to some measure of agency over their representation and image, as well as those that they broadcast. The second layer of resistance lies in the strategic crafting of representations of Black womanhood that

⁸ See Maureen Honey, *Bitter Fruit: African-American Women in World War II* (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 28-29. Also see Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: One World Ballantine Books, 2005) and *Brown Sugar: Over One Hundred Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (New York: Continuum, 2007), for further support of this assertion.

challenged traditional stereotypical tropes, all five women purposefully defy the stereotypical tropes assigned to African-American women, including the acquiescent mammy, hyper-sexual jezebel, and bullish sapphire. Each woman would aggressively confront these representations as a part of their activism. Their combining of resistance within performance and/or visual representation with “on the ground” social and political activism creates the third layer. Each would contribute to contemporary political and social movements outside of their artistic creation. One often must look beyond onstage performances to see expressions of social and political resistance. Onstage performance must be combined with off stage activism to see their full contributions. Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott come to understand their stage personas, images, and representations as extensions of social and political movements including the Popular Front and the Civil Rights Movement. When employing this layered politics each woman engaged in her own distinctive form of resistance based on her location as a cultural worker within Black cultural production. These women are also emblematic of African-American women’s unique approach to resistance.

The political implications of resistance are illuminated within the lives of African-American women. Forms of layered resistance have been a necessary approach for African-American women historically due to the juncture at which multiple oppressions meet within their lives. Black Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins describes African-American women's resistance in terms of the goals of self-definition and self-determination:

For Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals. One is the goal of self-definition, or the power to name one’s own reality. Self-determination, or aiming for the power to decide one’s own destiny, is the second

fundamental goal. Ideally, oppositional knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of African-American women should foster the group's self-definition and self-determination.⁹

Collins names a brand of layered resistance. Self-definition, self-determination, and oppositional knowledge “in defense of Black women” become forms of resistance that are often waged simultaneously within a larger American society that often denies these basic privileges. The activist and cultural work done by Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott are in direct conversation with Collins as they combat representations and images that are designed to deny African-American women's self-definition and self-determination. These women also worked as cultural producers who promote oppositional knowledge. Their cultural production between 1937-1957 testifies to this day an understanding of African-American women that emanates from Black communities and contests false national constructions. In the case of Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott onstage performance must be combined with off stage activism to fully appreciate their layered resistance.

This dissertation loosely examines links in their personal, artistic and political lives from 1937 to 1957. The year 1937 marked the start of key events in their careers: Katherine Dunham opened her New York dance and drama school, Hazel Scott established herself as a New York radio attraction, Lena Horne got her start as a film star with the shooting of *The Duke is Tops*, Jackie Ormes began her entry into popular culture as a cartoonist, and Elizabeth Catlett, after graduating from Howard University's fine

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 45-46.

Arts Program, began her work as a sculptor and teacher. By 1957 their cultural contributions were waning. That year marked the last run of Ormes' *Patty Jo N' Ginger* cartoon and Hazel Scott's exodus to France to evade the fallout of the 1950's blacklisting of politically progressive artists. The 1937-57 period also spans several relevant social and political movements and major national turning points that will come into play in this dissertation, including the Great Depression, America's entry into the Popular Front, WWII, the Double V campaign, the beginning of the Cold War, the 1950's Red Scare, and the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

This dissertation will explore how these artists applied visual art and performance as forms of resistance largely by interrogating their biographical histories and cultural production. It will chronicle key moments in their respective lives that target or motivate them to target gendered and racialized oppression and, most significantly, defiance to what they see as damaging constructions of African-American women. It will employ several bodies of literature to achieve its goals, including biography, cultural histories, and literature from a spectrum of key theoretical frameworks. All of these expressions of cultural and political work must be unpacked to uncover the ways that the unique contributions of these black women artists are aligned with the greater lineage of African-American women's resistance. This dissertation centers Black female activism and Black female cultural resistance while simultaneously widening existing definitions of both. All of the women grapple with, engage, and are heavily influenced by what historian E.

Francis White calls the “politics of respectability.”¹⁰ The activists’ artists adhere tightly at times to gendered expectations in relationship to image and representations. At other times they resist and reimagine them. Nevertheless, the thin isthmus of African-American women’s image and representations found within the white mainstream media landscape would have looked far different without the contributions made by these five women during this period.

Milieu of Women Activist Artists and Performers

Dunham, Scott, Ormes, Catlett, and Horne were not alone in employing a layered political resistance. They were part of a milieu of women activist artists and performers in the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s whose resistance can be understood through the Black feminist lens provided by Collins as they employ self determination and self definition. Women activists for equality and racial justice politics, such as Fredi Washington, Ruby Dee, and Pearl Primus were part of a core group in the struggle for self-definition and self-determination as they battled negative representations and second-class citizenship. The struggle, arguably stretching back to the nation's founding, can be linked back to numerous moments when African-American women artists and performers fought for the rights of artistic expression – to create art, express themselves through dance, and, by the late nineteenth century, perform on local and national stages. More importantly, create art

¹⁰ White argues that restrictive narratives that African Americans sometimes create to counter oppressive and racist constructions of what constitutes blackness create the “politics of respectability.” Degrading portraits of African American life and culture plagues these oppressive constructions. African-Americans counter with narratives of life that overemphasize respectability. For more on this, see E. Frances White, *Dark Continent Of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics Of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

that reflected some level of agency over image. Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott, exceptional only because of their national visibility and impact, not only joined contemporaries like Washington and Primus, but also added to a lineage of activist Black women artists and performers to whom resistance through self-definition and self-determination was paramount.

A Review of the Literature and a Consideration of Layered Resistance

Black women artists and performers are often left out of histories that recount the many phases of the long movement for Black equality and liberation. Writing about African-American artists tends to confine itself to cultural histories focused closely on artistic production. Activities off the page, beyond the stage, and outside of the studio have been subordinated, and artificially distinct categories have been created separating popular performance, fine art histories, biographical studies, and movement histories. Under these constraints the layered cultural, personal, and political resistance engaged in by Dunham, Scott, Horne, Ormes, Catlett, and others becomes invisible. But the peculiar, overwhelming, and overlapping conditions oppressing African-American women during the 1940's and 50's require a critical examination that calls upon scholars to consider their resistance from all angles and intersections. An interdisciplinary examination of Black women's resistance to dominant racial and gender narratives, including popular challenges to tropes and off stage political activism, may be the sole approach to unveiling accurately the breadth of the resistance of these artists and performers.

Today there exists a small but growing body of literature developed directly around Black women artists, cultural production, and, to some extent, their political resistance as well. This work includes Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black*

Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1998) in which Davis connects Black feminist theory with the production and representation of African-American women blues artists. Through her work Davis reveals and broadens our understanding of Black feminist traditions. Farrah Jasmine Griffin’s *If You Can’t Be Free Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2001) examines the lifetime, historical image, and popular representation of Billie Holiday and, to a lesser extent, Abbey Lincoln. Griffin explores the lives and political and social contributions of dancer Pearl Primus, writer Ann Petry, and pianist Mary Lou Williams in her newest work, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (2013). She outlines the ways in which they help lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s. In her *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* (2007), Bennetta Jules-Rosette brilliantly maps out what she refers to as a “semiography” that examines Baker’s life using key images as signposts of her personal, cultural, and political contributions. Jayna Brown’s *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008) offers an excellent cultural history of Black performers in variety shows from 1890-1945. Brown takes as subjects the Black women who traveled in a cross section of vaudeville and burlesque variety shows and helped to shape modern urban culture all around the globe. Most recently, historian Ruth Feldstein discusses the engagement of several Black women entertainers with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 60’s, including Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, Lena Horne, and Cicely Tyson in *How it Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (2013).

Another set of historical studies dating from the early 1990s has focused more directly on Black women's radical activism in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Notable titles include *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African-American Women Activists in the Cold War* (2011) by Dayo F. Gore, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (2007) by Carole Boyce Davies, and *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (2000) by Gerald Horne. All of these works have deepened our understanding of Black women's radicalism in the early to mid twentieth century. Historical work that discusses Black women's struggles and triumphs during WWII is essential to this dissertation as well. Any work spanning the WWII era that centers African-American women must acknowledge and give due to Maureen Honey's outstanding compilation *Bitter Fruit: African-American Women in World War II* (1999). Honey's compilation provides an overview of African-American women during the war by gathering articles, prose, and images by and about them published in four major Black journals. Her goal is to uncover their endowment to America during the war years and to construct an authentic portrait of their opinions, concerns, and struggles at that moment.

As noted, this dissertation is concerned with a core group of women artists: Dunham, Scott, Ormes, Catlett, and Horne. Much of the writing on Katherine Dunham consists of popular biographies, including *Katherine Dunham: a Biography* by Ruth Beckford (1979), *African Rhythm American Dance: A Biography of Katherine Dunham* (1974) by Terry Harnan, and *Katherine Dunham* (1982) by James Haskins. Joyce Aschenbrenner dedicated two academic studies to Dunham. In *Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance* (1981) Aschenbrenner locates Dunham's contributions to African-American dance within a

larger American dance history. The biographical summary of Dunham's life incorporates a general critique of the way American dance and theater resisted the contributions of Dunham and other Black performers. It is a great source for contextualizing Dunham's approach to dance and technique within the late 1930s and 1940s.

Aschenbrenner's other, more recent book, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (2002), combines an academic analysis of Dunham's contributions with a biography. While being the most comprehensive to date regarding Dunham's life and work, it is altogether too brief to be considered the full, in-depth study of Dunham that is still sorely needed. In 2005 Veve A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson published their monumental *Kaiso!: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. This nearly 700-page compendium of writing on, or by, Dunham provides a summary her life and reflects on key elements, including her work as an ethnographer, choreographer, image maker, and activist. Dunham's vast archive, housed in the Morris Library Special Collections at Southern Illinois University, was heavily drawn on for primary research. I was also able to interview Dunham's daughter Marie Christine Dunham Pratt.

Despite enjoying a popularity that rivaled Horne's, Hazel Scott's accomplishments have been nearly erased from the historical record. Karen Chilton raised Scott from obscurity with her popular biography *Hazel Scott: the Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC* (2008). This biography's strength lies in its contextualization of Scott within the music scene of the 1940s and beyond. To her credit, the author crafts a life narrative from thin, and often conflicting, sources. Unfortunately, in its almost complete reliance on the Hazel Scott papers, the biography includes little outside corroborating historical research. *African-*

American Actresses: The Struggle For Visibility, 1900-1966 (2010) by Charlene Regester contains a chapter on both Horne and Scott in which Regester analyzes their personal and professional lives. Kristin A. McGee's anthology *Some Liked it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television 1928-1959* (2009) contains two essays: "Swinging the Classics: Hazel Scott and Hollywood's Musical-Racial Matrix" focuses solely on Scott, and "Televisions Musical Variety Guests: Hazel Scott, Peggy Lee, and Lena Horne" also looks at Lee and Horne. McGee's work investigates the ways in which Scott crossed racial and gender boundaries in music and on television. Scott has also been overlooked due to the limited accessibility to her personal papers and archived materials. They remain in the possession of her son Adam Clayton Powell, III, and are housed by him. I was allowed access to a portion of the Scott papers at his residence. They are referred to as the *Hazel Scott Papers* within citations as they not catalogued.

Regester and McGee's compilations only begin the work that is needed to uncover the unique resistance of Scott and other Black women activist artists and performers. The many and varied bodies of literature that easily lend themselves to this dissertation speak to the need for multidisciplinary and multi-subject investigations of the resistance and contributions of these multi-faceted women.

While there have been a limited number of academic journal articles written about Elizabeth Catlett, some very well-researched, full-length studies have been devoted to her life and work. Melanie Anne Herzog's *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (2000) chronicles Catlett's life in Mexico and the influence that her adopted country had on her work. Herzog begins her study with an overview of Catlett's early life and artistic influences. The author pays particular attention to Catlett's teaching, her years in New

York, and her linoleum cut collection *The Negro Woman* series. Incorporating biographical information, Herzog's interest is in Catlett's artistic production and its political overtones, which she sees as enacting a kind of visual politics. In another full-length study, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (1984) Samella Lewis provides an excellent visual catalogue of Catlett's prodigious work as an artist. Placing less emphasis on narrating Catlett's life, Lewis instead includes an extensive collection of excerpts from Lewis' interviews, lectures and speeches. This work stands out as the most exhaustive visual record of a given artist, and includes events and images of Catlett's early life that are undocumented elsewhere. Following the pattern noted earlier, these works tend to focus more on Catlett's individual artistic production, and less on her political work. Unfortunately, Catlett's archive was largely inaccessible during the researching of this dissertation due to Hurricane Katrina. However, this dissertation was greatly benefitted from a lengthy interview graciously granted by to me by Catlett herself.

Jackie Ormes is best understood through her prime medium of visual representation, which was the comic strip. Nancy Goldstein's *Jackie Ormes: the First African-American Woman Cartoonist* (2008) chronicles Ormes' life and compiles 124 of her cartoons in a well-researched and annotated work. Beyond describing Ormes' life and her life's work, Goldstein places this work in socio-political context by discussing major events impacting African-Americans at the onset of the Cold War era and correlating them with Ormes' political cartoons, editorials, and personally invested causes. Goldstein was particularly helpful to me in pointing out and sharing resources. A small collection of Ormes' personal affects are held by the DuSable Museum of African-American History.

They were inaccessible during the writing of this dissertation due to the relocating of the DuSable research archive.

A fair amount has been written about the life and career of Lena Horne. Although most of this writing has dealt with her life and work as a popular figure, in recent years the body of academic writing on Horne has grown. In Shane Vogel's article "Lena Horne's Impersona," Vogel critically looks at the way Horne crafts her seemingly aloof onstage persona in mostly white clubs. He illuminates her strategies for avoiding the rampant sexualization and fetization that confronted her during her intimate performances.¹¹ Vogel describes how Horne's inaccessible demeanor heightened her ability to project an image of Black refinement. In another article on Horne entitled "Performing 'Stormy Weather': Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham," Vogel dissects the vocal performances of the famous song by Horne and Waters and compares and contrasts the differing racialized performances by each songstress. He attributes much to Dunham for bringing Black modernity to the movie-going masses through her choreography and dance in the film and play.

James Gavin's *Stormy Weather: the Life of Lena Horne* (2009) is the most recent and most comprehensive full-length biography of the singer. It is written for a popular audience, it does not always provide a context for properly assessing African-American women's experiences historically. However, the book uniquely serves as the only comprehensive biographical record of Horne. Older biographies include *Lena* (1965) by Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, and *Lena: a Personal and Professional Biography of*

¹¹ Also published in his book, Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Lena Horne (1984) by James Haskins with Kathleen Benson. The Horne family papers are held by the Schomburg Center for Research and Culture and were used by me as a major source of research. Unfortunately, Horne's family has not yet placed her personal papers in an archive since her death in 2010.

The Prime Backdrops of the Great Migration

This dissertation would not be complete without discussing the geographical, political and social backdrop of the eras that the dissertation spans. In the first half of the 20th century Blacks fled the South looking for better employment and living conditions during what came to be known as the Great Migration. A major result of the migration was the creation of dense Black urban spaces in the North, which functioned as bases of concentrated social and political power. Within these spaces unprecedented opportunities for Black political activism and Black cultural production developed. Without such spaces, it is hard to imagine how the lives and achievements of the core group of women have taken place in the ways that they did. For starters, consider the influence of the regions in which these women were raised, or to which they traveled. Elizabeth Catlett was born and raised in Washington DC and spent part of her young adult life in Chicago and Harlem. Jackie Ormes spent her youth outside of Pittsburgh and moved to the center of that city as a teenager, and then on to Chicago. Katherine Dunham's legacy in dance and politics relies in part on the formative cultural influences of Chicago and Harlem. Lena Horne was a Brooklyn native immersed in the Black urban spaces of New York, including early on in Harlem's Cotton Club. Hazel Scott was a native Harlemit who began her life in America there at the age of four. The Great Migration gave birth to Black urban neighborhoods and spaces where African-Americans survived, and

sometimes thrived, through their inventiveness in pushing forward an agenda of full equality through community independence, art, and politics.

Harlem, New York, a prime exemplar of the inimitable Black Urban spaces erected in the early to mid-twentieth century, will function as a key space within this dissertation. Admittedly, local observers and distant admirers alike often overstate the portrait of Harlem as a utopia. This image of Harlem derives from the yearning dreams of migrants and the privileged conceptions of Harlem's elite. Just as European immigrants had viewed America's shores as a paradise free from economic exploitation and social repression, in the early 20th century Black people around the world viewed Harlem as an idyllic refuge. These Black migrants and immigrants helped to construct a Black cosmopolitanism that located Black people in the "modern" world. But Harlem was just the most visible part of a broader transformation that would eventually include similar Black urban spaces across the country, including parts of Los Angeles, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, all of which figure prominently in this narrative.

These Black urban spaces in the early- to mid-twentieth century provided unique opportunities for African-American women. While most African-American women tended to work in relatively servile positions, for example, as domestics, possibilities for other types of work, cultural production, and political involvement not possible in the South did present themselves in these spaces. This is not to say that African-American women had not been key political workers in the South since enslavement.

Unquestionably these women were essential, and often primary, organizers in Black Southern movements during Reconstruction and on into the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the layered politics of resistance engaged in by many Black women artists and

performers, including the core group within this study, was not possible in Southern spaces.

The political engagement of these women artists was manifest substantially in their involvement in movements such as the Cultural Front during the 1930's. In his landmark work *The Cultural Front* (1996). Michael Denning defines this Front as the cultural arm of the Popular Front, which was a loose coalition of leftist groups that endorsed democratic ideals within the US. Specifically, he describes it as a "terrain of cultural struggle" consisting of a set of "cultural industries and apparatuses" involving the alliance of radical artists and intellectuals.¹² Political radicalization during this era was a result of the economic collapse. Left leaning political organizations filled a void for disenchanted workers and gave many Americans ideas about alternative governmental and social structures. Monica Hairston has suggested that the Popular Front was made possible by the cultural production of Black women (e.g. Billie Holiday), and that the Popular Front both celebrated them and rendered them invisible.¹³ However, as this text will demonstrate, instead of simply being used by the Popular Front, many Black women artists intervened by co-opting it for their own uses. Chief among these interventions was to promote positive, sophisticated, and visible representations and images of Black women.

¹² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth-Century* (London; New York: Verso, 1996), xix.

¹³ Monica Hairston, "Gender, Jazz, and Front" in Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, ed., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 64-89.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 focuses on choreographer and dancer Katherine Dunham. She makes her entry into the arts and on to the stage the earliest within the core group of five women. This chapter discusses her contributions and layered resistance, particularly in relation to the politics of respectability, the staging of Black female sexuality, and the fight against colorism. Chapter 2 concentrates on Hazel Scott's construction of an image combining glamour and pride. It also explores her off-stage resistance to segregation and racial oppression. Chapter 3 explores the artwork of both Jackie Ormes, cartoonist, and Elizabeth Catlett, fine artist. It discusses the distinctive, but related approaches of these two women to the representations of African-American women in print. It considers the ways in which they sought to portray African-American women in their full span of humanity. This chapter will also include an overview of Catlett's *Negro Woman* series and several of Ormes' historical strips including *Patty Jo N Ginger* and *Candy*. These representations constitute breakthroughs in the representation of African-American women. Chapter 4, the conclusion, revisits the thesis and connects Lena Horne, her image, and activist work to the larger dissertation. Further, it briefly surveys the impact of the five women on the American media landscape as well as their enduring legacies.

The fact that this core group of women artists had a significant impact on Black communities and American culture can be seen in a number of ways. Chief among them may be the reaction of state and federal agencies during the anti-communism/anti-radicalism epoch following WWII. The over 1,000 pages of FBI documents that fill the combined files of Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes and Scott literally speak volumes about the backlash of state and governmental institutions to their activism. The lives of

Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott encapsulate unique cultural, political and social histories of their time. The crucial historical decades in which they experienced the pinnacle of their careers form the backdrop to the legacy of resistance that their interlocking narrative carries forward to the present. Along with the contributions of many other unsung African-American women, the cultural production and social and political activism of Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott should be thought of “not as passive representations of history but as active influence within history.”¹⁴ This production is simultaneously a historical mirror, a cultural and historical object, and a generator of history.

¹⁴ In Hazel Carby’s timeless *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelists* she discusses that Black women’s cultural production in novel form should be thought of “not as passive representations of history but as active influence within history”, 95.

CHAPTER 2

"WHOLE NEW VISTAS WERE OPENING" KATHERINE DUNHAM, RACE, GENDER, AND MODERN DANCE

On March 7, 1937, with the help of fellow dancers Edna Guy and Alison Burroughs, the Chicago-based Katherine Dunham Dance Company at long last premiered before a New York audience.¹⁵ Recognizing that New York was a crucial market for nationwide touring and legitimacy within the world of dance, Dunham had agreed to appear with the hope of broadening access to concert venues for her troupe.¹⁶ She had exchanged correspondence with Guy and Burroughs and concert organizers to make this performance happen. The performance, entitled “The Negro Dance Evening,” was held at the Theresa Kaufman Theater located in the 92nd Street Young Men’s Hebrew Association, a venue in vogue at the time for staging white modern dance concerts. This performance, however, was meant to showcase emerging soloists, troupes, and choreographers of cutting edge Black dance.¹⁷

¹⁵ "They Will Show New Yorkers the Haitian Dances," *Baltimore Afro American*, March 6, 1937; John Martin, "The Dance among Educators," *New York Times*, March 7, 1937.

¹⁶ Concert dance refers to the performance of dance on the stage and separated from other forms of entertainment. Dance, until the late 1920’s and early 1930’s was presented only as far as it augmented comedy routines, music concerts, variety shows, or drama. It was not traditionally presented alone as a staged art form. Black concert dance, although stifled, developed alongside a burgeoning White concert dance. For more on this development, see *Black Dance in America* by James Haskins or John O. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Letter from Edna Guy to Katherine Dunham (hereafter cited as “Letter from Edna Guy”), Katherine Dunham Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library,

The program traced a sweeping historical narrative of Black dance. Beginning with dances from the African continent, it went on to illustrate the evolution of Black dance in the Caribbean, and ended with popular dance found in Harlem. Each act hoped to counter the discriminatory image of Black dance as the natural expression of a “dance-inclined” race, and instead reveal the place of Black dance within the realm of artistic expression.¹⁸ The stereotype had been reinforced in part by restrictions disallowing Black modern dancers from dancing on the public stage with white modern dance troops, so the emphasis in this performance was on modern dance. Modern dance had come into vogue in the late 1920’s and was changing the rigid landscape of dance by allowing much more freedom in movement and themes than traditional dances, such as ballet. While expression in modern dance was relatively unrestricted, participation in the dance was not – white women dancers and choreographers dominated it. Modern dance was yet another racially segregated space for Black dancers. Dance historian, Julia Foulkes explains,

If white women found in modern dance a means by which to work within modernism and refute conventional images of femininity, African-American men and women had less success in working around modernism’s fundamental rift between high and low culture, which mirrored and reinforced social experiences of racial discrimination.¹⁹

Southern Illinois University Carbondale (hereafter cited as “Dunham Papers”), January 9, 1937; Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 107-108.

¹⁸ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 94-101.

¹⁹ Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 52.

The dance community, reflecting the dominant view in the rest of American society, understood Black culture as exclusively based in a vernacular expression of “low culture” that lacked true artistic value.

Edna Guy's direct experience with discrimination was a prime motivation for her making the effort to stage Dunham's troop. Guy had been studying with modern dance innovator Ruth St. Denis for several years, and although she was one of Denis' most outstanding students, she was not able to tour or dance at public concerts with the school troupe because she was Black. Fed up with Denis, and more generally with the discrimination found in dance schools and troops, Guy helped to organize the performance, composed mostly of New York-based dancers. Guy and her co-organizers were compelled to create their own opportunities to stage black concert dance. Previously they had participated in what was entitled “the First Negro Dance Recital in America” in 1931; this 92nd Street performance can be viewed as a continuation of her work of exposing Black dancers to the concert stage.²⁰ Guy’s correspondence with Dunham reveals that the immediate monetary reward would be slim: “None of us will get big money out of this concert. The expenses are too high, and the income too small, even if we sell every ticket.” However, Guy assured, “on the other hand, the future holds great rewards for us all if we are willing to make some small sacrifice at the beginning...”

The program would include a mix of traditional and modern styles. Guy asked to have Dunham's troop perform “outstanding traditional Haitian dances, about six: or a suite of Haitian dances for the historical part of the program” and “one modern dance of

²⁰ Foulkes, *Modern bodies*, discussion of first Negro recital; James Haskins, *Katherine Dunham* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982), 70.

yours for the modern part of the program.”²¹ The night’s dancing included a performance by Clarence Yates, director of the Works Progress Administration Negro Dance Unit, who choreographed and danced “Songs of Protest” and “Because I am a Nigger,” “Scottsboro” by Burroughs, and “Spirituals” by Guy. Dunham intended the lineup and Guy to challenge the demoralizing misrepresentations of Black dance that limited their creativity and artistic contributions.

This performance proved to be a tremendous break. It was nearly missed by the troop. Forced to drive fifteen hours through a terrible snowstorm, Dunham and eight members of her soon-to-be company made it to New York just in time to change into their costumes and perform the planned Haitian “ceremonial dances” and a modern ballet . While Dunham and her dancers did not present the standout performance at the recital – that honor went to Guy –they were well received by a demanding and savvy New York audience. At the close of the show, the company was invited to a house party thrown by a new acquaintance, Archie Savage, a dancer who would eventually become Dunham’s performance partner. In celebration, the dancers partied through the night, and ended falling asleep anywhere they could, including the floor and an empty bathtub, before heading back to Chicago the next morning.²² The experience provided Dunham with badly needed exposure and, eventually, funding. It would mark the beginning of Dunham’s contribution to Black dance and African-American women’s representation in

²¹ “Letter from Edna Guy,” Dunham Papers.

²² Haskins, *Dunham*, 62-63; John Martin, "The Dance among Educators"; *Free to Dance* ,DVD directed by Madison Davis Lacy (2001; New York, N.Y.: National Black Programming Consortium).

dance. By uniquely combining African, Caribbean folk, European ballet, and Black popular dance with American modern dance, she created a hybrid space for Black dance that centered on Black creativity, form, and innovation. Critical to the success and social impact of this creative work was Dunham's advocacy for an alternative representation of African-American women dancers, and that of lesser known dancers like Edna Guy and Alison Burroughs.

A core complaint voiced by many African-American women dancers was the forced, almost exclusive, linking of Black dance to popular musical entertainment, as opposed associating that dance to more prestigious forms of artistic production associated with the visual or literary arts. Staged Black dance in the enjoyed brief popularity in 1920's in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, but Black dance was not seen as an elevated form of artistic expression until much later in the twentieth century. Performers such as Nina Mae McKinney, Josephine Baker, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and Florence Mills would appear in a variety of Broadway revues; at least nine productions were staged with all Black casts.²³ But regardless of their phenomenal talents as dancers and choreographers, these performers were not viewed as having developed dance as an art form. Instead, they were confined to well-choreographed popular dance, and understood as a passing novelty. By the late 1930's, the national representation of African-American women in particular was dominated in professional dance by light-skinned chorus girls like those seen at the segregated Cotton Club in Harlem. Dunham and other Black

²³ Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance*, 17.

women dancers of all kinds were very aware that their dances, and they themselves, were inheriting judgments based on a paternalistic, white Victorian morality.

A more detailed description of the tension between Black modern dance pioneer Edna Gray and well known modern dancer Ruth St. Denis helps illustrate this view. In an exchange occurring sometime in the 1920's, Guy writes to her mentor,

My dearest Miss Ruth each day I get up with wild hope. I visit this office and that. I dance before this man and that one, and even though they like my work someone else not half as good gets the call. They win because of their light skin and flashing eyes. Brown skin is as lovely to look upon as light skin isn't it?

St. Denis responds by remarking to the youthful Guy:

Edna dear, it seems wise to me that you do not attempt for a moment to get into the cheap shows here in town. There are thousands of young attractive very pretty colored girls who are storming the stage doors of those productions. You could neither stand the life that those girls live nor are you pretty enough or light enough in color."²⁴

This reflects the dominant white sentiments expressed toward black women dancers; they were cheap, lacking virtue, and policed by color and skin tone.

Reflecting on her time as a dancer and choreographer within the field of Black concert dance, Dunham said that she sought to “develop a technique that will be as important to the white man as the Negro. To attain a status in the dance world...and take our dance out of the burlesque –to make of it a more dignified art.”²⁵ In taking Black

²⁴ Foulkes, *Modern Bodies* also details the relationship between Guy and Denis.

²⁵ Frederic L. Orme, "The Negro in the Dance as Katherine Dunham Sees Him," *The American Dancer* 11, no. 5 (March, 1938), 61-62; Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 110.

dance “out of the burlesque” Dunham was reacting to the strict identification of Black dance with low culture, sexual expression, unsophistication, and, ultimately, Black women’s bodies. She was attaching modern Black dance, to the bodies of African-American women, and dignifying all Black dance whether it be danced by chorus girls, social dancers, or burlesque performers.

Part of what distinguished Dunham from other modern dance innovators was her longevity in pursuing her aspirations, a factor contributing to her national impact and visibility. Touring in some form or another from 1937 to 1956, the Dunham troop gave hundreds of performances around the country and around the world on the concert stage. They would become the longest touring unsubsidized American dance company, as well as the longest touring Black concert dance company prior to the emergence of Alvin Ailey.²⁶ This achievement granted unparalleled exposure of the public to Black concert dance. Ultimately Dunham would redefine Black concert dance and the national representation of African-American women in dance, but encountered struggle each step of the way. Despite her talent, she would be required to fight numerous battles against Jim Crow to expose American racism on and off the stage. Unflinchingly meeting these challenges, she worked as a conscious activist against inequality.

Dunham's contributions to dance will be considered in this chapter, although more in-depth coverage of these contributions has been written about elsewhere. But the primary focus here will be on Dunham's unique blending of innovations in dance with her political and social interventions as an activist, in other words, her use of a layered

²⁶ Perpener, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 158.

political resistance. In the course of maneuvering herself and Black dance onto the national and international stage, she transformed Black female representation and imagery. The 1937 performance was both the culmination of a long journey and the beginning of a lifelong vocation that uncompromisingly combined dance and anthropology on the concert stage.

Beginnings

Dunham's interest in dance developed from an early age, perhaps as part of an escape from an unhappy childhood. Born in 1909, Dunham was raised outside of Chicago in Joliet, IL. In her memoir, *A Touch of Innocence*, Dunham, disassociating herself from the early pain of her youth by referring to herself in the third person, explained to one interviewer, “it was too close to me, I was too tender, to be objective.”²⁷ Her mother by birth died young, and she had a difficult relationship with her father Albert Dunham. In her introductory note to the reader, she explains that one of her reasons for writing a book about such a painful time was that, “perhaps from their [her family's] confused lives may come something that will serve as guidance to someone else...”²⁸ Dunham would employ the fortitude that she gained in childhood throughout her life.

Dunham's outstanding ability to claim and manipulate public space can be traced to her years in high school when she staged a cabaret to raise money for her church. After convincing the conservative church body of the benefits of staging the cabaret, she took

²⁷ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 17-18.

²⁸ Katherine Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence: Memoirs of Childhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), “Note to Reader.”

charge in showing her enthusiasm for jazz and blues dancing by acting as writer, director, and star attraction. Show rehearsals were held in secret. At the conclusion of the show many of the church elders expressed extreme discomfort with the material, but their discomfort seemed to be tempered by the thirty-two dollars raised. For some in the community, Dunham earned a reputation as a “wild” girl, but was undeterred from her pursuit of dance. This fundraiser would conclude her staged dance career in Joliet.

Difficulties at home led to Dunham's departure as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Even by the standards of the time, Dunham's father was extremely strict, and his approach to fatherhood alienated his family. Albert Jr. was the first to flee the tense household upon graduation. He sent a letter to his sister and mother explaining, “you know how hard it is to live with a person who ‘treats ‘em rough.” He included a separate postscript to his father, “you have told me many times to clear out. We can't get along together –so long!”²⁹. Katherine's spare time was spent assisting her father with his dry cleaning business or sticking close to home. Enrollment in dance classes, let alone a dance career, was out of the question according to her father. By Katherine's senior year, her stepmother Annette remained married, but sporadically lived apart from her husband with her stepdaughter. Buckling under the weight of her father's expectations and the rules of a strict household, Katherine Dunham finished high school and followed her brother Albert to Chicago.

Dunham arrived to a Chicago in 1928 that had gained a national reputation for its rich artistic and intellectual communities. Most relevant as an influence to the aspiring

²⁹ “Letter from Albert Dunham, Jr. to Katherine Dunham (hereafter cited as “Letter from Albert Dunham Jr.) [exact date unknown]1931,” Dunham Papers.

Dunham, Chicago was perhaps “the preeminent site of African-American activism, exchange, and affiliation with the organized Left in America in mid-century.”³⁰ During the late 1920’s and 1930’s Dunham would join in the company of artistic and intellectual luminaries such as the writers Frank Yerby, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker; artists Charles Sebree and Charles White; musician, W.C. Handy; intellectuals St. Clair Drake and Charles Johnson; and actors such as Rose McClendon, Canada Lee and Ruth Attaway. Several, like Hughes, Sebree, and Attaway, would become lifelong friends. Years spent with a radical elite comprising the progressive scene in Chicago would help her form and articulate her political consciousness. She recalled that it was during this early period in Chicago “injustice of man to man became a dominant theme in my life.”³¹

The timing of Dunham’s entrance onto the Chicago scene would provide her with a unique combination of experiences that would raise and refine her political awareness. Chicago played a role, along with other urban communities across the nation, as extensions and co-constructors of what Alain Locke encapsulated as "The New Negro Movement." Reminiscing about her friends at the time, Dunham clearly identifies with the movement:

³⁰ Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 5.

³¹ Katherine Dunham, “Minefields” in *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham* (hereafter cited as “Kaiso!”), eds. Katherine Dunham, Veve Clark, and Sarah East Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 109; Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 20,25; Letter from Albert Dunham, Jr.

We took so much for granted but we worked hard for our freedom...we were the prime motivators of the “New Negro” rage. It was more than a vogue. In Chicago we were inundated by media waves –films and lectures and photographs from Paris and New York. Picasso and the cubists, Gershwin and Handy, Nancy Cunard and Noble Sissle –even without realizing it we were touched by them. More than that, we felt *ourselves* to be the New Negro...³²

Dunham was a definite product of the New Negro political and cultural front movement of the 1920s. But her work and thought can be better understood as combining the New Negro movement with the “cultural front” growing out of labor-oriented radicalism in Chicago in the 1930s. Given the association of the labor movement and the Communist Party with progressive groups of various kinds, Dunham would have several encounters with them throughout her long career and was affiliated with several left-leaning organizations and institutions. For example, within a few years she would be one of the key choreographers for the Federal Theater Project and work with the International Garment Workers Union.³³ But she often had mixed feelings about the efforts of such organizations. For example, she describes their attempts at interracialism as “heavy handed” and sometimes involving, “deception and hypocrisy.”³⁴

Through her brother Dunham, she would become acquainted with Alain Locke, the midwife of the cultural arm of the New Negro Movement, and someone who

³² Katherine Dunham, "Survival," In *Kaiso!*, 110.

³³ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 83.

³⁴ As mentioned in her unpublished memoir, “Minefields” in *Kaiso!*, 104.

similarly allied the two movements.³⁵ In Locke's 1940 introductory address to the Exhibition of the Art of the American Negro in Chicago, he stated his intention to “formally announce a new black visual aesthetic emerging from the social and political traumas of the Depression whose onset had coincided with the end of Harlem’s artistic boom.” It consisted of a transformation of the “cultural racialism of the 1920’s” into a “black folk-cultural revival.”³⁶ In drawing attention to the artistic legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke was also pinpointing the synergistic relationship between it and the combined artistic and political products of 1930s Chicago.

The political message Locke was conveying drew attention to the fact that, despite the excitement of the radical scene, it, like society at large, was not resulting in the improvement and upward mobility of most of Black Chicago, then forming in the South Side during the late 1920’s. Juxtaposed to the arts and letters scene was a deprived ghetto constructed for African-Americans who were steadily fleeing the south. Dunham had been intimately linked with this construction in her early childhood spent in Chicago after her birth mother’s death. She would only spend a few years there, but it would leave a lasting impression. Richard Wright described the Chicago of the time this way, “Chicago is the city from which the most incisive and radical Negro thought has come; there is an open and raw beauty about that city that seems either to kill or endow one with

³⁵ Letter from Albert Dunham, Jr.

³⁶ Mullen, *Popular Fronts*, 75-76.

the spirit of life.”³⁷ Granting freedom from her domineering father, offering a stark contrast to the confines of a small town, and immersing her into a progressive Black community, her time in Chicago seemed to offer Dunham the spirit to expand her horizons in multiple ways.

Her brother Albert helped his sister considerably in her transition to life in Chicago. His connections brought an opportunity to take a civil service test, which enabled her to support herself by working at a library during her early years in Chicago. He brother would also help her in the pursuit of her true passion. Albert, who was studying philosophy at the University of Chicago, had co-founded the Cube Theater Club, a theatre that was an unusual interracial venture in Chicago dedicated to “all forms of modern art.” The Cube Theater Club became an important space for Dunham to experiment artistically.³⁸ She hoped to parlay the small amount of experience she had as a dancer in high school into an avenue for generating income and, hopefully, into some kind of a career. Studying hard to make up for what she saw as precious lost time, she took classes in modern dance and ballet and performed on stage at the Cube Theatre. She debuted in public at the 1931 Chicago Beaux Arts Ball appearing in “A Negro Rhapsody.” Acting on a suggestion from one of her friends, she began teaching dance to earn extra money in 1934, and in time moved into a poorly renovated stable that doubled as her dance studio for teaching.

³⁷ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xvii.

³⁸ Haskins, *Katherine Dunham*, 40.

The year 1934 was a pivotal year for Dunham in dance. Mark Turbyfill and Ruth Page, well-known dancers and choreographers at the Chicago Opera with whom Dunham had become friends, backed her new enterprise. Connections like these provided new opportunities, including her being asked to arrange the “Negro Dance” portion of the Chicago World’s Fair. Within a short time Dunham would not only find her self immersed in dance, but also involved as a serious student of anthropology in the progressive, unorthodox, and newly formed department of anthropology at the University of Chicago. Her personal papers include report cards from her years in that department and indicate that she often earned straight A’s in the challenging department as an undergraduate.³⁹ The department had established a national reputation with innovative faculty like Edward Sapir, who had studied with Frank Boas and nurtured the unique character of the department: “an anthropologist who studied at Chicago described the atmosphere of the anthropology department in the 1930’s and the 1940’s as holistic, in tune with the interdisciplinary atmosphere at the university. Liberal humanism was the philosophy, and racial equality and cultural relativity were its first principles.”⁴⁰ Dunham felt comfortable within this atmosphere of innovation and progressive values.

Dunham would integrate the principles that she learned as a student into her social and political thought. She was mentored and molded as an anthropologist by noted anthropologist Robert Redfield, a young faculty member at time. Redfield was instrumental in exposing her to the idea that she could combine her love of dance with

³⁹ “Katherine Dunham Grade Record, Northwestern University 1934-5,” Dunham Papers.

⁴⁰ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 30.

her scholarly pursuit of anthropology within the field of social anthropology. She would eventually develop her studies into what she labeled "Dance Anthropology." Despite her earnest study, it was her extra-curricular participation in performances with the Cube Theatre group that would create an opportunity to conduct the groundbreaking fieldwork for which she would become famous.

Dunham the Ethnographer: Fieldwork, Self Discovery, Blackness, and Transnationalism

A fortunate opportunity to perform before a philanthropic benefactor made possible academic fieldwork that proved essential to the construction of her "Dance Anthropology," and also provided an early demonstration of her later mastery in gaining access to, and manipulating public space. During an evening performance the wife of Alfred Rosenwald was in the audience, and she was so impressed with Dunham that she requested the dancer appear before the board of the Rosenwald Foundation, who sometimes gave financial aid to artists. There are conflicting narratives about her Rosenwald interview. In some remembrances, relying on creativity and ingenuity, she stripped to her dance costume beneath her clothes, and asked the committee if she could dance her objectives rather than verbalize them. Dunham, dismissing this as an urban legend, explained that she was much too modest to engage in this type of behavior, which also conflicted with the very real need to obtain the respect and esteem of the Rosenwald committee.⁴¹ She said that the interview consisted of a conversation and academic presentation.

⁴¹ This narrative of events seems to have had its origins in a 1941 *Collier's* article entitled, "Partly Primitive: Katherine Dunham, the Marian Anderson of Dance" in which

The response from the foundation Board was overwhelming. After a few months of intense training with famed anthropologists Melville Herskovits, Dunham was soon to be on her way to the Caribbean to undertake fieldwork. Her research would take her first to Jamaica to study in Accompong, a Jamaican maroon settlement, and then on to Haiti, whose people she believed retained a greater number of African influenced traditional dances. She visited Haiti very briefly and continued on to Martinique and Trinidad before returning to Haiti for a nine-month sojourn.⁴² Dunham focused on African influences that she felt had been widely devalued on the world stage. The fieldwork became part of what would become a lifetime goal to engender greater respect for the dances and indigenous cultures of Africa and the cultures and people that composed its diaspora. Her success in this endeavor would be her prime intellectual and professional legacy. Dunham was concerned that many African-Americans had rejected their African ancestry, or that some, like the New Negro cultural nationalists Countee Cullen and Aaron Douglass, romanticized it. Dunham would find a modern function for traditional African culture through dance. Her ethnographical work during her initial Caribbean research trips would contribute to changing our understandings of the relationship of African-Americans with Africa, and their identification with a Black global community, using the medium of dance. Further, her early field experience reflected the way she would locate Black women in particular as the locus of this African dance heritage and modern evolution.

Dunham is interviewed. It is difficult to identify which are direct Dunham quotes and which have been imagined by the writer. Dunham disputes this story in several later interviews, including in the Black dance history series *Free to Dance*.

⁴² Ruth Beckford, *Katherine Dunham, a Biography* (New York: M. Dekker, 1979), 28; Katherine Dunham, *Dances of Haiti* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983), xxii.

Dunham the ethnographer was able to employ her Chicago-style political awareness to her advantage. There were several qualities that set Dunham apart from other ethnographers, who were traditionally white and male, and these qualities would assist Dunham in avoiding the conventionally exploitative nature of anthropological fieldwork. For example, Dunham was herself a member of the African Diaspora that she was studying. She brought a unique appreciation for connections to Africa forged by the New Negro cultural nationalists with whom she spent time in Chicago in the twenties. She was very aware of her membership in a Black global community that was governed by multiple systems of segregation, apartheid, and colonialism. In addition, as a student of Redfield and Herskovits, her fieldwork emphasized the value of African retention in anthropological work within the Black Diaspora.

As the first African-American woman to visit this community, Dunham was challenged to place her beliefs and academic knowledge of her African connections to the test. She later explained, "A good field technique, I found, was to establish the relationship between my ancestors and theirs. They thought of me as an American, not as a Negro, until I talked to them about our common African ancestors. Then they accepted me."⁴³ In Jamaica this approach had a significant impact on the maroons, who referred to Dunham as "one of the lost people of 'Nan Guinea' and revealed their secrets to her so that she could inform her people."⁴⁴ Although Dunham was a foreigner, in her they

⁴³ Porter, Amy. "Anthropological Katie," *Collier's*, February 24, 1945, 69.

⁴⁴ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*.

recognized a common ancestry. Her ability as a dancer further helped her connect with individuals and communities as dancers despite other differences.

Her gender perhaps presented more of a challenge than her local unfamiliarity, but also distinct advantages for research in her given topic of study. She was a woman entering traditional spaces in which gender played a key role. For someone constructing what she termed Dance Anthropology, the fact that women possessed knowledge of the most sacred of dances and rituals certainly did not hurt her chances for successful research. However, her status as a woman would work to her disadvantage at times as the repressive narrative of gender roles sometimes limited her access for study. She described how elite Haitians, for example, adhered firmly to the nineteenth century gender roles of French society. Women were discouraged from participating in any public meetings or political events, or even leaving their homes.⁴⁵ This required careful and troublesome navigation when attempting to begin her fieldwork among the peasantry while simultaneously conducting necessary interaction with the elite.

Dunham would both apply and enhance her political consciousness during her fieldwork in the Caribbean. In the course of her ethnographic research in Haiti she creatively negotiated a system of class and color barriers that differed from the more familiar Black-white binaries of the United States. In Haiti she found a society in which a two-part caste system was created based on class and complexion. It stemmed from a history dividing a small upper class mulatto elite, which was lighter in skin and descendant from French and African parentage, and a darker-skinned, largely

⁴⁵ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 23.

impoverished peasant majority, descended from the enslaved population. In this system Dunham was identified in Haitian terms as a mulatto.

Yet she found ways to circumvent and distance herself from the rigid class narrative of the island. For example, although Melville Herskovits, which he thought would make her access to research easier, gave her several letters of introduction she used these discerningly. She did not introduce herself to Stenio Vincent, the president of Haiti, until she was nearing the end of her research.⁴⁶ She also very consciously kept company with a cross-section of Haitian society. She was alternately in the company of black peasantry, dark-skinned friends who were upper class according to wealth, and, the most perplexing of all, a poor white mechanic. Reflecting on her place in Haitian society, Dunham confessed that “I seemed to have wavered or catapulted from mulatto to black, elite to peasant, intellectual to bohemian, in to out, up to down, and tried hard to keep out of trouble but did not succeed.”⁴⁷

Dunham cleverly found ways to work around the modernist preferences of the Haitian upper class towards aspects of her object of study, which focused on traditional art forms. Most of the Haitian elite and intellectuals looked down on the Voudun, and were anxious to expunge this “backwards” practice from Haitian society in favor of the image of a modern and cosmopolitan Haiti. Recognizing their control of the political, economic and social landscape in Haiti, she resourcefully appealed to their own biases in order to gain access to her chosen subject of study:

⁴⁶ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham: a Biography*, 36.

⁴⁷ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 3,11-13.

I had a very amusing experience when I first went to the islands, for the Urban society leaders questioned my desire for native research, and needing the moral backing of these leaders, I gave a concert for them and included only numbers which were traditional ballet or aesthetic interpretations. They loved it, and I was given a free hand thereafter to search out my primitives.⁴⁸

Dunham no doubt recognized the irony of this performance. Her access to traditional African dance in Haiti was achieved by masking that very dance.

Her hard-won access bore fruit and helped establish Dunham as a uniquely engaged anthropological innovator and advocate for the full appreciation of traditional African dance. Her respect for the culture, and refusal to engage in class inequities with the subjects of her study, helped her gain unprecedented access in Haitian peasant society.⁴⁹ Immersing herself fully in research on the Voudun, she became a Voudun

⁴⁸ “Letter to Melville Herskovits, November 11, 1935,” Dunham Papers.

⁴⁹ Although employing a different approach, Zora Neale Hurston, who was a contemporary of Dunham’s, understood anthropology in a similar way. They both saw in it as an avenue by which to prove the equality of African-American and other African derived peoples. Anthropologist A. Lynn Bolles says of the two, “both Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham must be counted among some of the true innovators in cultural anthropology- Hurston for her reflexive ethnographic method used decades before it was embraced by anthropologists or post modernists, and Katherine Dunham for creating the field of dance anthropology Also, like Hurston, Dunham was a student of a founding anthropologist who had traveled to the Caribbean (Hurston was a student of Frank Boas) Although Dunham and Hurston were known to have a sometimes contentious relationship Hurston spied in her great potential and ability. She wrote in her 1947 review of Dunham’s short book on her month with the maroons, that “Katherine Dunham’s *Journey to Accompong* is a lively and word-deft account of a thirty days visit to Accompong...Miss Dunham’s book is very readable; in addition to the lively style and the pert observations on the doings of the men, women, and children of Accompong...”. Hurston’s description of Dunham could very easily been used to describe her own engaging style of ethnography. See Zora N.Hurston, “Thirty Days among The Maroons,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 12, 1947.

initiate and mastered dozens of traditional sacred and secular dances.⁵⁰ Via phonograph, photography, and film over time she would gather extensive documentation not only of Haitian dance, but also that of Jamaica and Martinique. Photographs of Dunham doing her work in Haiti and other parts of the Caribbean display what must have been seen as a great oddity at that time –an African-American woman anthropologist, sleeves rolled up, at work in a field with other Black women. One can only imagine the impact an image such as this would have had on a young African-American girl in the mid 1930's, not to mention its power today.

Through her work Dunham revealed the overlapping edges of African retention transnationally. Her research formed the understructure for much of her contribution to Black dance. It helped spawn the performance of powerful and ecumenical representations of Black women on stage that was exploding onto stages across America and the world.

The Return

Returning to the United States in 1936, Dunham, while beginning to refine her performance of diasporic dance, faced the reality of a Chicago still deep in the Depression, thus making it impossible for her to immediately undertake Black concert dance as a full-time career. Along with the rest of America in the midst of the Depression, she had to address the daily needs of food, shelter, and income to satisfy financial obligations. Following a Caribbean trip fully-funded by the Rosenwald

⁵⁰ Wendy Perron, "Katherine Dunham: A One-Woman Revolution, in Art and in Life," *Dance Magazine* 74, no. 8 (2000): 42.

Foundation, her very real need for basic survival took precedence over forming a dance company or sharing her notion of Dance Anthropology with audiences. There were also several unresolved issues in her life that needed sorting out. Her beloved brother departed for Boston along with Frances Taylor, her best friend and roommate in 1933.⁵¹ Dunham also returned to a husband, Jordis McCoo, whom she had hastily married. As she described it, “to be perfectly honest, I believe I married out of loneliness...when I returned to Chicago from the Caribbean, nothing had changed, so he gallantly agreed to a divorce.”⁵² McCoo was a fellow dancer who held a steady job as a postal clerk. Dunham would continue to have a friendship with him and regular contact through various dancing engagements.

Dunham's return also presented her with an academic future to deliberate. Still officially enrolled as an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago, she needed to consider restarting serious study as an anthropologist. Dunham graduated from her undergraduate studies and was given a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation to pay tuition for a Master's degree at the University of Chicago. In order to make ends meet Dunham resumed her work at the Chicago Public Library, took odd jobs, and taught classes when possible. Dunham attended classes in the morning and worked the rest of the day. She lived on a very small salary and excitedly described in her unpublished biography the practical joys of finding places that were inexpensive to eat, being able to

⁵¹ Dunham became a relative of Elizabeth Catlett when Dunham's brother married Taylor, who was Catlett's aunt. Author interview with Elizabeth Catlett, New York, NY, April 23, 2011 (hereafter cited as “Catlett, author interview”).

⁵² “Minefields” in *Kaiso!*, 85.

secure credit for a winter coat, and getting dresses from her father's now defunct dry cleaning business.⁵³ Still Dunham remained committed to dance and to the cause of its proper representation and appreciation. In this she reflected the fortitude and dedication of so many Black artists during the early development of Black entertainment when salaries were low, if earned at all, and passion for their art was high.

By this time success would come relatively late for Dunham. She was 28 years old when she gathered a company for that fateful trip to New York in 1937 to participate in Edna Guy's recital. This opportunity presented itself to her at an age where many experienced dancers would have been at the heights of their careers. Age mattered particularly for African-American women since it was very young women who typically fit the accepted popular and professional image of a Black female dancer. Dunham had made many interventions into professional dance by the late 1930's, but without full success. She had begun two separate dance groups, opened a dance school for youth, performed many times on the stage, and worked as an organizer for the Worlds Fair in 1933. She managed to juggle being both a full-time student at University of Chicago and a full-time dancer and dance instructor. But the first major break in her dance career would come after the New York recital when, in 1938, she was hired to act as one of the Dance Directors for a Federal Theatre Project (FTP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the New Deal. The WPA had several units dedicated to the arts, including the Federal Writers Project and Federal Theatre Project. Both employed Dunham after her return to Chicago. She took a ballet script entitled *L'Ag'Ya* to the heads

⁵³ Dunham, "Survival," In *Kaiso!*, 87, 101.

of the Theatre Project, and it was accepted as a part of a larger program entitled *Ballet Fedre*.

Dunham's *L'Ag'Ya* illustrated her abilities in Afro-European dance fusion, her inclusive approach in composing her troop, and her skill in integrating the historical realities of the Black experience into her work. The premise of the narrative was based on “a tragic love triangle” set in a village in late eighteenth-century Martinique. In the narrative the love between characters Loulouse and Alcide is thwarted by a third, undesirable character named Julot. Although *L'Ag'Ya* was conceived of as a modern dance ballet, it was founded in the martial arts dancing of Martinique. The work was a descendant of similar African dances, like the Capoeira. The work displayed a range of Dunham's talents: writer, choreographer, director and star. The piece provided an early example of her ability to blend African and European styles in the way it incorporated European dance styles like the French *Beguine* and *Mazouk*. But the influence of African vernacular culture was unmistakable. For example, she honors Martiniquen folk belief in the Voudun when Julot asks the “Zombie King” for a love charm with which to woo Alcide. The love triangle comes to a tragic end when Julot murders Loulouse during the *L'Ag'Ya*. African-derived dance was presented as high art in *L'Ag'Ya*, and it was done with characteristic inclusiveness. Dunham's troop incorporated dancers from all walks of life. Professional and student dancers were recruited as well as people “from off the street,” such as cooks, typists, maids and chauffeurs. It took two weeks of continuous auditioning to find a “full complement of fifty.” She remembers, “I had always wanted to

work with the people –that is, proletariat or lumpen, and this was a golden opportunity.”⁵⁴ She saw their presence as valuable as they “gave the stage the dimension of reality which made the folk myths believable.”⁵⁵ Dunham’s politics of resistance consisted of a layer that joined her on stage work to her off stage political beliefs and activism. The employment of African-Americans from varying laboring classes reflected her association with Popular Front ideals.

The *L’Ag’Ya* was only one of many innovative and radical artistic productions that were produced through the FTP, and is now considered to be the first Dance Anthropology performance.⁵⁶ Dunham’s anthropological gaze was embedded in *L’Ag’Ya* as was her subtle critique of colonialism. As scholar and dancer Veve’ Clark explains:

The syntax of Dunham’s choreography in *L’Ag’Ya* reflects the profound class and color antagonisms that existed in 1930’s Martinique. *L’Ag’Ya* is a perfect example of oxymoron in dance; the narrative opposes work days/feast days, seaside/jungle, love fantasy, respectable, community oriented behavior/ questionable, ego-centered desire... Dunham’s choreography reflects social oppositions existing simultaneously and paradoxically in a society governed at a distance from France, and further controlled economically and socially... by former plantation families... in such an environment, dance of the majority population demonstrates the contradictions of New World acculturation.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Dunham, "Survival," In *Kaiso!*, 90.

⁵⁵ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 115.

⁵⁶ Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 9.

⁵⁷ Clark, “Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham’s Chereography, 1938-1987” in *Kaiso!*, 331.

Dunham's use of Black concert dance as seen in *L'Ag'Ya* would serve multiple purposes and reveal several layers of resistance. The primary purpose of the performance, arranged through the WPA, was providing employment to dozens of unemployed Black workers. But Dunham also uses the dance as a platform for considering the impact of colonialism on the Martiniquen population. Further, she promulgates the richness and cultural value of an African diasporic aesthetic. While decisively continuing her resistance to dominant and degrading Black female imagery and representation by featuring a central female characters that were complex and had no connection to the damaging tropes of mammy or jezebel.

With respect to racial representation, with *L'Ag'Ya* Dunham began to institute her deliberate use of dancers, particularly women, with a range of skin colors and phenotypes. Some of this was due to the motley crew of out-of-work recruits. However, much of it reflected Dunham's conscious rejection of color caste in the staging of Black dance. Any theater or club-goer in the mid-1930s would have encountered female dancers with light skin in almost all Black dance performance. Dunham's troupe would feature the variety of skin colors reflective of global diversity:

When I was forming the company, from about 1938 on, the ideal black dancer was light skinned, somebody who danced at one of the famous whites-only nightclubs, like the Cotton Club. But that was not my ideal. My company was what you might call a 'Third World Company' from the beginning. We had Cubans, West Indians, Latin Americans and their complexion didn't matter. What mattered was their talent.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Haskins, *Katherine Dunham*, 73. Haskins, *Black Dance*, 40.

Her dancers for the 1938 show included a collection of artists with whom she had worked prior to conducting fieldwork in the Caribbean, along with those who had more recently joined the company. The first staging of *L'Ag'Ya* included female dancers Carmencito Romero, Lucille Ellis, Patty Bee Yancey, Roberta McLauren, and male dancers Jordis McCoo and Woody Wilson. Together they represented African body types in all of their permutations, as well as a cross-section of complexions that actually existed in the Black global community – a condition she felt was central to traditional dance. All hues and a spectrum of features were represented on stage.⁵⁹

This diversity, combined with the African influences, intriguing narrative, gorgeous costumes, outstanding set (created by designer, and future husband, John Pratt), innovative choreography, and of course the brilliant dancing of the troupe inspired both pride and awe in African-American audiences. An unnamed reporter covering the event for the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper, extolled the performance:

L'Ag'Ya...is the most thrilling theatrical experience one has ever witnessed of Race members, not barring the famous opera, 'Porgy.' Color, drama, enchantment, and superb dancing all contributed to the uproarious bravoos that the audience poured in applause that are directed by Miss Dunham who dances the lead role with finesse and understanding of the authentic Caribbean Dances.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Katherine Dunham's daughter, Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, points out that her mother made a very conscious choice and effort to employ talented dancers with a wide array of skin tones and explains that, "...she insisted also of not taking lighter, besides Julie [Belafonte], people in the company...were talking about women...often she was asked to take lighter members into her company...she always took her stance. It was her company." Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, author interview, March 10, 2011, Carbondale, IL.

⁶⁰ "Ballet Fedre Is Fine WPA Theatre Production," *The Chicago Defender*, February 5, 1938, 2.

A writer from another African-American newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, said that Dunham and her company, "...presented ... *L'Ag'Ya*' with such fire and realism the dancers literally stopped the show and were given an ovation by the overflow crowd."⁶¹ *The Pittsburgh Courier* would note of a later performance of *L'Ag'Ya*, "if one watches closely, one will detect a step or two popular in our American jazz world."⁶² *Ballet Fedre* ran for six weeks before ending its triumphant run. *L'Ag'Ya* became a permanent part of the Dunham repertoire.

The FTP show would change Dunham's life in two major ways. First, it gave her previously undefined career a new direction toward concert dance. In her memoirs she confesses that "...whole new vistas were opening at such a great rate that anthropology receded much of the time into the background, diminished by the stirrings of a desire to create something new and wonderful, to include myself in it, and to make of it something permanent."⁶³ Second, she had met her eventual husband and designer for the Dunham Company, John Pratt.⁶⁴ She described their relationship as passionate, loving, stormy, and imbued with an unrivaled synergy as romantic partners and professional partners. They would be together for nearly fifty years. Dunham contributed the choreography and dance innovation to performances, and Pratt created costumes and sets that were critical to the

⁶¹ "'Sugar Hill Opens Run in Chicago," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 3, 1938.

⁶² Gwendolyn Hale, "Dunham's Creative Dance Ability Impress Writer," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 13, 1945.

⁶³ "Minefields" in *Kaiso!*, 100.

⁶⁴ John Pratt was an established designer and visual artist. He was an established member of Chicago society and a fixture of the creative scene, having worked with many dancers such as Agnes de Mille and showing his work in galleries.

Dunham concert experience. Dunham often pointed out that, “The Dunham show would not have been the same without his costumes, scenery, and lights... He had quite a vision.” She added, “It is amazing what he could do as a white man...” Their adopted daughter Marie –Christine explains further: “My mother, my father were together in love and art but they were not married until 1949.”⁶⁵ Dunham and Pratt were both responsible for building the world-renowned company.

Despite the popularity of her work with audiences, Dunham immediately faced the challenges brought by biased and segmented understandings of Black dance performance. At the close of *Ballet Fedre*, the dancers in her production, including those who were a part of her evolving troupe, were sent to begin rehearsals for other Negro Unit shows, such as *Swing Mikado*. Dunham was then asked to step down from her FTP position. A devastated Dunham launched a fiery protest. On March 15, 1938, she sent a letter to Harry Hopkins, an administrator for the WPA. Quoting the Supervisor of Employment in the Chicago branch, Hopkins said that Dunham’s work was “highly satisfactory,” however, “Since she only works with the Negro ballet only and these people are rehearsing in the Mikado...there could be no possible use for Miss Dunham at this time.”⁶⁶ Dunham, who would continue her battle for reinstatement throughout the summer of 1938, wrote to Mary Mcleod Bethune – Head of the National Youth

⁶⁵ Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, author interview, March 10, 2011. This is supported in correspondence between Dunham and Pratt, particularly around the trouble with getting Pratt’s papers in order for the WWII draft. “Letter from John Pratt August 14, 1943,” Dunham Papers.

⁶⁶ “Letter from the Harry Hopkins Works Progress Administration to Katherine Dunham, April 28 1938,” Dunham Papers.

Administration and a member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Black cabinet – and even to Eleanor Roosevelt herself. In addition to her plea for reinstatement, she questioned what she believed to be biased practices in the FTP. She complained to Bethune that, "...while the other dance groups continue to function and present performances, the Negro group has been dispersed through other activities in the project."⁶⁷ She also wrote Arthur Mitchell, Congressman for the first District, Illinois, in an ardent appeal. Referring to the productions to which Black dancers were moved, she pointedly writes, "...it also enters my mind that these productions are not under Negro supervision, and it seems a little incongruous that with available Negro supervision the main Negro productions so far with the exception of the ballet have been under White supervision."⁶⁸

The pressure on the status quo brought by Dunham and others, either directly or indirectly, helped create a space and bring about major career interventions for a number of Black performers and artists. Dunham's petitions for reinstatement may have contributed to the career of friend and colleague Shirley Graham. Reacting to Dunham's plea, representative Mitchell and several other supports wrote to Hallie Flanagan, Director of the FTP. She responded surprisingly indicating that the Chicago (read "Black") Unit already had two productions soon to open. In addition to *The Mikado*, a production of *Little Black Sambo* was planned. Ironically, the playwright Shirley Graham would bring the presence of another Black women director to the FTP stage. Graham and

⁶⁷ "Letter from Mary Mcleod Bethune, National Youth Administration, to Katherine Dunham July 3, 1938," Dunham Papers.

⁶⁸ "Letter from Honorable Arthur W. Mitchell, Congressman First District, Illinois, to Katherine Dunham July 8, 1938," Dunham Papers.

Dunham became friends and would attend one another's productions when possible. While it cannot be said with certainty whether the protests of Dunham influenced the securing of this production for Graham, in general the combined resistance of artists like Dunham undoubtedly had an important impact, despite the lack of action exhibited by many of the left-leaning programs of the New Deal. As one historian noted, "even while operating within these narrowly proscribed spaces, African-American performers promoted a diverse series of racial representations, expanding theatrical roles beyond the confines of conventional racial stereotypes."⁶⁹

The small opening created for Black artists by the WPA arts programs would soon disappear as those who administered the FTP would be called before the newly formed House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). They were compelled to testify regarding unfounded accusations of communist infiltration in late 1938. The FTP, like other WPA projects, would suffer budget cuts and serve as a scapegoat by those with animosity toward the New Deal's liberal agenda. By 1940 the FTP faded from existence altogether.⁷⁰ While Dunham attempted to recover her position in the FTP, she returned to her post at the library, sparsely resumed her Master's studies, and spent much of the late 1930s soliciting venues and sponsors for her newly formed company. Her need for employment enabling her to do what she loved best was balanced by an uncompromising drive to position herself, her choreography, and her dancers on the popular stage and capture public consciousness. Dunham could have opted to alter her show to suit the

⁶⁹ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 216.

⁷⁰ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 121.

tropes of Black entertainment of the time. *Amos n' Andy*, for example, dominated the radio airwaves of the 1930's and 40's and, as already noted, a plethora of clubs hosting light-skinned social dancers as entertainment abounded in every major city. But she recognized that some of the most popular Black entertainment was the antithesis of the Dunham show. Her passion and drive instead was directed to placing her vision of the Dunham Company in the public eye. Her papers include letters sent far and wide across the country inquiring as to the possibility of holding performances. In some instances she was fortunate, but in most she was unsuccessful. She wrote to historically-black colleges in the South and to an array of organizations and venues. She solicited her friend Professor Charles Johnson at Fisk to see if there was a possibility of her troupe's performing at the college's annual folk festival. Her sister-in-law inquired about participation in the Haitian Coffee Fest in Washington, DC. Dunham's secretary again called on Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she felt "might be interested in having [Dunham] dance at some affair at the White House."⁷¹ Tally Beatty, a principal dancer in the Dunham Company, reflected, "I just think it's amazing that anyone could be so sensational and then be out of work!"⁷²

Under constant financial strain, Dunham and her dancers trained, took gigs as they were available, and traveled intermittingly as they held true to her vision. From the very beginning the company was under constant financial strain. Dale Wasserman, her

⁷¹ "Letter from Charles S. Johnson, Director, Department of Social Science, Fisk University to Katherine Dunham March 1, 1938"; "Letter from Katherine Dunham to Sue Bailey Thurman, April 3, 1938"; and "Letter from Katherine Dunham to Eleanor Roosevelt, May 2, 1938," all from Dunham Papers.

⁷² Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 108.

future Stage Director, remembered, “The Dunham Company was characterized by the fact that it was in a constant state of bankruptcy. It could be less bankruptcy or a little more but the basic situation was always mild or extreme desperation.”⁷³ While more hungry days stood between Dunham and her eventual explosion onto the New York and national stages, the strain did not interrupt her constant devotion to dance or political activism. She supported the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the integrated volunteer force who fought against Fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Dunham used the crisis of fascism in Spain as a platform to stage her first overtly political production, the *Spanish Earth*, which was Dunham’s direct global political critique. Dunham recalled, “I represented the roots of peasant Spain with heels and castanets in a fiery protest to the fascist armies of Franco. For years I refused to appear in Spain as my own private protest...”⁷⁴ The company performed this production almost weekly for a time.

Other opportunities arose after the 1939 Labor Stage Production of *Pins and Needles* began to flounder, Dunham was asked to assist in its choreographing. This production was originally staged by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and ran in 1936 and 1937. In 1939 the show was adapted to Broadway, and Dunham was brought in from Chicago with half of her company. She arranged “Bertha, The Sewing Machine, or It’s Better With a Union Man.”⁷⁵ The run of the show proved

⁷³ Lacy, “Free to Dance.”

⁷⁴ *Kaiso!*, 105.

⁷⁵ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 120; “Press Release for Windsor Theater Debut, January 31, 1940,” Dunham Papers.

profitable and set Dunham and her company on a course that would more visibly transform Black dance.

Le Jazz Hot

Since her untraditional approach to Black dance generally produced difficulties in finding backing for stage shows, Dunham used her salary from *Pins and Needles* to produce her next show on her own. This show would continue to demonstrate her increasing ability to take principled risks, and generate both critiques and rave reviews from audiences. The new concert was entitled *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot: from Harlem to Haiti*. It premiered at the Windsor Theatre on West 48th Street in New York. By titling the concert “from Harlem to Haiti” Dunham hoped to draw an ancestral line between the dances of Harlem, the hub of Black America, to Haiti, a capital of the global Black community and Africa, the continent of origin. The second section of *Le Jazz Hot* paid homage to Blues-influenced African-American dancehall dances, but was included only after convincing the theater owner to allow it. He misinterpreted Dunham's embrace of folk artistic forms as displays of pedestrian low culture bearing excessive sexuality.⁷⁶

The *Le Jazz Hot* program was Dunham's first to include a Black Americana suite. She included dances from the pre-WWI era (the shimmy, the Charleston, black bottom dance, the cakewalk), and a suite of more contemporary popular dances (the Jitterbug, Boogie Woogie) and an infamous Blues-based staging of the Barrelhouse.⁷⁷ All of the

⁷⁶ Edward Thorpe, *Black Dance* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1990), 126.

⁷⁷ Perron, “One Woman Revolution,” 43; “Press Release for Windsor Theater Debut, January 31, 1940,” Dunham Papers.

dances in the suite honor African-American dance and artistry, but the Barrelhouse generated the most discussion. The staging was simple. A woman and a man meet in a small juke joint and commence to lose themselves in the Barrelhouse dance. They wind their bodies into artistic interpretations of the authentic “Barrelhouse Shimmy.” Dunham frequented a barbeque shack in Chicago that served “moonshine” on the side during prohibition. She explains that it was here that she heard the “Barrelhouse Shimmy” anonymously played and composed.

I believe the first concepts of the movement of the shimmy came from these after hour spots; even way back when, as a child, I would see Ethel Waters at the Monogram Variety House with a feather duster tied around her waist, bouncing it back and forth as she described in what manner she would welcome her absconded man when he returned, with the robust side to side twist of the shimmy.⁷⁸

Here Dunham's anthropological gaze, set upon urban working-class Black Americans, is revealed in her choreography of the Barrelhouse.

She was likely not surprised that audiences and reviewers would be enchanted with the first "exotic" section of the concert, *Tropics*, which included dances from West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. However, she wisely connected these charming dances to the under-appreciated working-class African-American dances with which she had grown up. She says of African-American dance, “I was running around getting all these ‘exotic’ things from the Caribbean and Africa when the real development

⁷⁸ “Minefields” in *Kaiso!*, 117.

lay in Harlem and black Americans....so I developed more things in jazz.”⁷⁹ She explains, “if I could research and present the equivalent from other countries, I could not consider myself a conscientious field anthropologist if I neglected the rich heritage of the American Negro.”⁸⁰

The choice to include jazz and blues in her dance performance was a controversial act in 1940 given the way dominant culture framed the sexual references these musical genres as low cultural expression and an affront to Puritan values. But, as Hazel Carby has noted, the blues has served as a privileged site for the expression of sensuality and sexuality on the part of African-American women.⁸¹ The stage afforded women blues performers access to a welcoming mass audience for such expression. It also granted artists an opportunity to use public performance as a tool for critiquing the greater society. This is not to say that the stage magically shielded women blues performers from greater oppression or discrimination. It also does not suggest that all African-American women used the stage in this way. But the position of entertainer granted possibilities. Dunham understood the power she could wield as an entertainer, and, through her blues and jazz pieces in *Le Jazz Hot*, created a privileged site for the unnamed woman in the Barrelhouse. Dunham's lone blues woman reinforced the freedom accessible to the female character in Barrelhouse that may have eluded others who are more constrained by propriety. The inclusion of this character also points to Dunham's recognition of

⁷⁹ Perron, “One Woman Revolution,” 43.

⁸⁰ “Minefields” in *Kaiso!*, 119.

⁸¹ Hazel V. Carby, “‘It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues,” *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1987): 8-12.

African-American women's regular engagement with a layered politics of resistance. For this character wielding freedom is an essential layer of resistance. She is both determined and self defined in this moment. For Dunham centering this representation constitutes resistance and the manipulation of popular public space.

A review from a major newspaper failed to offer more than a superficial view of the performance. In an article entitled, "Dance: A Negro Art," John Martin of the *New York Times*, commented:

this is quite in character with the essence of the Negro dance itself. There is nothing pretentious about it; it is not designed to delve into philosophy or psychology but to externalize the impulses of a high-spirited, rhythmic, gracious race. That Miss Dunham's dances accomplish this end so beautifully can mean only that she has actually isolated the element of folk art upon which more consciously creative and sophisticated forms can be built. (2)

Martin identifies Dunham's production with a "low" folk art that is natural and innate to Black Americans. He sees the African, Black Americana, and Caribbean-based choreography as only something from which better and "more consciously creative and sophisticated" forms of "high" art can be developed. white Americans like Martin, adhering to the racial narrative and cultural norms of the time, were not alone in their rejection of Black Americana as an elevated art form. Dunham explains that

I have had to defend on more than one occasion the American section of the program, always in the United States. At one time it was to a group of 'comrades' who in the early days in New York

somehow felt this expose of black culture to be undignified; at another time in San Francisco years later, when a group of militant brothers failed to see the historic value of their own roots.⁸²

Dunham faced the inevitable critiques related to the sensual nature of the choreography. Critics became obsessed with Dunham's sexuality, an obsession at times thinly veiled beneath the adjective used most frequently used to describe her shows: "exotic." Headlines such as "K. Dunham's Hips are Sociological," "La Dunham Comes Back Still Sexy and Sizzling" and "Dunham Makes Learning Alluring" were common, and were meant to eschew the intended artistic and anthropological leanings of the productions. One critic, Arthur Pollock, persistently sexualized Dunham's dance concerts, framing her as the "jezebel" stereotypically applied to African-American women. Within these thin reviews Dunham's fearless embrace of sensuality and sexuality lost all complexity. Titles to his review articles give an indication of this characterization with their typical innuendo about her "hot" performances: "Katherine Dunham Superb in Dances of Hot Places," and "La Dunham, with 3 New Works, Still Torrid Stuff."⁸³ The battle with the sexualized conception of Dunham and her African-based dances would continue throughout her career.

Despite such misreading by prominent white American cultural critics, and at times by their Black counterparts, *Le Jazz Hot* generally received rave reviews. It was an important and unprecedented step in the process of accepting African-American dance as

⁸² "Minefields" in *Kaiso!*, 119.

⁸³ Peter Barry, "K. Dunham's Hips Are Sociological," *DC Compass*, April, 15, 1950; Robert Wahls, "La Dunham Comes Back Still Sexy and Sizzling," *Sunday News*, December 11, 1955.

a professional art form, and demonstrated Dunham's willingness to take countless risks when making subtle political statements within the composition of her concerts. *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot* ran for thirteen consecutive Sundays before it closed. While marking a turning point for Black concert dance, it would also begin one of the Dunham dancers' busiest years. They would be more in demand than ever following their next production.

Cabin in the Sky, Stormy Weather, and the American Racial Narrative

On September 18th of 1940, Dunham signed a contract to play her first spoken acting role in a production. The play, temporarily named *Little Joe*, would become the smash hit *Cabin in the Sky* on Broadway, and later a film. Her contract indicated that she would play the part of temptress Georgia Brown, and guaranteed her a much-needed four hundred dollar a week salary for the 1940-41 season. Originally Dunham alone was offered a part in the production, but she insisted that her dancers be hired as well.⁸⁴ According to Lucille Ellis, the play cemented the Chicago and New York Dunham dancers as one unit: "With *Cabin in the Sky* we all became a full company."⁸⁵ The play told the story of a man who dies but is given six more months to live in order to amend his "evil ways," which included gambling, cheating on his wife, and spending his family's money at the juke joint. Throughout the play he is tempted by Lucifer and scolded by "The Lawd's General." The production had an all-Black cast and included personalities who were household names in the Black community, such as Ethel Waters,

⁸⁴ "Contract, Actor's Equity Association, Katherine Dunham, September 18, 1940," Dunham Papers.

⁸⁵ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 124.

who headed the cast, Dooley Wilson, and Rex Ingraham. There would be many highs and lows within the staging of this production for Dunham and her company.⁸⁶

George Balanchine, known as the “ballet maker,” was hired to stage, direct, and choreograph the show. He cared deeply about the production and invested some of his own money. Working for the first time with Black dancers Balachine’s approach was to “...give the dancers steps that they could do better than anybody else. No one can do hanging, fluent, smooth jumps the way these boys can...There are few dancers in the world whose lack of self consciousness means more intense and disciplined audience projection, rather than less.” Here Balanchine was in line with his contemporaries in relying on what he understood to be the “natural” abilities of Black dancers. Dunham was asked, at first, to assist periodically with choreography. Unfortunately, in the midst of previews, Martin Beck fired Balanchine a week prior to the opening performance because of creative differences. According to Tally Beatty, “Balanchine was removed from the choreographic scene, and Dunham had to reset all of the dances. And, she did reset everything except something called ‘The Hell Scene.’ He adds that, “Dunham did all of the choreographing. As I see in the program, Balanchine takes credit for that. But he

⁸⁶ Dunham was continuously at odds with Ethel Waters, who was known to be difficult on set, often treated younger actresses with contempt, and wanted full star treatment. She and Dunham had several run-ins during the production. One issue was the amount of press Dunham received for her part. Both *Time* and *Collier’s* coverage barely mentioned Waters and did not print her picture. Apparently, Waters also made friends with some of the dancers and attempted to steal them away from Dunham (“Minefields” in *Kaiso!*, 148-149) Also see Bogle’s biography of Ethel Waters, Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

didn't choreograph it.”⁸⁷ Dance scholar Constance Valis Hill sees *Cabin in the Sky* ultimately as an important collaboration between the two choreographers.⁸⁸

Dunham took the lead in confronting a script that perpetuated familiar racist tropes and discrimination. She and John Pratt were resistant to accepting any role in the production initially because of its incorporation of the stereotypical ne'er-do-well Black man and the portrayal of Black women as Jezebels. Further, Dunham characteristically used her influence and choreography to re-shape various aspects of the performance. For example, in one scene her character is supposed to hit Ethel Waters character, Petunia, over the head with a beer bottle. Dunham refused and threatened to quit over the matter. The scene was amended.⁸⁹ Another matter pitted her against the wishes of show's producers: aside from the ongoing tug of war with the script, producers were unhappy with the varied physical appearance of her dancers. Producers felt that many dancers were too dark in complexion, and they asked Dunham for replacements. Tally Beatty recalls that they wanted to switch in “all these Lena Horne types. But Dunham did stand up! She did hold her ground. But that didn't deter them. They hired these girls -- the Cotton Club girls just to drape the stage. Every time the Dunham dancers would come on we had a whole lot of Cotton Club girls, very fair, behind us.”⁹⁰ Coincidentally, the

⁸⁷ Talley Beatty, *Interview of Tally Beatty by Zita Allen, James Hatch and Arthur Smith*. eds. James Hatch, Zita Allen, and Arthur Smith (New York, NY: Artists and Influences: Hatch Billops Collection, 1981), 11-12; Perpener, *Concert Dance*, 146.

⁸⁸ Kaiso!, Hill “Collaborations.”

⁸⁹ Haskins, *Katherine Dunham* 70.

⁹⁰ Beatty, *Interview by Zita Allen*, 6-7.

Cotton Club had recently closed, so there happened to be many light-skinned female club dancers recently out of work. But the idea that light-skinned chorus girls could stand in for well-trained dancers completing intricate choreography must have been hard for the Dunham troupe to fathom.

Dunham's efforts to continue her company's success took her to the entertainment center of southern California where she began her commercial film work. After the Broadway production closed, the company toured with *Cabin in the Sky* and ended up in California, at which time Ethel Waters, the star of the show, left unexpectedly. Dunham's Company found itself stranded far from home and without work or sufficient funds on the West Coast. Dunham immediately began booking any engagements she could to "to hold it together."⁹¹ California would turn out to be a fruitful place for her and her dancers. Her commercial film work began with a twenty-minute short film she made for Warner Brothers Studio entitled, *Carnival of Rhythm*, which was based on Brazilian music and dance. It continued the battle to amend popular images dominating Black representation in popular entertainment, but this time in a new medium.

Yet a change in medium did not mean an escape from the old issues. Prior to the release of the short, Will Hays, the President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, indicated that he "frown[ed] upon the use of Negro actors in parts where they represent Brazilians." American movie moguls were being encouraged to court South American audiences during WWII as a part of the Good Neighbor

⁹¹ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 127.

Policy.⁹² As a result, any and all references to the specific locale of the dances and music were removed from the narration. This left many moviegoers confused as to the meaning and purpose of the film. Dunham and Claude A. Barnett, Director of the Associated Negro Press, exchanged letters about the incident and approached both Hays and the Brazilian Embassy. Barnett explained to Hays, “Negroes of talent have a hard enough time, it would appear, without piling difficulties in their paths.” The Brazilian Embassy denied any knowledge of this, stating, “we never made any representation to the Will Hays office in respect to anything which had to do with racial differences in moving pictures.”⁹³ Countering the extreme color consciousness that she found pervaded Hollywood, Dunham in *Carnival of Rhythm* prominently highlighted dancer Carmencita Romero who, because of her darker skin, would never have been featured in a typical Hollywood production. Recalling such battles, Dunham put it plainly, “I know that it cost me a career in Hollywood.”⁹⁴

Her next experience with film in Hollywood came when Twentieth Century Fox called upon Dunham and her company to appear in *Stormy Weather*. The film starred

⁹² The Good Neighbor Policy arose as a result of World War II and the efforts of the United States to strengthen alliances with neighboring countries, specifically South America. The policy called for non-intervention into domestic affairs of South American countries and simultaneously pushed for economic exchange. This heavily impacted the movie industry that was often used as a tool of propaganda in the exchange and an avenue to increase American profit.

⁹³ “Letter from Claude Barnett to Katherine Dunham, November 18, 1941”, “Letter from Katherine Dunham to Claude Barnett, October 20, 1941”, “Contract between Katherine Dunham and Felix Young dated December 4, 1941”, all from Dunham Papers. Despite this claim the Nicholas Brothers would encounter a similar situation when they appeared with Carmen Miranda in *Down Argentine Way*.

⁹⁴ Haskins *Katherine Dunham*, 73.

Lena Horne, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and a who’s who cast in Black entertainment that included Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, Dooley Wilson, Ada Brown, and the Nicholas Brothers, to name only a few in the illustrious cast. *Stormy Weather* was a back-stage review that was held together with a thin boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl narrative. Its main focus was pure entertainment, and, like *Cabin in the Sky*, it was not always successful in avoiding stereotypes and negative Black constructions. However, Dunham did make an important intervention during filming.

This opportunity came when Dunham was asked to choreograph a street scene that would create a dance sequence to an extended syncopated version of the famous title song. The scene begins with Lena Horne singing the song in front of a very literal backdrop. Horne is standing next to a window in her sitting room, rain pours outside the window amidst lightning and claps of thunder. Toward the middle of the song, the camera sweeps out the window onto Dunham and her dancers below an elevated train. At this point the original vision of the writers was to have the dancers begin a popular dance on the street in street clothes. Instead, Dunham insisted on incorporating a fantasy modern dance sequence based on a melding of African and Caribbean movements, ballet, and Black Americana. In contrast with the numerous depictions of more popular Black dance, Dunham and her troupe performed on stage in more formal theatrical costumes.

She wrote to her friend Yvonne Wood, a costumer at Twentieth Century Fox, before filming “I would like something else for the Stormy Weather sequence if we use

it—something earthier and still with more movement...”⁹⁵ The minstrel-like trope that the dance embodied, as written, was instead transformed by her choreography and costuming into a modernist moment within the larger film. Cultural historian Shane Vogel explains that:

Coming after earlier scenes of tap dancing, cakewalking, and vaudeville acrobatics, Dunham’s performance marks a choreographic contradiction within the film between the history of stereotyped minstrel dance and the emergence of modern Negro dance by artists like Pearl Primus, Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora, and Dunham herself...Dunham’s kinesthetic rewriting of ‘Stormy Weather’ situates the song and its racial inscription within a diasporic rather than a national horizon.⁹⁶

Dunham’s choreography and scene interpretation would foreshadow the abstract musicals of the fifties in which dancers like Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse incorporated dance sequences relying on abstract interpretation. In 1943 both *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* received wide exposure to both Black and white audiences across the nation.

Soldiering Against Racial Oppression at Home While War Develops Abroad

⁹⁵ “Letter from Katherine Dunham to Yvonne Wood, Designer, August 21, 1943,” Dunham Papers.

⁹⁶ Todd Vogel, *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 107. Shane Vogel provides an excellent overview of the history of Stormy Weather the song and the various productions in which the song is incorporated. He also identifies the ways in which Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham reinterpret the song to create a marker of Black modernism. Shane Vogel, “Performing ‘Stormy Weather’: Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham,” *South Central Review* 25, no. 1 (2008): 93–113. doi:10.1353/scr.2008.0013.

By the early 1940s both the war and America's racial caste system would impact Dunham and her troupe personally and professionally. Despite the exposure, good reviews, and success being garnered by the Dunham Company, they could not escape living in a country that was policed by racial inequality, legal segregation, and de facto segregation. In addition to managing a hectic national touring schedule for various productions between 1939-1945, Dunham choreographed and appeared in two more films, *Star Spangled Rhythm* and *Pardon My Sarong*. As America became officially involved in the war, John Pratt, following his "order to report for induction," arrived at the induction board on the morning of July 9, 1943.⁹⁷ Pratt's departure left Dunham alone to manage set design and costuming in addition to managing all the company's myriad affairs, including personnel management, travel arrangements, choreography, and rehearsal.

In the early forties the segregated armed forces would have been a particularly difficult place to be for a liberal leftist from the North, or for a white man married to an African-American woman, and John Pratt was both. When Pratt finally reached his base Fort Eustis Virginia, he remarked, "I came in with a bunch of toughies from Little Sicily in Chicago and find thousands of 'crackers' here..."⁹⁸ Pratt's specific views of the war are unknown, but it is clear that he was aware of the contradiction that a war for democracy represented for a deeply divided America. The opinion of a friend, identified as Louis, who wrote to him reflecting on riots in contemporary Chicago, East St. Louis,

⁹⁷ "John Pratt Induction Papers, July 9, 1943," Dunham Papers.

⁹⁸ "Letter from John Pratt to Katherine Dunham, August 14, 1943," Dunham Papers.

Fort Brown (Texas), and skirmishes in South Carolina, was one shared by many African-Americans:

doesn't it strike one as odd that freedom for this and freedom for that far away is worth killing and dying for, but working and being creative for freedom right here at home only gets bullets...frankly until there is complete freedom for over twelve millions of colored people I'm deaf and blind to all of the hulabaloo elsewhere. O yes I'm for a world freed from the mad fool Hitler and the like but he's only the scab of a social cancer.⁹⁹

As for millions of others the impact of the war was very palpable in the Dunham-Pratt household, as was the effect of discrimination and inequality that they hoped would dissipate at the war's end.

It was while traveling that the sting of inequality would be most typically felt, and especially so for Black performers, athletes, and entertainers whose jobs were dependent on travel during the era of segregation.¹⁰⁰ The company was repeatedly humiliated while trying to find accommodations, rehearsal space, and comfortable travel. Their stage director, Dale Wasserman, recalled that the company would often need to book sleeping cars in the trains on which they zigzagged the country, and whites complained regularly about "the niggers" having sleeping accommodations while they did not. Many of these complaints came from soldiers fighting in WWII for freedom and democracy abroad. More trouble met them once they reached the city in which they were performing.

⁹⁹ "Letter from Louis to John Pratt, November 6, 1941," Dunham Papers.

¹⁰⁰ In one case that has come to be well known, in 1936 Jessie Owens and his wife were denied hotel room in New York City on the night he returned from winning four Gold metals in Berlin and doing considerable damage to the Nazi claim to White supremacy. He had to lodge above 125th, which was the heart of Black Harlem. America reserved little to no "star treatment" for its Black celebrities.

Tommy Gomez, another longtime Dunham dancer, explained that an “advance man would go to the black area or to one of the black churches and ask the minister to ask members of the congregation to house us...we went through the problems of racial prejudice all the time, from the very beginning of the company.” Lucille Ellis remembers that the dancers sometimes had to stay in “whorehouses” to find accommodation.¹⁰¹

As they traveled they realized that the North was not much better than the South – places with liberal reputations were unable to live up to their image. Carmencito Romero recalls that in California the company encountered the most racism and strict segregation. In one instance she and three other dancers procured accommodations for the company only by pretending they were part of an international dance troupe. The hotels accepted any international traveler, but not Black Americans. Each dancer spoke in a language they had picked up, French and Spanish. Dunham was sometimes spared the indecent accommodations to which her dancers were subjected by using her influence to avoid the worst lodging when possible.¹⁰² This, of course, was not always a possibility.

Dunham faced racial discrimination even while traveling in South America in 1950. After she and her husband booked a room, a Brazilian hotel refused to house her. They were told that “it was against hotel policy to accept Negroes.” The couple responded by pointing out that Marian Anderson had a reservation at the same hotel. The hotel decided they preferred canceling Anderson’s reservation rather than change their

¹⁰¹ Lacy, "Free to Dance."

¹⁰² Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 133; Carmencita Romero, *Interview of Carmencita Romero by Valerie Linson*. ed. Valerie Linson (New York, NY: Artists and Influences: Hatch Billops Collection, 1981), 153.

racist policy. Dunham and Pratt had to find alternative accommodations, but Dunham made sure that a protest was published in several newspapers and magazines, and sued for “redress for the humiliation suffered.”¹⁰³ Over time Dunham would file several lawsuits against landlords and realty companies that employed discriminatory practices. In some cases realtors would refuse to even sell property to her. She did not have the luxury afforded Harry Belafonte, for example, who, when refused a rental, was able to purchase the entire building.¹⁰⁴

A read through Dunham’s personal papers reinforces the impression that she encountered during these years what can only be described as a non-stop engagement with racial discrimination. She and her company persistently were either being confronted by it. Following a protest by Dunham in the press, a Jewish admirer laments the discrimination that the company faced in New York hotels: “It indicates, at least to me, that we are very far from putting into practice the ideals expressed in the Four Freedoms.”¹⁰⁵ In another letter, a friend reported his confrontation on a bus with bigots who were deriding the Dunham show. In yet another letter, Dunham complained to her mother: “[the Waldorf Astoria] refused my reservation on Tuesday November 30”.¹⁰⁶ In

¹⁰³ Katherine Dunham, "Brazil: Jaime Crow," *Time*, July 31, 1950.

¹⁰⁴ Harry Belafonte and Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: a Memoir*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 192, 193.

¹⁰⁵ “Letter from Alexander Sterne to Katherine Dunham, September 6, 1943,” Dunham Papers. The Four Freedoms was a reference to Franklin Delanor Roosevelt's appeal for human rights in his 1941 State of the Union address, where he calls for freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

¹⁰⁶ “Letter from Katherine Dunham to her Mother November 16, 1943,” Dunham Papers.

Cincinnati Dunham was asked to leave the Netherlands Plaza Hotel after complaints from the American Federation of Labor Leaders, who threatened to move their conference elsewhere. When management arrived at her room, she threatened to jump out the window if ejected. She called on her friend Harry Bridges, who was president of the International Longshoreman's and Warehouseman's Union to negotiate with the hotel. Unfazed, Dunham at the close of her stay made a reservation for another performer coming to the city, Paul Robeson. Following this scandal, Black performers were allowed to book accommodations at the Netherlands.¹⁰⁷

Dunham consciously combined her successful onstage remaking of Black image with her offstage politics, and had to have been aware of the financial costs and impact on her career resulting from her political activism. But this did not deter her in her struggles against segregation. The Dunham Company refused to stage productions for segregated audiences, and only played below the Mason-Dixon line in exceptional circumstances. On one remarkable night in Kentucky, Dunham courageously held to her convictions. The Dunham Company found out too late that an appearance before a Louisville theater was not desegregated, as previously agreed upon. The performance before the cheering crowd went on, but Dunham appeared afterward to deliver more than the audience had bargained for:

At the close of the show Dunham stepped out and announced, there comes a time when every human being must protest in order to retain human dignity. I must protest because I have

¹⁰⁷ Aschenbrenner Ivw. with Ellis from "Katherine Dunham: Anthropologist, Artist, Humanist," in *African American Pioneers in Anthropology*, Ira E. Harrison and Faye Venetia Harrison (Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois, 1999), 137.

discovered that your management will not allow people like you to sit next to people like us. I hope that time and...this war for tolerance and democracy, which I am sure we will win, will change some of these things –perhaps we can return.¹⁰⁸

Like her refusals to play segregated audiences, Dunham's participation in progressive organizations has not received much discussion. The war years stirred up activism in several corners of the African-American community, and because Black performers and artists were often in the public forefront, they often served as the public face of activism. Dunham lent her name and assistance to many causes, including the American Conference For Racial and National Unity and the Abraham Lincoln School in Chicago. She accepted posts as Vice Chairman of the Dance Committee for the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, and as Vice President of the Negro Actors Guild.¹⁰⁹ She also gave of her time for appearances at the 1945 Negro Freedom Rally at Madison Square Garden, organized by Paul Robeson and Canada Lee, as well as a different rally for Russian War Relief.¹¹⁰ She attended countless other benefits and fundraisers. She was a supporter of Benjamin Davis, the first Black Communist elected to office. A full packet of his campaign was kept in the sundry personal and business papers

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Dunham, “Comment to a Louisville Audience” in *Kaiso!*, 255.

¹⁰⁹ “Letter from Helen Tamiris, Executive Dance Committee, National Council of American-Soviet Friendship to Katherine Dunham, October 21, 1943”, and “Letter from Edna Thomas, Acting Executive Secretary, Negro Actors Guild of America to Katherine Dunham, January 17, 1941,” both from Dunham Papers.

¹¹⁰ “Letter from Edward C. Carter, President, Russian War Relief to Katherine Dunham, April 3, 1942,” Dunham Papers.

that she saved. Many of these organizations are of the sort that would cause Dunham's contemporaries, including Paul Robeson and Hazel Scott, to be called before HUAC.

Southland

No career risk rivaled that of staging *Southland*, Dunham's ballet Americana. *Southland* can be described as the performance that almost wasn't. Commissioned by the Symphony of Chile the production was to premiere in Santiago in January of 1951.¹¹¹ Dunham wrote *Southland*, a riveting tale about a southern lynching of an innocent man, after reading about an actual lynching of a southern Black youth. As was the case in many lynchings, a Black man in the story is falsely accused of the rape of a white woman. The white woman cries rape after being assaulted by her white lover. Beautifully choreographed and costumed, *Southland's* destiny was troubled from its inception. The first obstacle to staging the piece came internally from the reaction of the dancers themselves. Until the decision to perform this controversial piece, the dancers were temporarily insulated from confronting race as they toured the world free from American-style discrimination. But the dancers felt that this piece unnecessarily created a racially charged atmosphere within the troupe.¹¹² The Dunham Company had different numbers of white dancers at different periods. When *Southland* was being rehearsed and staged, Julie Robinson Belafonte, the wife of Harry Belafonte, who was white, was playing the lead. Belafonte recalls the hostility that arose in the other dancers when she spoke the one

¹¹¹ Constance Valis Hill, "Katherine Dunham's 'Southland': Protest in the Face of Repression," *Dance Research Journal* 26, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 1-10.

¹¹² Valis Hill, "Katherine Dunham's 'Southland'," 4-5.

word of dialogue throughout the entire piece: “Nigger!” She remembers that other dancers exclaimed, “Do you hear the way she says ‘Nigga?’ Nobody would say it that way if they didn’t really mean it.”¹¹³

The Dunham Company had other difficulties during the show's run; however, most of these had nothing to do with the diversity of the cast or internal racial tension. *Southland* was controversial in part because it was being staged in a foreign country, Chile that the United States government saw as friendly to communism. Dunham knew that the staging of the production was a risk and wrote to a friend at home inquiring as to the media response. He responds, “no news or reports here on ‘Southland’ yet. As you may know, this country is proudly publicizing the fact that in 1952, for the first recorded full year, there was not a lynching.”¹¹⁴ The United States government may have kept the American media coverage to a minimum, but it responded in force to this protest dance by Dunham. After its first show, all reviews in the US were suppressed, with the same affect locally since Chilean newspapers depended on America for newsprint. America, in the grip of the Cold War, perhaps felt that it could not afford to give publicity to the racist characterizations in *Southland*.

Dunham defiantly staged the piece again in Paris, ignoring the discomfort of the dancers, and the repression of the state department.¹¹⁵ This action would cost her dearly in the future, as J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, would take

¹¹³ Valis Hill, “Katherine Dunham's 'Southland',” 5.

¹¹⁴ “Letter signed Dale on Southland production to Katherine Dunham, February 2, 1953,” Dunham Papers.

¹¹⁵ Valis Hill, “Katherine Dunham's 'Southland',” 5.

a personal interest in “undermining her career.”¹¹⁶ According to her daughter, despite a growing backlash, Dunham again staged *Southland* in the United States.¹¹⁷ This cost Dunham’s troupe the much-needed governmental subsidy that international traveling troupes of its stature typically commanded and needed in the 1950’s.¹¹⁸ As late as 1967, the Federal Bureau of Investigation described Dunham as a risk to send internationally as a representative of the United States.¹¹⁹ The government’s suppression of activist consciousness was swift in the Dunham’s case. Once she moved from “exotic” entertainment, in the eyes of the state, to an activist performer, attempts at thwarting this consciousness were pursued. Dunham’s troop never again gained the notoriety it had prior to the staging of *Southland*. However, this would, by no means, mark the end of Dunham’s resistance to oppression, or quell her political contributions to the world.

Katherine Dunham’s troupe gave their last performance at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1956, ending a significant era in Black concert dance, but leaving a lasting legacy for the next generation of dancers and activists.¹²⁰ Dunham was only one, albeit one of the most visible, of many African-American women who waged a multi-terrain

¹¹⁶ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 150-151.

¹¹⁷ Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, author interview, March 10, 2011, Carbondale, IL.

¹¹⁸ Perron, “One Woman Revolution,” 45.

¹¹⁹ US Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], Washington Field to Sac, New York FBI* (New York: New York Field Office Katherine Dunham Bureau File 161-4870-39, 3/2/67).

¹²⁰ Edward Thorpe, *Black dance* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1990), 130.

struggle over Black female agency, image, and representation in the 1930's, 40's and 50's.

CHAPTER 3

“COLORED PERFORMERS REPRESENT THEIR PEOPLE”: HAZEL SCOTT AND POPULAR AND PRIVATE RESISTANCE

*Little girl
Dreaming of a baby grand piano
(Not knowing there's a Steinway bigger, bigger)
Dreaming of the baby grand to play
That stretches paddle-tailed across the floor,
Not standing upright
Like a bad boy in the corner,
That sends its music
Up the stairs and down the stairs
And out the door
To confound even Hazel Scott
Who might be passing
Oh!
Little boy
Dreaming of the boxing gloves
Joe Louis wore,
The gloves that sent two dozen men
To the floor.
Knockout!
Barn! Bop! Mop!
There's always room,
They say,
At the top.¹²¹*

— To Be Somebody, by LANGSTON HUGHES

In June of 1924 Hazel Scott announced to all who would listen that it was her birthday and she was four years old. She was aboard a ship leaving Port of Spain, Trinidad, the island nation from which her family hailed, and where she was born. Her

¹²¹ Langston Hughes, “To Be Somebody,” *Phylon (1940-1956)* 11, no. 4. (4th Qtr., 1950): 311. This poem was written by Hughes in honor of Scott and Louis. The title “To Be Somebody” points to the aspirations of African-Americans following WWII on the verge of the Civil Rights Movement. He is acknowledging what Scott symbolized to African-Americans during the post war time period.

mother, grandmother, and Hazel were embarking on a journey to begin a new life in New York. Shortly after bragging to the captain that she was now four and could play the piano, little Miss Scott was surrounded by onlookers as she tapped out popular Trinidadian calypsos on the piano. By the time she was discovered by her worried mother, she had a full crowd of ship passengers entranced. Hazel's grandmother was already familiar with the talent for piano possessed by her granddaughter. At two-and-a-half-years old Hazel Scott had managed to climb onto a piano stool to play a hymn often sung to her perfectly by ear. Her gift was amazing, but not entirely surprising given that her mother, Alma Scott, was a classically-trained pianist who had studied and taught piano for most of her life. When Scott arrived in New York, she was already known to be a child prodigy in her native Trinidad. By the age of three she had learned to read, shown perfect pitch, and debuted in public as a pianist.¹²² Long before the piano prodigy and actress graced the stages of Broadway, appeared in Hollywood films, and played smoke-filled jazz sets with the likes of Art Tatum, Lil Hardin, and Charlie Parker, she was establishing herself as a star attraction. As we have seen, Scott showed a knack for accessing and manipulating popular public space even as a toddler. And as Langston Hughes' poem so elegantly states, Scott would push herself and inspire others, "to be somebody," and to make some room "at the top" for Black American women. Scott's move to New York would eventually provide America with one of the first nationally recognized Black women performers and activists.

¹²² Luther Davis, "Hi Hazel," *Collier's* 109, no. 2 (1942):16; Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 9-10; Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African-Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 15; Perfect pitch is the ability to reproduce or identify musical notes with absolute precision without an outside reference.

Although Scott's contributions in the 1930's and 40's have been largely overlooked, I assert that Scott consciously and skillfully uses her image as a weapon to subvert the oppressive racial narrative of her time. Scott's stage, film, and television persona and performances stood in stark contrast to the appearances often made by African-American women in these mediums. Between 1938-1957 she was able to purposefully create an on-stage and film persona that represented positive, self-defined, and self-generated African-American women. Perhaps it was not coincidental that she was at the height of her fame during the WWII era, 1941-1945; Maureen Honey asserts that, "For all its racial barriers and limited opportunities for real economic change...evidence...suggests that World War II provided an empowering political base for African-American women." She adds that "The war against racism, in short, furnished African-American women... with models of pride and resistance..."¹²³

Histories of the WWII era often focus exclusively on the labor and economic advancement of white American women. Stories of white women on assembly lines, serving their country in the Women's Army Corps, and filling non-traditional male jobs abound. These discussions neglect the experiences of African-American women. Honey's thesis places emphasis not only on African-American women's vast contributions to the war effort, but also their manipulation of public space. In her work, *Bitter Fruit: African-American Women in World War II*, she draws from accounts in Black newspapers of the accomplishments and activism of Black women in a cross section of professions, including as artists and performers. These women functioned as the "models of pride and

¹²³ Maureen Honey, *Bitter Fruit: African-American Women in World War II* (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 2.

resistance” for African-Americans as they attained key positions and took brave stands against racism and segregation during WWII and in the years that followed. This had an important and lasting impact. Honey does not dismiss the ways in which all American women’s advancement was thwarted or dampened with the return of male workers at the war’s end; however, she gives due attention to the real gains experienced by African-American women who had been longtime participants in the workforce.

In the war years Scott positioned herself in the forefront of the battle over the Black female representation to become a conduit and symbol of both Black pride and resistance. Her son, Adam Clayton Powell III, said of his mother, “as long as I can remember she would talk about the dignity of how Black people, Black women especially, had to be dignified and had to really be models for everyone else. I think that she found it so totally unacceptable that there was no room in her universe to compromise on this.”¹²⁴ Like the other women discussed in this dissertation, she functioned as such a model, and merged her on stage artistic resistance with off stage political and social activism.

Harlem Prodigy: “I am in the presence of a genius”

The seeds for a life of resistance were planted in Scott’s unusual childhood and adolescence. Her family background is representative of the transnational identities created via the African Diaspora. Her mother, Alma Long, was the daughter of Afro-Venezuelans who emigrated by taking the short ten-mile ferry ride to the island. Alma

¹²⁴ Author interview with Adam Clayton Powell III, April 11, 2008, McClean, VA (hereafter cited as Clayton Powell III, author interview).

Long was a sought-after debutante and talented classical pianist.¹²⁵ Her father, R. Thomas Scott, was an English professor who had studied and taught in England. He had been born and raised in Scotland, where his Yoruban Nigerian ancestors were brought during slavery. He was later educated in England and moved to Trinidad. He became a government architect who designed several “official buildings” and was a “man of considerable importance [o]n the island.”¹²⁶

Both of the Scott’s lineage, income, education and status suggest that they were a part of the island’s bourgeois class.¹²⁷ Thomas saw to it that his daughter had the best musical education available in Trinidad. Based on her father’s occupation, and her mother’s heritage, the Scott’s family position in the class hierarchy of their community should have been somewhat secure. In the early twentieth century, the average Trinidadian labored in agriculture and earned as little as 35 cents per day in the booming industries of sugar and cocoa. While Scott’s father worked as an erudite professor educating the islands male elite at St. Mary’s College, over 43% of the island's

¹²⁵ Clayton Powell III, author interview; "Hazel Scott," in *Current Biography 1943* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1943), 678. See also "Hazel Dorothy Scott," in *American National Biography*, eds. John A. Garraty, Mark C. Carnes, and American Council of Learned Societies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 491.

¹²⁶ Arna Wendell Bontemps, *We have Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1945).

¹²⁷ Nigel O. Bolland, "Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945, Review," *The Americas* 51, no. 4 (Apr., 1995): 615-616. See George Simpson, "Social Stratification in the Caribbean," *Phylon* (1960-) 23, no. 1 (1962): 29–46.. It provides an in depth discussion of social and class categorization in the Caribbean. During this time period Trinidad, like many other islands in the Caribbean, had a complex ethnic-racial structure in which skin complexion often correlated to class status. This status was also most often hereditary. Trinidad’s racial-ethnic social caste system was more fluid than, for example, that of India that had a more rigid caste system.

population remained illiterate.¹²⁸ In spite of their status, after several years of marriage the security that the family's status promised was ripped away by the departure of Thomas Scott. He left his family in 1923 to seek his fortune in the United States. Unlike many in the Caribbean immigrating at that time, Scott did not send money back to support his family.

Growing emotionally distant from his wife, Thomas Scott used this relocation to begin a new life without his wife and child.¹²⁹ His departure left Alma Scott struggling to survive by performing a variety of jobs and descending in class status. It is not completely clear why a man with his social status and elite occupation would choose to move to the U.S. There is a claim in one biographical account of Hazel Scott that her father moved to work as a professor at Fisk University; however, there is insufficient proof in the small number of historical references of him to demonstrate that this was true.¹³⁰ It is very likely that Thomas Scott moved to the United States to chase the dreams that accompanied many Caribbean immigrants. Men and women from all class stratifications saw the promise of opportunity and increased access to wealth in the U.S. These same aspirations motivated Alma Scott to begin a new life in America. A common

¹²⁸ Eric Eustace Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492-1969*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 444, 456.

¹²⁹ Chilton, *The Pioneering Journey*, 5.

¹³⁰ "Hazel Scott," in *Current Biography 1943*, 678.

destination for these immigrants was Harlem, a Black enclave on the northernmost area of Manhattan.¹³¹

In 1924 Harlem was about to embark on a renaissance that would attract Black intellectuals and artists from all over the globe.¹³² Arthur P. Davis describes the neighborhood during this period in the following way,

Harlem in the 1920's was a delightful place...with its broad avenues uncluttered then by excess traffic, with its clean streets and well kept apartments houses ... Harlem was then still a relatively new settlement for Negroes, and the grime and the deterioration that came with subsequent years of poverty and job-discrimination and frustration had not blighted the black city...our enjoyment was in part the pride of having a city of our very own- a city of black intellectuals and artists, of peasants just up from the south, of West Indians and Africans, of Negroes of all kinds and all classes.¹³³

In the 1920's Harlem's atmosphere was influenced by a thick southern and Caribbean overlay. It was also rife with artistic creativity and burgeoning Black modernity. But the excitement over Black Harlem's contribution to the cultural renaissance belied the rising disproportionate poverty, disenfranchisement, and exploitation of its community. The financial boom of downtown Manhattan in nineteen

¹³¹ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1991), 153.

¹³² Scholars widely identify the Harlem Renaissance as beginning in 1925 with the publishing of the *New Negro*, a compilation of Black writing edited by Alain Locke. See Alain LeRoy Locke, *The New Negro* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and David L. Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

¹³³ Arthur P. Davis and J. Saunders Redding, eds., *Cavalcade; Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 429.

twenties America did not wind its way uptown. The main way that the country's financial prosperity was seen in Harlem was through the sudden flocking of wealthy white socialites to the white only nightspots, such as the famous Cotton Club. Over half of the Black men in Harlem earned \$23 a week or less, when the cost of living demanded a minimum of \$33. The majority of married Black women worked outside the home, and 80% of all Black women in Harlem labored in domestic service. Lack of access to quality healthcare and education led to higher than average death rates due to disease and a rise in delinquency and crime. Clearly not due to a lack of hard work, most of the poverty that racked Harlem was caused by exorbitant rents, restricted access to employment that paid a living wage, and blatant discrimination.¹³⁴ For most, Harlem was a mixed blessing; it was a black Northern urban space that brought freedom but was anchored by poverty and a small but significant cultural movement. This is the Harlem that four-year-old Hazel Scott encountered with her family, and that would have so much influence on creating the exceptional person she would become.

The Scott's lived with a host of relatives as they made their way in the new city. They settled with several family members in a Brownstone on 118th Street. Alma Scott took jobs as a domestic and performed different odd jobs to keep the family afloat. Hazel Scott continued to develop her musical talent and began to showcase it in the Harlem community. At five she debuted at New York's Town Hall. At age eight, Scott was permitted to audition for Paul Wagner, a renowned professor of music at

¹³⁴ Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 176; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *"Or Does It Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 32-35.

Julliard. After her audition, Wagner reportedly placed his hand on the little girl's head and said, "I am in the presence of a genius." He then agreed to teach her privately, as she was far too young to attend Julliard. Scott transitioned from private music student to professional musician by the start of adolescence. She was formally introduced to the Harlem community at a 1933 recital. She is pictured sitting on a piano stool and publicized as, "Little Miss Hazel Scott, Child Wonder Pianist." The concert took place at the Alhambra Ballroom at 126th Street and 7th Avenue.¹³⁵ Scott's star was ascending rapidly.

Ascendancy: "They want to make a little lady out of me"

The dreams and aspirations that led Scott's father to immigrate had been quickly dashed within the racial binary that was embedded at all levels of America's societal structure. R. Thomas Scott's "sense of dignity was constantly in conflict with American race prejudice."¹³⁶ Separated from his family and unable to secure a job in which he could utilize his academic prowess, he was "reduced to odd jobs" and "fell into a deep depression." In the years before he fell ill, he instilled in his daughter a great sense of racial pride, which was heightened after he became enthralled with Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and flirted with a Garveyism.¹³⁷ He would sometimes bring the impressionable Scott with him to meetings. Alma Scott meanwhile

¹³⁵ "Child Wonder Pianist," Poster, Hazel Scott Papers in the possession of Adam Clayton Powell III (hereafter cited as Hazel Scott Papers).

¹³⁶ "Hazel Scott," in *Current Biography 1943*, 678.

¹³⁷ Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 14; Will Haygood, *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Amistad, 2006), 121.

taught herself how to play the tenor saxophone, and stopped her reliance on domestic service and odd jobs to support her family.¹³⁸ Eventually, she began doing gigs with various bands. Her father's descent and her mother's ingenuity and hard work must have imparted sobering and profound lessons to their daughter. First, she saw directly the devastating impact that racial oppression could have on the lives of African-Americans. Second, she became privy, through her mother's gigs and contacts, to a community of capable Black women who functioned in non-traditional occupations, and projected very different representations of Black womanhood than those perpetuated in mainstream society, ones that often rejected roles prescribed by the dominant gender narrative. These women rejected the rigid boundaries imposed by the politics of respectability. They saw themselves as at once respectable and empowered to redefine gender norms. As she grew into womanhood, Hazel Scott was able to access a dynamic circle of African-American women who existed within a woman's musician subculture of their own construction.¹³⁹ These women employed traditional vehicles of resistance in new ways. However, their resistance grew out of modes of resistance adopted by African-American women as they survived slavery, American racism, and segregation. They constructed their own criteria for resistance and appropriate representation. These modes of resistance that pulled on self-definition and self-determination were not unusual in the African-American community. They, in fact, contributed to its survival. This description is true of many of

¹³⁸ Margo Jefferson, "Great (Hazel) Scott!," *Ms. Magazine*, November, 1974, 23.

¹³⁹ For an excellent discussion of this "subculture" as well as the character, composition and challenges of these female bands see Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All Girl" Bands of the 1940's* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

the women that Scott would encounter, first as her mother began to work full time for all-women bands, and, later, when she formally went to work as a paid member her mother's own all female band.¹⁴⁰

Alma Scott built working relationships and/or friendships with a host of women who worked against and outside the dominant gender narrative; these women included Trumpet player Valaida Snow. Alma Scott first auditioned for Snow's all-women group and toured with her briefly. Snow was best known as a trumpet player, but was proficient on several different instruments, and also could sing and dance. She was the definition of a one-woman show. Her practice was to pull together groups between her own touring domestically and abroad.¹⁴¹ Piano player Lil Hardin, who married Louis Armstrong, was the bandleader that Alma Scott would tour with the longest.¹⁴² It is said of her that, "in her long and many sided career she provided inspiration and often playing opportunities for other aspiring jazzwomen, and her piano style defied the myth of the timid, lukewarm female touch." She said of her playing, "I hit the piano so loud and hard, they all turned around to look at me."¹⁴³ This glance at African-American female musicians who would

¹⁴⁰ Haygood, *King of the Cats*, 121; Arna Wendell Bontemps, *We Have Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1945), 95.

¹⁴¹ Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 30

¹⁴² Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (Da Capo Press, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 255; Dorothy C. Salem, "Hazel Scott" in *African-American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, Biographical Dictionaries of Minority Women* (New York: Garland, 1993), 444-5.

¹⁴³ Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989), 23, 25.

touch upon Hazel Scott's life does not begin to include dozens of unnamed women who worked in all-female bands and as soloists.

After disbanding the Harlem Harlicans, a Black "all girl band," Hardin formed an all male band, but keeping Alma Scott on the tenor sax. Scott honed her skills in Hardin's band. The image of a beautiful woman wielding a tenor sax and her "strong way of playing" resulted in several run-ins with unappreciative male audience members. The harassment was so incessant that Alma Scott developed one-liners to combat their insults. Men would often complain, "Lady you play that thing just like a man." Scott would retort, "Mister, you carry your children just like a lady!"¹⁴⁴ These men undoubtedly felt threatened by the gender shift represented by women performing within a traditionally male dominated musical space. Within jazz and swing musical production, women were often limited to participation as vocalists. It was easier to attach sexuality to these vocalists than to female instrumentalists given that instrumentalists were expected to be much aggressive in their playing, and were less easily framed as unskilled sex objects. Women instrumentalists were seen as freaks, especially those who played instruments thought of as masculine, like drums, trumpets, and saxophones.¹⁴⁵ The ridicule for such women was only exacerbated by racism and segregation. Yet Alma Scott, as well as other African-American woman instrumentalists, was not deterred by this negative characterization. Instead their occupation of this musical space became a form of resistance to endemic sexism and racism.

¹⁴⁴ Jefferson, *Great Scott!*, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 6.

Another influence in Scott's life was her mother's friend, and Scott's eventual mentor, Billie Holiday. Scott grew fond of Holiday and found in her both a teacher and friend. Scott said of Holiday, "She always protected me. She had a very fierce protectiveness where I was concerned." After one show very early in Scott's career Holiday chased the young performer down the street and through several subway cars to scold her (and bring her to her mother) after she lied about her age, pretending to be eighteen, in order to impress an older male musician. Scott explains of Holiday's attitudes toward other female musicians "God help you if you sang out of tune, but if you had something going, she was very interested and willing to help you."¹⁴⁶ This description is telling as it points to a self defined Holiday, a woman detached from the dominant gender narrative's focus on meekness in women. Concurrently, it reveals a Holiday who contributes to the success and self-definition of others. In fact, it was Holiday who would secure Scott a gig at Café' Society, a job that would transform her career.¹⁴⁷ From these women Scott quickly learned and assimilated a range of skills as a musician and ways of navigating life as a woman.

Even considering all the role modeling accessed by Hazel Scott via this subculture of Black female musicians, none compared to the influence of her mother. Alma Scott imparted an unconventional wisdom to her daughter. For example, the elder Scott never taught her daughter to cook for fear that Hazel would burn her hands on the stove and end

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, *Notes and Tones*, 262-3; Jefferson, *Great Scott!*, 25.

¹⁴⁷ Billie Holiday with William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006), 103.

her promising career as a pianist.¹⁴⁸ Scott explains of her mother, “She was cool and level headed. When I stumbled or bumped my toe she was right there saying ‘Forget it. Move on.’ And when she found me getting carried away with myself she was on hand to tug my coat. As a result I kept my feet firmly on the ground. I still have them there.”¹⁴⁹ When fourteen-year-old Scott threatened to become a “juvenile delinquent” and bucked at the possibility of being groomed exclusively for the classical music concert hall, her mother allowed her to play with the band. She seemed to understand her daughter’s reasoning, “I can’t stay home with people who are not in the business –they want to make a little lady out of me.”¹⁵⁰ A “little lady” who was proper at all times, played solely classical music, and who had no opportunity to explore jazz or the blues was not appealing to Scott’s sensibilities. She understood that her relatives did not share the same vision of womanhood that she, her mother, and other women musicians did. It is clear from Scott’s description of her mother that women who existed inside this Black female musician subculture assimilated attributes that were not traditionally acceptable for women within the dominant narrative, attributes like assertiveness, outspokenness, and discernment, but were valued within the African-American community. Angela Davis

¹⁴⁸ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. , “My Life with Hazel Scott,” *Ebony*, January, 1949, 45 . This lack of training in the kitchen would have been unheard of for most girls, Black or White, because of the emphasis on domestic skills that were customarily stressed in preparation for marriage.

¹⁴⁹ Hazel Scott, “I Found God in Show Business,” *Ebony*, May, 1956, 41-42.

¹⁵⁰ Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 39.

identifies these attributes as possible Black feminist traits.¹⁵¹ Scott must have learned and quickly assimilated a range of skills as a musician as well as lessons for navigating life as a woman.¹⁵²

Scott's career began on a path of ascension that would crest during the late 1940s and early 50s. She performed her first professional solo in 1935 at the Roseland Ballroom playing on a bill with the Count Basie Orchestra.¹⁵³ She exclaimed, "The Basie band! Sixteen men. When they walked off the stand, I went on."¹⁵⁴ In 1936 she won a competitive radio audition sponsored by the Mutual Broadcasting System. Although ninety-seven other young people tried out, Scott landed the job. The contest resulted in her being awarded a six month contract in which she was charged with, "sustaining

¹⁵¹ Davis, "Hi Hazel," 56. Angela Davis notes in her work *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* that there are multiple and simultaneous African-American feminist traditions, many of which have been overlooked by scholars as they depicted feminist history as overwhelmingly white, leaving the majority of history books largely bereft of a Black feminist/womanist presence. Davis' focus is on early twentieth century Blues women including Ma Rainey. She explains of these women, "...although prefeminist in a historical sense, [this] reveals that Black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse." Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), xix .

¹⁵² Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 10. Sherrie Tucker explains, "African-American all-woman bands may have been unique in their ability to link expressions of the political desire of race women with the sensual desire of blueswomen." This is yet another trait that Scott would share with these women.

¹⁵³ "Hazel Scott," in *Current Biography 1943*, 445

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, *Notes and Tones*, 253.

programs with the added privilege of announcing her own numbers."¹⁵⁵ She also played at various venues regularly.

During her tenure as the between-set player at the Yacht Club on 52nd Street, she began to share her unique style of “swinging the classics.” It seems that the star of the show, Frances Faye, made a habit of sitting in on Scott’s performances. Scott recalled, “And whenever I’d start something –one of the tunes of the day –the busboy would come over and whisper ‘you can’t play that number. Ms. Faye does it in the show.” When Scott became completely frustrated, she decided to play something that Faye could not. She told herself, “Let’s see if Miss Faye does this in the show –and I started jazzing the Bach Inventions.” In an effort to maintain and expand her place in the spotlight, Scott bridged the two styles syncoating European classical music. “Jazzing the classics was self-preservation,” she explained.¹⁵⁶ This approach to both classical music and jazz was not new; it was embraced by many and disdained by others. She said of her playing, “I know lots of people have good reasons why it’s all right to swing the classics, but –well, I wish I didn’t do it...I just can’t help it.” She continues, “My stuff is hybrid. I’m not grim enough for the classics. As for swing –well, I’m not sufficiently aboriginal.”¹⁵⁷ Poet Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) reflected on Scott’s “jazzing the classics” twenty years later during the height of the Black Arts Movement in his book *Blues People*. “The shabbiness, even embarrassment of Scott’s playing ‘boogie-woogie’ before thousands of

¹⁵⁵ “Alpha Kappa Presents Hazel Scott. Program, 1948” Hazel Scott Papers, 5-6, 16.

¹⁵⁶ “Alpha Kappa Presents Hazel Scott. Program,” Hazel Scott Papers, 16-17; Jefferson, “Great Scott!,” 25.

¹⁵⁷ Davis, “Hi Hazel,” 16.

middle class white music lovers” he wrote.¹⁵⁸ His generation rejected many of the artist expressions and aesthetics of former generations. One thing is certain through her use of a layered politics of resistance in the 1940’s Scott made a lasting impression on the young beat poet. She was able to position herself to be seen and remembered by him and countless others, in audiences and press accounts across the country. This was a feat for any Black musician of the day, and particularly for a woman. Either loved or hated, this strategy would turn Hazel Scott into a household name in the Black community, and segments of the white community nationally. It was also yet another strategy for Scott to position herself in the center of popular public space. Despite her immense talent as a classical pianist, Scott might never have become a celebrated musician or have appeared in newspapers or on film without this hybrid style. America was not willing to accept the touring or notoriety of a Black woman classical pianist. Scott was included in a small group of professional Black female pianists who were able to earn a reputation and a living as full time musicians. .

A younger contemporary of Scott’s, Philippa Schuyler, was able to embark on a career as a classical pianist. Schuyler was born in 1931 to conservative Black journalist, George Schuyler, and Josephine Cogdell, a white Texas heiress and painter. Philippa’s birth was an experiment in interracial unity for her parents. The Schuyler’s believed that raising a bi-racial child on a strict dietary and educational regimen would draw out the best of both races and instill superior abilities. As a child Philippa Schuyler was fed on a strict raw diet of both vegetables and meat. She was allowed only to read in advanced

¹⁵⁸ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 218.

subjects, such as philosophy and classical European literature. To supplement this rigorous education, she was taught to play the piano, in which she excelled. She began playing professionally at age six when she appeared in her first public recital. By all accounts she was a prodigy, reading at two and a half, possessed an IQ of 185, and playing the piano like an aged master at a very young age. She “cast a long shadow across the early years of those of us who chose to fritter away our Harlem childhoods playing games instead of reading philosophy and taking to the concert stage. In the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s, hers was a household name, unusual enough that all the syllables, to many a young ear, seemed to run together; she was ‘Fillupaskyler’ and that meant child prodigy,” one writer recalled.¹⁵⁹

Schuyler became a concert stage celebrity. Her concerts were well attended initially. Unfortunately, despite her obvious talent, too many in the audience attended her concerts just to get a glimpse of the curious bi-racial prodigy and to see if the Schuyler experiment was a success. America could not abide a serious touring classical pianist who was also African-American and a woman. As she grew into adulthood and the novelty wore off, her domestic career waned. She was forced to find work abroad. She died young in Vietnam in 1967 after pursuing a second vocation as a foreign correspondent and journalist. Her success as a Black female classical pianist ultimately was based largely on the consumption of her playing as an oddity rather than as

¹⁵⁹ Kathryn M. Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Marilyn Richardson, "The Child Prodigy Who Grew Up," *The Women & Apos' Review of Books* 13, no. 7, Feb 01 (1996): 9.

something arising from a bona fide talent, which she surely was. Success for Black American classical pianists, male or female, remained elusive.¹⁶⁰

For a woman, breaking into the music world as an instrumentalist in jazz was only slightly easier than doing so on the classical stage. If a woman were able to gain entre, she had to prove her talents continuously; the challenge of having a significant career seemed insuperable. Role models were few and far between, but one, Mary Lou Williams, did make a strong impression on the still developing Hazel Scott. Williams was the most respected female jazz pianist of the day. She was another child prodigy piano player. Born in 1910, Williams was ten years older than Scott and had a childhood that contrasted sharply with that experienced by the much younger Schuyler. Williams was raised in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh and began playing to help support her family at age 6. Her mother had migrated from Atlanta and sustained a hardscrabble existence for her family as a domestic. Williams had a rough and violent childhood. She left home early and began touring with bands at 14. At 15 she was playing with bandleader Duke Ellington's early group The Washingtonians, and at 19 was a key arranger and player with Andy Kirk's popular band, The Twelve Clouds of Joy.¹⁶¹

Williams came to be respected by men and women players alike, and was honorably thought of as, "one of the boys" in jazz circles. In fact, in a well-known portrait commemorating jazz greats taken by Art Kane and entitled "A Great Day in

¹⁶⁰ Kathryn Talalay, "Philippa Duke Schuyler, Pianist/Composer/Writer," *The Black Perspective in Music* 10 (February 01, 1982): 43.

¹⁶¹ Linda Dahl, *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams, Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 3-10.

Harlem,” Williams is one of only three women featured among the 57 musicians assembled. Two of the three women, Williams and Marian McPartland, were pianists, and the other, Maxine Sullivan, was a singer.¹⁶² Williams set the standard for women instrumentalists, and to many symbolized the possibilities for Black women in jazz. She did not have to stoop to musical gimmickry or sell herself via beauty. She was dark-skinned, reserved, and deadly serious. Although she was beautiful, this was not a characteristic she chose to emphasize in performance, and it did not impact her popularity. This was a highly unusual feat for women in music. In the late 1930’s, given the musical prowess of Williams in the jazz world, and their age difference, Scott idolized Williams and kept her picture up on her wall. Scott and Williams would become very close friends in later years. However, this would come after Scott’s ascension to fame by swinging the classics and honing her well-crafted stage persona.

Hazel Scott and Café Society: “The wrong place for the right people”

“Swinging the classics” brought good fortune to Scott's career when in 1938 her mother’s band broke up and Scott was freed to pursue her own music. Once on her own Scott's popularity soared. She played first with her own short-lived 14-piece band. During this time she was also invited to play at the exclusive Le Mirage in downtown Manhattan. She was the first Black performer to integrate the club’s entertainment and appear as a regular on the “Fun Club” radio show. She quickly earned the moniker, “the mistress of

¹⁶² Dahl, *Morning Glory*, 37-38, 109-111.

Swing” in the media.¹⁶³ She was featured in the Broadway production *Sing Out the News* at the age of eighteen. She brought the house down with her rendition of “Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones.”¹⁶⁴ This appearance would lead to her long engagement at a new club called Café Society. On Election Day of 1939 the managers were left without entertainment. When Blues singer Ida Cox was delayed, Billie Holiday, who headlined at the club, suggested Scott as a fill in.¹⁶⁵ Scott took a gig that, originally intended to last three weeks, went on to last a total of six years. When she opened she had a full performer's resume that included her own radio show, performing with notable bands in addition to her own ensemble, and appearing on Broadway. Only in her late teens, she was already a seasoned entertainment veteran.

Despite her long list of accomplishments up to that point, her run at the Café Society club would be especially pivotal in Scott’s personal and professional life. Former New Jersey shoe salesman Barney Josephson had opened Café Society just a year earlier. Josephson, a Jewish liberal, wanted to provide a space that was the opposite of what he felt constituted the buttoned up and rigidly segregated atmosphere of most New York nightclubs. He hired staff, musical and otherwise, of all races. Most controversially, Café

¹⁶³ Bill Chase, "All Ears," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 10, 1938, :24; "Notes at Random," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 12, 1938; "High Priestess," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 19, 1938; Chase, "All Ears," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 26 1938; "Mistress of Swing," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 19, 1938.

¹⁶⁴ “Hot Classicist,” *Time*, October 5, 1942, 89; ”Hazel Scott,” in *Current Biography 1943*, 678.

¹⁶⁵ Bontemps, *We Have Tomorrow*, 97-98; Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 102-103; "Hazel Scott Succeeds Billie Holiday at Cafe Society," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 18, 1939.

Society *also* catered to customers of all races and classes. Josephson had been inspired by the political cabarets of Eastern Europe. The fitting slogan for the club was, “the wrong place for the right people.”¹⁶⁶ The club was a downtown hub for radical left politics. Helen Lawrenson, celebrated leftist editor of *Vanity Fair*, would later claim that it was opened specifically to raise money for the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) by order of Earl Browder, its General Secretary. “Jazz and politics were what it was all about.” She explained. She acted as hostess and co-collaborator with Josephson during the earliest stages of the club development, and she was a self-identified “fellow traveler” of the Communist Party. The Depression era created an ideal environment for an activist political café such as Café Society because, as one former attendee stated, “. . .the politics of hunger bred left-leaning radicalism, it raised the prospect of interracial workers’ alliances. . .because poverty [or the threat of poverty] stalked black and white alike. . .”¹⁶⁷ For its strong identification with Black culture, politics, and activism Café Society owners, artists, and many of its patrons would find themselves under constant surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They would be questioned regularly and harassed.¹⁶⁸

The Bureau was tracking the movements at Café Society so closely by 1944 that, when Scott had to elicit help from the FBI due to a string of mysterious telegrams, they already seemed to have an extensive dossier on many of those connected to it. According

¹⁶⁶ David W. Stowe "The Politics of Cafe Society," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1384.

¹⁶⁷ Helen Lawrenson. *Whistling Girl*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 86-89.

¹⁶⁸ Tuck, *Black Freedom Struggle*, 182.

to FBI documents, a telegram soliciting Scott's assistance states, "we can and will explain to you that the persons that are causing us to ask your help are decidedly hindering our war effort by passing drugs among our Negro and white servicemen." The telegram is ended with a threat of "nasty" publicity for Scott if there was non-compliance. It was delivered to her in the hospital as she recovered from minor surgery. Two others followed. The Bureau denied having sent the telegrams and attempted to apprehend the sender. A suspect was never identified. Blanked out names dominate the pages and point to the regular use of informants inside the club. This single investigation lasted 6 months and, as seen in Scott's file, became an opportunity to deepen surveillance.¹⁶⁹ In later years Scott's relationship with Café Society and its activism would be one of the links to connect her to communist activity and the blacklist.

Lawrenson said of Café Society, "few people, however, could have been utterly unaware of the left wing ambience." On any given night a patron may encounter a table of Communists sitting next to a table of Socialists mingling with Civil Rights activists and other characters who considered themselves a part of the Popular and Cultural Front.¹⁷⁰ Any and all left leaning celebrities frequented the club. Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Bill Robinson, Franklin Deleanor Roosevelt, Jr., Fredi Washington, and Henry Fonda came through regularly. Conversations concerning politics, alternative philosophy, and the latest example of injustice could be overheard from any corner of the 210 seat

¹⁶⁹ US Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], Chicago Field to Director, FBI* (Chicago: Chicago Field Office Hazel Scott Bureau File, n.d.).

¹⁷⁰ Stowe, "Politics of Café Society," 1384-1395.

venue.¹⁷¹ Only 19 years old at the time, Hazel Scott soaked up the cultural and political ethos at Café Society. She struck up lifelong friendships with Paul Robeson and other activists, performed at a countless number of fundraisers for radical and progressive causes, and grew into a stauncher activist herself. She needed little prodding. Lena Horne's first impression of Scott was that she had the "fiercest sort of racial pride."¹⁷² Café Society likely helped Scott become abreast of the issues in the radical community. However, her pride already had been deeply ingrained, a product of her Trinidadian upbringing and an unflappable belief in her talents. This political and cultural ethos would form a dominant theme in her life and career, strongly influencing her approach to performance and activism. Scott, despite describing herself as intentionally avoiding "the activist tag," would time and again by wage many battles against segregation, injustice, and racial inequity, battles that sprang in part from a consciousness raised in the small, packed Café Society club.¹⁷³

The entertainment alone at Café Society warranted its packed houses. Several acts worked the club during overlapping periods. Headliner Billie Holiday played exclusively at the club for two consecutive years. In any particular month during this period vocalists Lena Horne, Josh White, and Holiday, dancer Pearl Primus, comedian Jimmy Savo, and

¹⁷¹ Photograph of Café Society attendees, Hazel Scott Papers, n.d.; Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 150.

¹⁷² Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 117.

¹⁷³ Interview, Clayton Powell III.

pianists Mary Lou Williams, Art Tatum, and Scott could be seen performing.¹⁷⁴ Dancer Katherine Dunham would make appearances with her troop at the club. A young Sarah Vaughn would get her start here as well. In his work *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, Mark Naison has outlined a shift in strategy by the Communist Party to more strongly embrace Black culture during the thirties. He explains that the newer generation of American-born communists, “became convinced that Afro American music represented the keystone of an American musical culture that was ‘democratic’ in spirit and form and embodied the best elements of the national character.” Further they distinguished themselves from the former generation by, “display[ing] their greatest interest in black musical idioms that were commercially successful –swing and hot jazz...some communists saw a unique opportunity, in identifying with this music, to dramatize the Afro-American contribution to American culture and the cultural benefits of interracial cooperation.”¹⁷⁵ Café Society prided itself on presenting undiscovered Black acts that illuminated these contributions.

Although catering to a very integrated audience, some 90% of the entertainment at the café was Black. John Hammond, well-known personality and music scout for the club, sought out this talent from all around the country. For example, Boogie Woogie pianists Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis were brought in from Chicago. Ammons was a Chicago cabbie, while Lewis worked at a car wash. Hammond discovered Pete

¹⁷⁴ Stowe, “Politics of Café Society,” 1389, 1394; David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 66-67.

¹⁷⁵ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 211.

Johnson in Kansas City. One journalist reported, “This exciting native American music is now having a widespread influence on popular orchestral compositions and arrangements.”¹⁷⁶ The trio represent only a few of the many acts that Hammond and Josephson recruited to fulfill the political and cultural aspirations of the club.¹⁷⁷ For the gifted African-American performers at Café Society, the opportunity to sing and/or play for a steady living was appealing. They also understood the cultural significance of Black music, the ways that it formed the foundation of much of American popular and non-secular music. There were other motivations for them as well as, “African-American artists of many genres saw racism as one problem among many and focused on the possibilities of broadening American democracy to include Blacks.”¹⁷⁸ Within this milieu of extraordinary talent, Scott, confident and enchanting, became the star attraction before the sophisticated club crowd.

Scott then underwent a transformation from well-known performer to genuine celebrity. She made her recording debut for RCA-Victor in a sextet. This group was asked to have a jam session and record on wax by music critic Leonard Feather, who

¹⁷⁶ "Night Spot Was First to Hire Team and They're There Yet," *Afro-American*, January 11, 1941, 13.

¹⁷⁷ Interestingly, Hammond disliked Scott's playing so intensely that he would very often read the newspaper during her set. This was more than likely due to his admiration for what he believed to be “pure” black music and his rejection of what he saw as her high brow classical based performances. Helen Lawerenson said of him, “Hammond was mad about Negro music: blues and boogie woogie, not Uncle Tom spirituals or furrowed-brow intellectual jazz, but the black gutbucket music from the whorehouses, honky-tonks and gin mills on New Orleans, Chicago, Kansas City,” 88.

¹⁷⁸ Sondra Lomax, and George Jackson, "Reviews: National," *Dance Magazine* 67, no. 3 (1993): 80.

would be a career-long champion of Scott's. All four songs, "Mighty Like the Blues," "Calling all Bars," "Why Didn't William Tell," and "You Gave Me the Go-By" were written by Feather. Her records sold well, and in 1940 she would be signed to a hefty six-album deal. Musicians and fans were impressed. Saxophonist Coleman Hawkins hired Scott to write arrangements for his new band. In 1939 and 1941 Josephson would feature Scott as a main attraction, along with the other players at Café Society, in a set of Carnegie Hall concerts that had as their theme, "Spirituals to Swing." These concerts were patterned after a concert given by Hammond years earlier.¹⁷⁹

Black newspapers followed her every move, and the white press took notice of her ascendancy as well. They tracked her appearances, her charity, and activist work, as well as her salary and possessions. She became so valuable at Café Society that her salary was raised from an initial \$40 weekly to an eventual \$1500. This was a tremendous salary for a Black performer in the 1940's, particularly a woman. It was also notable due to the reputation that Josephson earned as notoriously underpaying his artists. Scott was chosen for the cover of the NAACP's Crisis magazine in June of 1940, and mentioned in Vogue, a national fashion magazine, in the same month. In May of 1941 she added to her busy schedule a premiere at The New York University School of Education, where she was crowned the first Black "Queen of Senior Prom." A few days later she performed at a newly organized program series for the Harlem Cultural Society. Scott was in astonishing

¹⁷⁹ "London Swing Critic Lines up Mixed British Swing Ork Here," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1939; "Hazel Scott Signs to Make Recordings," *Afro-American*, November 30, 1940; "Café Society's Greatest Swing Show to Do Spirituals to Swing," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 23, 1939; Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 56.

demand from Black and white patrons and audiences alike. Her popularity was so intense that a Hazel Scott/Café Society association was formed that lasted from 1939-1943.¹⁸⁰

Image and Persona: “some thought her arrogant others knew that she simply demanded respect.”

Night after night in every performance at the Café Society and at other venues, Scott presented an alternative to the light-, near white-skinned, black beauty that pervaded the New York and national club and music scenes. She was brown-skinned with short, cropped hair. She also challenged the negative conception of African-American women through her signature dignified performances. Scott’s popularity was primarily based on her musicianship, but was secured by her carefully-crafted image during her heyday, one that portrayed African-American glamour and pride.

From the very beginning of her career, Scott was concerned about the image she portrayed on behalf of African-American women as well as the consumption of that image by the public, both white and Black. Many observers describe Scott as always reflecting confidence, poise and sophistication.¹⁸¹ One Harlemiter described the impact Scott’s image and career had on her as a young girl:

She was a beautiful women and she was talented. The black community really supported her... little girls have dreams about what they want to do [and] I thought, gee, maybe I could play the piano like Hazel Scott. I used to sit on the side of the Apollo where the piano was so I could

¹⁸⁰ “Four Pictures--\$4,000 a Week,” *Afro-American*, December 30, 1944, 5; “Hazel Scott Is Nyu's 'Queen of Prom',” *Afro-American*, May 17, 1941, 13; “People Are Talking About...,” *Vogue*, June 15, 1940, 85; “Hazel Scott Tested for 'Panama Hattie',” *Afro-American*, August 30, 1941, 21; “Will It Be Lil or Hazel?,” *Afro-American*, October 18, 1941, 14; Garraty, 491.

¹⁸¹ Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, 15-16.

see her hands. I was fascinated with her hands...She was always a lady. She always played the piano. She always played herself.¹⁸²

Scott's preoccupation with image and representation was well founded given that, for every contribution made by Black artists and performers such as Scott, Horne, Catlett, and Dunham, there were countless critics who viewed their creative production through a racialized and chauvinistic lens. For example, in a 1944 review, cultural critic James Agee uses a piece published in the *Partisan Review* to post an egregious response to the African-American popular image that was emerging in the WWII period. He targets several Black celebrities, including Paul Robeson and Duke Ellington, but saves the thrust of his critique for Scott. He accused her of "being Niggery" and selling herself to audiences by engaging in the "exploitation of her bust and armpits" and "grimaces of creative mock-orgasm." Regarding her musicianship, he says "she plays the kind of jazz that one could probably pick up through a correspondence school" and "which any mediocre elementary piano teacher would slap her silly for."¹⁸³ Agee's critique of Scott's abilities as a pianist and entertainer reach far beyond assumed boundaries. His response to Scott's image, persona, and musicianship is visceral and nearly violent. Agee attacked every aspect of her performance. He also includes severe racialized and gendered insults into his critique. Unfortunately, such racialized critiques are emblematic of the extreme reaction of some whites to Scott's dignified presentation as well as her politics of resistance.

¹⁸² Gene Caldwell, author interview, April 29, 2008, Holyoke, MA.

¹⁸³ James Agee, *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

Scott's image would impact the African-American community much differently. In January of 1945 *The School Review* published a study entitled "Relation of Social Environment to the Moral Ideology and Personal Aspirations of Negro Boys and Girls." The purpose of the study was to "determine the relation of the socioeconomic status of boys and girls in a Negro community." It was designed to illuminate their conception of right and wrong, and identify "their ideas of the person they would most like to resemble."¹⁸⁴ One section of the study asked girls and boys (averaging age thirteen) to describe their "ideal self." The majority identified first Hazel Scott, then Lena Horne as a "glamorous adult" in their essays. Boys overwhelmingly chose Joe Louis.¹⁸⁵ Although the children had a limited selection of famous African-Americans to choose from, their choices emphasized the most esteemed national figures. The significance of having national Black images that spotlighted pride, glamour, and prestige was that it spoke to the positioning of Black Americans in the historical moment. African-American resistance to negative imagery was an essential component of the Black struggle during the WWII era. Scott's own expression of resistance centered on her affirming the professional performance of African-American womanhood, her conscious focus on Black dignity and pride, and her off stage activism.

In a 1944 description of one of Scott's performances at the Café Society Uptown (opened in 1940), a reporter for the *Baltimore Afro American* reinforces the idea that

¹⁸⁴ Rebecca Evans Carroll, "Relation of Social Environment to the Moral Ideology and the Personal Aspirations of Negro Boys and Girls," *The School Review* 53, no. 1 (Jan.) (1945): 30-8.

¹⁸⁵ Carroll, "Relation of Social Environments," 34-35.

Scott was always vigilant of her image, not only as a performer, but also as an African-American woman:

The difference between Café Society Uptown and most other night clubs is similar to the difference between chess and black jack. Miss Scott contributes to this atmosphere. Men look at her and pant, but they are polite about it... watch Miss Scott flitter down the aisle to the piano. White spectators lean out to talk to her, but she maneuvers away and sits at the piano. All the lights are dim. Her round, brown face and sensuous shoulders are illuminated only by a spotlight. She plays three or four numbers. As soon as a number is over she floats through the café, which she calls a 'room' and gets upstairs to her dressing room.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Michael Carter, "Tells How She Became a \$4000 a Week Pianist," *Afro-American*, December 30, 1944, 5.

In this description Scott seems concerned with her perception and interaction with the audience. Never one to sit and mingle with the crowds at the clubs when she was playing, Scott preferred the privacy of her dressing room to the sometimes raucous crowds. She explained to an interviewer, “I am not kidding when I say I don’t like night clubs. People go to them to get drunk and show other people they’re having a good time.”¹⁸⁷ This avoidance of fawning crowds is not surprising given Scott's sense of the positioning of African-American women as wanton objects of sexual desire beginning with enslavement. Historically the branding of African-American women in this way became embedded in society’s view of African-American womanhood. As a result, “resistance to sexual exploitation therefore had major political and economic implications.”¹⁸⁸

Scott understood her predicament as an African-American woman entertainer well. She described how audience members and managers sometimes, “mistook her sensuality for promiscuity.” Newspaper coverage on Scott often focused on her physical attributes instead of her talents. Earl Wilson from the New York Post exclaimed, “In a strapless evening gown she makes most sweater girls look underfed.” Others referred to her as the “hot classicist.” The white media insisted on focusing on her color and her sensuality: “on the stage appeared a lovely colored girl of an even twenty years, a dusky beauty with large flirtatious eyes, a pouting mouth...”¹⁸⁹ Racist expectations combining with homophobic norms meant that the rejection male advances placed the Black woman

¹⁸⁷ Michael Carter, *Afro-American*, “\$4000 a Week Pianist,” December 30, 1944, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub, 1994) 34.

¹⁸⁹ “Hot Classicist,” 89 ;Davis, “Hi Hazel,” 67

in a double-bind, “Everyone wants to sleep with you,” she reportedly confided to a friend. “If you don’t, you’ve got problems. When you brush off the bosses and geniuses in the front office, you automatically become a lesbian. If you do go along with these idiots, you’re a bum. Name it and take your choice.”¹⁹⁰ There is no doubt that stories such as these could be recounted by women, Black and white, at all levels of occupations during this period. However, her positioning as an African-American woman and as an entertainer complicated Scott’s experience. As an entertainer, like many African-American women before her, Scott walked a fine line in which she, at times, embraced her sexuality and sex appeal in an effort to advance and secure her career. At others, she rejected it, in an effort to be taken seriously by the entertainment industry and larger society.

Even as she was characterized as a sex symbol in the media, intimate descriptions of her actual life do not uncover any over-emphasis on sex or sexuality. One explanation to consider takes into account Darlene Clark Hine's work on what she terms “the culture of dissemblance.” According to Hine, within this culture, African-American women, due to their historical experiences of rape, sexual exploitation, and oppression, have developed skills “that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”¹⁹¹ If Scott is considered as operating from within this culture, then her sensual, celebrity persona could be interpreted as representative of a small part of her total and authentic self. Part of her

¹⁹⁰ Scott, qtd. in Haygood, *King of the Cats*, 122.

¹⁹¹ Hine, *Hine Sight*, 37.

success as an entertainer relied on the audience's perception of her as open, engaging, and approachable, despite her inner feelings at the moment. However, at least one reporter picked up on the duality of her existence when he wondered:

What kind of person is she inside? This is hard to say. She is definitely an enigma. She is extremely pleasant to meet, when you can manage to meet her, which is not too easy. She rather avoids the crowd, and though she is grateful for the admiration of people she shows diffidence in mixing with them. . . . she does not talk much but when moved to talk, can talk of things that you never thought she had the slightest knowledge of, like philosophy. When among her friends and not in the public eye, she likes to be treated as a friend and not as *the* Hazel Scott.¹⁹²

This reporter suspects that there is much more to Hazel Scott than she makes apparent. Because of Scott's location in an integrated and privileged liberal space, she was, at times, able to be more transparent than many other Black women performers. She seemed to be able to navigate the nightclub scene off stage by retiring to her dressing room. During her musical performance she was less accommodating. Leonard Feather recalled, "But the bright-eyed jubilation with which she performed could freeze in an instant, nobody who ever saw her will forget her habit of stopping suddenly, transfixing any noisemaker with an icy glare and waiting for total silence before she resumed. Some thought her arrogant others knew that she simply demanded respect."¹⁹³

In such moments the audience was made privy to Scott's inner feelings, as closely guarded as they may have been. Either way Scott's concerns around image and representation are significant in a moment when Black performance careers suffered from

¹⁹² Roy Coverley, "Queen of Café Society," *Off Stage and On*, November, 1948, 28..

¹⁹³ Feather in Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*.

countless indignities and were often short lived. Scott's ability to rise to the top of the entertainment industry and refuse to compromise what she saw as her dignity is significant.

Hollywood in Hot Pursuit: "Colored performers represent their people"

The year 1941 brought Scott the attention of Hollywood. In that year Scott was asked to test for the film *Panama Hattie*, and Orson Welles selected her to play the role of Lil Hardin Armstrong in a film that would trace the history of jazz. Both possibilities never transpired, but by 1942 Hollywood was in hot pursuit of Scott. She appeared first in *Something to Shout About*, and directors became enamored with her and offered her parts in two other films that year, *I Dood It* and *Tropicana*. In successive years starting in 1943, she appeared in *The Heat's On*, *Broadway Rhythm*, and in *Rhapsody in Blue*. Scott's skill as a pianist and exceptional ability as a show-woman, as well as her public demand, won her contracts very unlike those offered to the handful of African-American actresses in Hollywood. Barney Josephson, who acted as her manager, established a contract specifying she would only appear as "herself" in movies, disallowing the misrepresenting of her skin color, and prohibiting other degrading representations. Josephson recollected the contracts language as follows:

You cannot change her color, nor make her darker or lighter than she is.

She would play the piano and sing, but not as a maid in somebody else's house

You cannot put a bandana on her head, nor an apron on her body.

You cannot present her in any way that would be a bad reflection upon her people; if you do she won't work.¹⁹⁴

Scott and Josephson had crafted a contract that anticipated the many tactics used by Hollywood to perpetuate negative representations of African-Americans in movies of the era. Actors needed to be obviously identifiable as Black or white by American movie-going audiences. Blackness was static in Hollywood. As a Black actor you were either very dark in complexion, or light enough to pass for white. Lena Horne, often referred to as “the copper colored girl,” faced difficult casting in films because of this binary. Her skin was often extremely lightened in her earlier films. One only needs to take a passing look at Fredi Washington in 1934's *Imitation of Life* and compare it with her more candid photos to see the difference in skin tone. She is a very light skinned African-American woman but is made to look devoid of color in the picture. This was complicated by black and white film, the use of early movie cameras that failed to capture accurate complexion, and stage makeup that was created for white skin.

African-Americans were also presented as perpetual servants. Scott's clauses that insist on no bandanas or aprons may have been curious to actors of other races. However, for African-American performers and actors, the request was completely understandable, even by those who willingly donned them. The few opportunities for these actors revolved around this servant type. Scott explained, “...I've turned down four singing maid roles in movies during the past year or so...there are plenty of white performers who can play maid's roles and then step into a pent house or a school classroom. Colored

¹⁹⁴ Josephson, *The Wrong Place*, 138.

performers represent their people...”¹⁹⁵ Even in films in which the image of African-Americans remained distorted by white Hollywood, Hazel Scott understood that her appearance as herself, a poised, talented and successful woman (who demanded respect from whites), was integral in the economic, cultural and political advancement of African-Americans, particularly women.

In *I Dood It* Scott strides into an audition wearing a full-length white fur with an elegant Black sequined gown. She promptly rushes on to the stage. Three white producers are eagerly awaiting her and Horne’s arrival. After Horne sweeps into the scene in similarly elegant attire, they perform a very literal interpretation of the song “Jericho.” The women are featured as peers and professionals. In addition, the short scene features a collection of other secondary singers and musicians who are also attired in tuxedos and beautiful dresses. Although the scene amounts to yet another Black performance short that could be cut from the film in the South, the Black actors, particularly Scott and Horne, are treated with respect, and their characters usually were imbued with some measure of dignity.¹⁹⁶

Horne and Scott were also allowed to shine in 1943’s *Broadway Rhythm*, a backstage musical. Again their parts were not integral to the loose narrative. They were presented, for the most part, in glamorous costuming and as distinguished performers. Interestingly, in this film Horne is outfitted for one unfortunate scene in “The Jungle Room” in a sparse exotic costume that showed her midriff. Conga players and dancers

¹⁹⁵ Michael Carter, *Afro-American*, "Tells How She Became \$4000 a Week Pianist," December 30, 1955, 5.

¹⁹⁶ *I Dood It*, DVD, directed by Vincent Minnelli (1943; Columbia, 2009).

back her as she sings, “Brazilian Boogie.” In one scene where Horne played a singer practicing for a show, the focus was properly on Horne as she sang “Somebody Loves Me.” Unlike the Jungle Room bit, it avoided racial stereotypes. In this simple and laid back scene, she sang with little backdrop to her manager, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. Scott was, as stipulated in her contract, playing herself in her scene. A bejeweled Scott wore an evening gown and played a boogie-inspired “Minute Waltz” by Chopin.¹⁹⁷ The few positive images would have been particularly important for African-American women who felt as if they were on the cusp of a new American society in which equality could be realized, and Scott and Horne were two symbols of that transformation.

There is an important distinction to be made between the efforts and activism of actresses such as Horne and Scott, and the insurmountable realities of Hollywood in the 1930’s and 40’s. The depictions of life in fictional movies must be distinguished from the realities of the physical space that constructed Hollywood -on studio lots and in its high-end residential neighborhoods. American segregation, racial inequality, and their ill effects were at work behind the scenes. The aspirations of Hollywood to reflect some semblance of American unity across lines of race and class during the war stood in contradiction with the legacy of racial separation and oppression in America. When the redbaiting descended on the country in the late 1940’s, one of the first communities to be investigated and prosecuted were the Left in Hollywood. Many in Hollywood; actors, producers, and directors, saw themselves as operating within *the* locus of Left white liberalism.

¹⁹⁷ *Broadway Rhythm*, DVD, directed by Roy Del Ruth (1943, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1943).

Scott would see this contradiction firsthand in her next studio film *The Heat's On*. Her first scene, an elaborately staged musical number, went well. Scott was on a stage seated at a black piano wearing a black gown studded with white accents. She belted out “the Black Keys and the White Keys,” singing, “when the black keys meet the white keys on piano avenue do they music/ they do/...the black and the white doing alright/ alright/...like pepper and salt/ chocolate and malt.../ when the black keys join the white keys in that merry old house parade/ is it music/ its played/ I’m telling you jack stick to the black and white...” After a solo by a horn playing puppeteer, the camera pans back to Scott, now seated between a black piano and a white piano, playing the melody with a hand on each wearing an identical dress in white. This song, composed through a collaboration between Jay Gorney, Henry Myers, and Edward Eliscu, is one of many appearing in movie musicals of the time that were heavily influenced by the Popular Front. The song lyrics easily can be connected to the major themes of the Popular Front. Its inch deep subtext references interracialism and unity. Both were important Popular Front goals. At least one of the song’s collaborators, Gorney, suffered blacklisting in the early fifties for radical activity. Gorney was also the writer of the well-known depression era song, “Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?”¹⁹⁸ This scene was located very close to the limits of Hollywood progressivism. It showcased a glamorous, well-attired African-American woman pianist playing a Popular Front inspired tune, advocated equality, and eschewed a focus on racialized stereotyped constructions.

¹⁹⁸ Sondra Gorney, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?: The Life of Composer Jay Gorney* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005); Hairston in Nichole T., Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 65.

Scott bumped up against more problematic constructions in her next scene. Entitled “the Caisson Number,” it was meant to be homage to African-Americans fighting in the war. It was set with a lonely piano sitting in a back courtyard lying between the dilapidated apartment buildings of a Black community. It contrasted sharply with the opulence of Scott's other scene. Scott, dressed as a Woman Army Corp member, was to play the piano. Actors, dressed as soldiers, and actresses, playing their sweethearts and dressed as maids, danced to a syncopated version of the “Caisson Song.” This was Hollywood’s vision of Black Harlem -a Harlem that lay outside of the Cotton Club and other “Whites only” nightspots. It included stray dogs and a few older Black women dressed in mammy-like attire. The issue arose when Scott overheard the choreographer giving instructions to the make up department to sully the aprons of the maids in the scene with dirt in an effort to make them look more “authentic.”

Scott must have believed that this would make a scene that was already laden with racial stereotypes much worse. Per choreographer David Lichine's instruction, the scene was changed to include the eight maids dancing in dirty “hoover aprons.” It veered toward minstrelsy.¹⁹⁹ After blowing up in anger, Scott asked, “Have you ever seen any Negroes other than your own domestic servants?” With this question Scott is referencing the legacy of American segregation and racial inequality that complicated every Hollywood production. Movie sets were spaces dominated by whites that often had little to no interaction with African-Americans and harbored the same racial attitudes as their white American contemporaries. Scott refused to perform in the scene until costuming

¹⁹⁹ Dwayne Mack, "Hazel Scott: A Career Curtailed," *The Journal of African-American History* 91, no. 2 (2006): 155.

was adjusted. She recalled, “Until my fight at Columbia, no Black person had ever dared oppose the Establishment. You either kept your mouth shut and took the roles you got or remained out of work.”²⁰⁰ Three days into Scott’s boycott the costumer relented, and the women were allowed to wear their own dresses. This protest would end Scott’s film career. She would shoot one more film in Hollywood, *Rhapsody in Blue*, a film required by contractual obligation.

In later years Scott identified *Rhapsody in Blue* as her favorite film role.²⁰¹ There was much to like in this role. The film was a biopic of composer George Gershwin set in Paris. In her scene the camera opens with Scott at the pianos singing “The Man I Love.” As Gershwin arrives before the Parisian crowd, Scott introduces him in French before performing herself. Dressed in a satiny white gown and dripping in diamonds, Scott delivers an impressive medley of Gershwin tunes, including, “Fascinating Rhythm” and “I’ve Got Rhythm.” She then stands at the microphone to sing “Yankee Doodle Blues.” Scott is once again portrayed as glamorous, and this time as a musician worthy of playing for the renowned Gershwin. The Black community responded favorably to Scott’s role in the film. During the making of the movie the *Afro American* announced, “Miss Scott will recreate the character of a colored pianist who inspired [Gershwin] one afternoon while strolling the streets of Paris.” The unknown reporter added, “So Miss Scott will be both seen and heard when the great feature is finished and released.” A *Chicago Defender* reporter Phil Carter was impressed with Scott’s performance. He dubbed her “Queen

²⁰⁰ Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 83.

²⁰¹ Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 87.

once more in Warner's *Rhapsody in Blue*." He reflects, "It is doubtful that anyone who has followed films over the years can remember when a Negro artist has been permitted to display her cultural abilities as does the glamorous Hazel in *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Actually she speaks French and several other languages with the same ease with which she handles English...she interprets Gershwin's melodious songs in both French and English."²⁰²

Rhapsody in Blue is also unusual in that Scott's scene appears to be an integral part of the film. Her playing in the scene is interspersed with Gershwin's conversation. He sits at a table where he will meet his love interest. Scott's performance sounds in the background even when she is not seen. The scene is structured in a way that would make cutting Scott out difficult because Gershwin's romantic meeting plays an important role in the film. Whether intentional or not, the scene was highly unusual at the time to have a scene such as this. Most scenes with Black performers were continuous segments that could be added or removed easily and held no significance to the film's narrative. Unsurprisingly, the South had a negative reaction to the film, and regardless of the impact to the integrity of the film, it was edited for Southern audiences.

Rhapsody in Blue was 'hacked' in the South. The image of the poised, well coifed, sophisticated, and intelligent Scott was far too alarming for Southern audiences. The Memphis Board of Censors removed her scene in the film. The same year they removed a scene from *The Sailor Takes a Wife* in which Robert Walker, the white hero, tips his hat

²⁰² "Hazel Scott Signed as Gershwin's Inspiration in 'Rhapsody'," *Afro-American*, September 18, 1943; Phil Carter, "Hazel Scott Is Queen Once More in Warner's 'Rhapsody in Blue'," *The Chicago Defender*, September 1, 1943.

at Rochester. The film *Brewster's Millions* was banned altogether because the Black character "moved through the film on easy terms with the white principals." Southern cities that did screen *Rhapsody in Blue* and other films featuring more "affirmative" portrayals of African-Americans did so in segregated theaters. Scott would encounter Jim Crow face to face when she attempted to see the film upon its release in 1945. She hoped to attend a showing of the film at a theater in Washington, DC. Despite being in the height of the war for democracy abroad, the nation's capitol continued its practice of segregating theaters, and she was turned away at the door.²⁰³

Unfortunately, affirmative roles would not be Hollywood reality for the majority of African-American women in film during, or following, WWII. Long after Scott took a stand against, "dirty Hoover aprons," Black women would encounter similar fights over negative depictions of African-American womanhood. In 1946, just three years after Scott's stand in *The Heat's On*, and one year after the conclusion of the war, Billie Holiday was cast in her only feature film, *New Orleans*. Her experience would support the worst fears of African-American women performers who were "discovered" by Hollywood. Holiday describes the making of the film in this way:

I thought I was going to play myself in it. I thought I was going to be Billie Holiday doing a couple of songs in a nightclub setting and that would be that. I should have known better. When I saw the script, I did. You just tell me one Negro girl who's made movies who didn't play a maid or a whore. I don't know any. I found out I was going to do a little singing, but still playing the part of a maid...I'd fought my whole life to keep from being somebody's damn maid. And after

²⁰³ David Platt, "Hazel Scott's Role in Film Heavily Chopped in Memphis," *Daily Worker*, February 3, 1946 .

making more than a million bucks and establishing myself as a singer who had some taste and self respect, it was a real drag to go to Hollywood and end up as a make believe maid.²⁰⁴

Holiday's encounter with Hollywood represents a sharp turn from the more positive imagery of African-American womanhood that filtered through ever so briefly during WWII. It also reinforced the message to African-Americans that WWII was not the panacea for inequality within the United States that many African-Americans had hoped it would be. In fact, Holiday's casting in this film, following the brief but more affirming portrayals of actresses like Scott and Horne, demonstrated a reversal in the gains made by Black women in film.²⁰⁵ Scott would see the impact of this reversal within her career as a performer in the post war period as well. This shift would accompany major changes in her personal life.

The Powell's: "...A new kind of negro couple"

Scott allowed one audience member to see her in totality -Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the much-loved Harlem Congressman she would marry in 1945, at WWII's end. He was captivated by her beauty and dignified stage persona. The image that she crafted so meticulously for her audience drew him in as well. Known to be a playboy, Powell nonetheless developed both an admiration and respect for Scott. Powell was Harlem royalty having been born to Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of the century-old Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street and Seventh Avenue. The Sr. Powell had

²⁰⁴ Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 136.

²⁰⁵ Bruce Tyler, *From Harlem to Hollywood the Struggle for Racial and Cultural Democracy, 1920-1943* (New York: Garland, 1992).

chosen the site and erected a grand structure of fine wood, blue stone, and Italian marble after the church relocated from New York's Tenderloin District. Powell's mother, Mattie Powell, was a devoted wife and esteemed member of the community. Their son would grow up roaming the hallways of the church and the streets of Harlem. He attended prestigious Townsend Harris High School and Colgate University. Young and rebellious, Powell surprised his parents when he announced that he would enter the ministry and follow in his father's footsteps. By 1937 Powell Jr. succeeded his father as acting Pastor and was a busy community leader. In 1941 he was elected to the New York City Council and became the first African-American to hold a seat.

Powell and Scott became friends through their political work and Powell's regular visits to Café Society. Powell's position as a rising political star and Scott as an in-demand performer provided them with something in common – demands on their schedules to make appearances and lend their names to various causes. Another commonality was their involvement, like most of their peers, in the Double Victory campaign.²⁰⁶ After the start of WWII the Double V campaign called for the double victories of victory abroad over fascism and victory in America over racism.²⁰⁷ The involvement in this campaign assisted made evident their shared aspiration to perpetuate positive African-American images and break down barriers of discrimination and segregation. They were often on the same bill at Double V fundraisers, rallies, and political events. It was at one of these rallies that Powell made an unscheduled

²⁰⁶ Haygood, *King of the Cats*, 98.

²⁰⁷ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 11.

announcement of his candidacy for Congress. Before twenty thousand people he gave an impassioned speech and condemned America's treatment of African-Americans. Powell proclaimed to the captivated crowd, "American fascism marks the wolf of Ku Klux Klan hypocrisy behind the sheep's clothing of pseudo patriotism." His answer to this hypocrisy was to encourage Black protest. Powell's extended buildup before his announcement to run for Congress effectively stole the nomination from A. Philip Randolph, who was unable to speak due to time constraints made prohibitive by Powell's unscheduled speech.²⁰⁸

For African-Americans few Black leaders symbolized the new face of Black America more than Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. He had given up his seat as the first Black City Councilman in New York to be elected to Congress. His early activity in actions like the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign identified him as an unrelenting and radical advocate for Harlem residents. This campaign was begun as an effort to force white Harlem businesses to hire Black clerical employees. Although the campaign was started by a broad coalition of Black organizations, and not Powell himself, it nevertheless helped propel him into the national spotlight. Powell also drew the attention of J Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI.

As early as 1942 Hoover requested intelligence on Powell. Powell was outspoken, unafraid and flamboyant. Further, he was a relentless champion for African-American rights. Powell was the embodiment of what white society feared in radical Black protest. The FBI saw Powell as such a threat to the status quo that it would compile a dossier of

²⁰⁸ Ernest E. Johnson, "New York Masses Protest for Democracy," *Chicago Defender*, June 27, 1942.

intelligence on him for over twenty-eight years. Just as the government and its agencies placed Marcus Garvey under surveillance in an effort to eventually destroy his political power and organization during WWI, they hoped to subject Powell to similar treatment. Even prior to his being elected to Congress, the FBI was gathering information on him. An excellent politician, Powell was involved in the passage of more than fifty bills in Congress between 1961 and 1966.²⁰⁹ His career was only aided by his marriage to Scott.

But Powell and Scott were an unlikely match for several reasons. Powell was a minister, while Scott was a star in the secular world of entertainment. Powell was from a light-skinned family high in the hierarchy of the Black bourgeoisie, while an immigrant single working mother in a crowded Harlem brownstone raised Scott. Powell was also a married man. He had been married to actress Isabel Washington, sister to Fredi Washington, for thirteen years when he fell in love with Scott. Regardless of their differences, it quickly became apparent to friends and family of both Powell and Scott that their time together was beginning to center around romance, and not simply friendship, music, and politics.²¹⁰ Scott admitted that, “He was turned on to me first and I ran. Much to my regret I have to admit that I ran from him.” Powell weighed his every move, “he took his time. First, the gifts. Nothing elaborate: a book; a photograph; the loan of a silk scarf that I kept. His ring; his handkerchief, his favorite poetry.” The relationship slowly grew. As Powell revealed years later to *Ebony* Magazine: “our courtship was compounded of visits to Café Society, dinners at Reubens, luncheons at

²⁰⁹ Kenneth O'Reilly and David Gallen, *Black Americans: The FBI Files* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994).

²¹⁰ Haygood, *King of the Cats*, 98-99.

'21,' liberal quantities of floral perfume and hours of intense discussion of such varied topics as philosophy, politics, boogie-woogie and war.”²¹¹ His intentions were serious. He proclaimed to a friend before getting elected to the House of Representatives, “I’m going to marry that girl –but first I’m going to congress! No one is ever going to call me Mr. Hazel Scott!”²¹²

The affair scandalized Harlem circles. Aside from the blaring sin of adultery, the color-struck, church-going Harlem bourgeois felt that the brown-skinned performer from Trinidad was unworthy of a man of Powell’s stature and color. Scott said, “Oh there was a great deal said by others about him marrying a brown skinned woman and a nightclub performer. But Adam had married his first wife because he loved her not because she was fair, and he married me for the same reason.”²¹³ Most preferred the light-skinned Isabel, whom they saw as being a far more appropriate match. According to Powell his first marriage was strained before their affair began.²¹⁴ Just before leaving for Washington Powell coldly announced to his wife Isabel that their marriage was over and set a date to marry Scott. He informed Isabel that he would be bringing Scott to Washington as Mrs. Powell, and not her. She rightfully felt betrayed and was devastated. She repeatedly shared her feelings of scorn with the press. Many, like Isabel Powell, thought Scott’s

²¹¹ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., "My Life with Hazel Scott," *Ebony*, January, 1949, 42 ; Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 98-99.

²¹² Hazel Scott, "Unpublished Autobiography" (Hazel Scott Papers, 1979).

²¹³ Norma Jean Darden, "Hazel Scott: Up Tempo," *Essence*, November, 1978, 148.

²¹⁴ Adam Clayton Powell III, *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), 223-224.

behavior being the “other woman” shameful and not within the confines of what a “good woman” would do. Always defiant and unphased by the pressure to conform to traditional expectations, Scott told inquirers that she would be happy to marry someone as distinguished as Powell. Scott would soon get her wish.

The Scott-Powell wedding was the affair of the 1945 summer season. Their wedding made the cover of the Harlem-based and widely circulated African-American newspaper *The Amsterdam News*. The headline, quoting Powell, read, “At Long Last, The Women I Love.”²¹⁵ The coverage focused on the sensational aspects of the wedding. One reporter described the scene outside the reception at Café Society: “three thousand guests organized in a single column by twenty five cops, slowly filed into the night club, where they gawked at the famous bride and groom.” He continued, “The biggest, boldest and most talked about wedding...it took precedent over Yolanda Dubois’s marriage to Countee Cullen in 1929, and topped by a big margin the daughter of Mme. A’Lelia Walker’s \$15,000 wedding...”²¹⁶ Beyond all of the sensationalism surrounding their marriage were two people with deep political concerns centered on the oppressed status of African-Americans.

Scott’s marriage to Powell, despite its questionable beginnings, cemented her status as a leading African-American star and race woman: “the second wife of fiery politico Adam Clayton Powell II, she represented half of a new kind of Negro couple:

²¹⁵ Abe Hill, “Adam Kisses Women Guests at Reception,” *The Amsterdam News*, August, 1945, 1.

²¹⁶ Abe Hill, “Adam Kisses Women Guests at Reception,” *The Amsterdam News*, August, 1945, 1.

educated, cultured, political, outspoken; a modern woman who didn't brook fools easily."²¹⁷ Deeply in love, Powell expressed his admiration for his wife on several occasions, saying "Her mind is brilliant" and, marveling at her quest for knowledge, he noted, "She is never anywhere without a book by her side, usually the heavy, challenging demanding type."²¹⁸ The Powell's were the picture of Black upper class modernity, and wielded considerable political, economic, and social power. They bought expensive property in Harlem, had a house built in Long Island, lived and had homes in both Washington and New York, vacationed globally, spearheaded a number of campaigns and court cases for equal rights, housing and jobs in New York, and were featured in the national Black and white press regularly as a model Black couple.

The Powell's would have a son, Adam Clayton Powell III, a year into their marriage, but this did not slow Scott down. She continued performing as both an entertainer and mother. Adam Clayton Powell III fondly remembers the effort, by both of his parents, to construct a life for him that was as normal as possible. At the end of each week his mother flew overnight flights in order to spend every weekend day, and as many other days as possible, with her family.²¹⁹ Despite, her hectic schedule Scott and Powell created family rituals for their son. Like other families they would attend movies, go to church, and have family meals. Scott and Powell ensured that weekends would create a center for a life that was unusual, particularly with a mother who worked outside of the

²¹⁷ Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, 16.

²¹⁸ Clayton Powell, *Adam By Adam*, 224.

²¹⁹ Clayton Powell III, author interview.

home and was out of town for most of the week. She explained, “Saturdays is what we call our family day. We make it a point to be at home...we take Skipper to the show and sit through millions of cartoons.”²²⁰ One of the events that Adam Clayton Powell III looked forward to most each week was the family’s customary Sunday stroll down Eighth Avenue with his parents.²²¹ Come Monday Scott and Powell would be off to their respective jobs.

Scott attempted to balance motherhood, her duties as a pastor’s wife, her career, and self-fulfillment. Against the gender expectations of her time, Scott believed in the necessity of personal interests for women beyond motherhood and as a wife. She reflected, “I believe also that every woman should have some interest, some preoccupation outside of her home and husband. She should spend an hour or two on something every week- and I don’t mean bridge either. She has to get outside herself, has to do something if she doesn’t want to become narrow.”²²² She was desperately resisting the heavy expectations of motherhood and being confined to the role of Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell. This would be a hard task to accomplish.

Contrary to their public image, fissures developed early in their marriage. Both Powell and Scott had strong personalities and had developed fully-formed opinions of the world by the time they were married. What drew them together would eventually tear them apart. Scott was a veteran performer at 25. She had supported her family and been

²²⁰ Hazel Scott, “I Found God in Show Business,” *Ebony*, May, 1956, 41

²²¹ Clayton Powell III, author interview.

²²² Scott, “I found God,” 50.

forced to grow up quickly in order to navigate nightclubs, musicians, unions, and the stage. Most women were married by this age in the 1940's and, although most Black women worked outside the home, many expected the man to be the breadwinner. Powell was a divorced man of 37 who was well educated and a community legend with a large amount of influence. Following their marriage Powell instituted several changes in Scott's career. He demanded that she stop all appearances at nightclubs, retire from Café Society, and begin a career of touring as a concert pianist. Scott recalled in her unpublished memoir, "Adam had been adamant no night club work was to be permitted. Although I had given one or two isolated concerts I had never taken on a full scale concert tour with all its rigors. He insisted that as a concert artist no one could find fault with his choice of me as a wife. He declared that all of my classical training was wasted if I did not concertize." He also stepped in to manage her career and took charge of her financial holdings. Scott explained, "As if it were yesterday, I can recall the phone conversation with Adam leaning over my shoulder as I talked with the representative of the Shubert's. A brand new musical was being mounted... It was a marvelous opportunity and would have meant to the continuation of a bright career. Instead, I refused the offer. At Adam's insistence, I declared that it would have been too confining for a newly married lady."²²³

²²³ Hazel Scott, "Unpublished Autobiography" (Hazel Scott Papers, 1979).

Jealously, infidelity, and violence slowly made appearances in their relationship. The Powell's marriage was tempestuous. Divorce rumors arose early in their marriage.²²⁴ They often got into arguments and physical fights. All of this took Scott by unwelcome surprise. She recalled, "When I was first attacked physically by my first husband it was a shock from which I was almost unable to recover. Quite apart from the pain of the body, there was severe damage to the spirit. Something deep inside of me recoiled and was untouchable for many years." This was made worse by Powell's numerous affairs. Powell was often seen around town with other women. His infidelity was well documented in the press and regularly found out by Scott. She concluded, "It has long been a matter of some perplexity, why men, seeing women like myself, at the top of their professions are driven to pursue, win and wed these women, only to attempt to pull down, desecrate and destroy us."²²⁵ The image of the power couple that so enamored the press was partly a mirage. There was genuine love between the two, but their unstable marriage would not bring the fulfillment Scott had hoped it would. Luckily, the constant travel demanded by both of

²²⁴Constance Curtis, "Hazel Scott Expects Baby Next Summer," *Amsterdam News*, January 1, 1945.

²²⁵Hazel Scott, "Unpublished Autobiography" (Hazel Scott Papers, 1979); Haygood, *King of the Cats*, 233; Clayton Powell III, author interview. He remembers his mother opening her house in Paris to women who had suffered abuse from their husbands and boyfriends. Undoubtedly, her experience in her first marriage made her empathetic to other women suffering the similar abuse.

their careers kept them apart most of the time. Marital strife aside, together they were a powerful force for social change.²²⁶

On Stage & Off: “I am ready to fight now, not for myself alone, but for my race”

It would be easy to connect Scott’s social and political activism solely to her marriage to Powell. Many histories that focus on Powell position her in this way. However, in his biography of his father *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, Adam Clayton Powell III emphasized the need for research on his mother and her political and social work. His discussion of her is intentionally minimal in the book to encourage this, and he expressed his pleasure at the start of new research on her life and career. Her schedule was packed with the same political appearances as activist celebrities Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes. She was deeply connected to the freedom rallies that were given in New York in the mid– and late-1940’s. One of the largest Freedom rallies at which Scott performed was held at Madison Square Garden in 1945, and featured Canada Lee, Robeson, Kenneth Spencer, Pearl Primus, and Josh White in the rally’s review, entitled, “Carry On –America” co-written by Hughes.²²⁷

Scott was also a primary organizer for a Freedom Rally held in 1947. She announced the rally to the press in May and it was held on June 16. Powell was the chairwoman for this event co-sponsored by the People’s Committee and Women’s Action

²²⁶ The behind-the-scenes narrative of their marriage is included to deepen the understanding of Scott’s challenges and triumphs, and not to disparage the legacy of either as luminaries.

²²⁷ "Negro Freedom Rally Program," *New York Times*, June 12, 1945; "Freedom Rally Set for Garden Airing," *Afro-American*, June 23, 1945.

Committee. Most of the performers who participated in events such as this would suffer persecution alongside Scott at the hands of the House on Un-American Activities in the late 1940's. Her biggest contribution to this event, as with many others, was as a performer donating her time and music. At one point she was playing piano in four to five benefit concerts weekly. Scott also lent her formal and informal support to a collection of other issues, including supporting Trinidadian Independence and many women's causes. She was also a great financial contributor. For instance, she campaigned for and donated a large sum of money to Benjamin Davis' controversial campaign to become the first Black Communist member of the New York City Council.²²⁸

She, like so many others, saw the war as the beginning of the end of discrimination and racial segregation in America. Many Black Americans believed that the series of life changing events experienced by Americans in the 1930's and the 1940's, these decades marked especially by the Great Depression and WWII, respectively, would lead to real lasting change. The "war for democracy abroad" rhetoric and Black participation in it seemed to signal a new status for African-Americans in a reconstructed America. Scott performed for American G.I.'s whenever an opportunity arose during the war. She played at more than 1,000 shows for servicemen and belonged to more than a dozen war-related organizations. She volunteered to play for African-American and white troops who were on the infectious disease wards of hospitals in America and abroad that

²²⁸ Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994) 108. Adam Clayton Powell III explains that his mother was involved in numerous organizations, particularly African-American women's organizations. However, she was not usually a formal member (Clayton Powell III, author interview).

many other performers had neglected or avoided.²²⁹ Off stage political activism and her on stage representation were intimately linked, one a natural outgrowth of the other. Yet, as she toured the country, Scott's expectations for positive social change in American life were soon diminished.

Upon the Powell's arrival in Washington, they were slowly invited into the intimate circles of power within the beltway. This was an uneven embrace, because Powell's presence, with his swagger and confidence, was repugnant to the white power brokers in DC, and the lingering air of scandal kept the Black DC elite at arms length initially. Scott had very little interest in pursuing a life in Washington either way, and Powell's main focus was to break down the walls of discrimination and inequality for Black people. To both his credit and detriment, he also had a tremendous ego that thrived independent of acceptance in DC. One of the many slights experienced by Scott in segregated DC would lead to the Powell's first major engagement with American racial injustice as a couple.

Despite her service to the war effort, Scott was refused the use of Constitutional Hall. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) would not permit Scott's concert to be given within the space that had conventionally not allowed African-American performers on its stage. Along with her husband she waged a frontal media attack on the DAR, on First Lady Bess Truman (who had accepted an invitation to a tea with the DAR following the incident), and the President himself. In interviews Powell labeled Mrs. Truman, "the Last Lady" due to her refusal to distance her self from the

²²⁹ Carter, Michael, "Tells How She Became...", 5.; Salem, "Scott," 342; Clayton Powell III, author interview.

DAR and condemn their racism.²³⁰ While this media attention was a convenient and politically expedient avenue to gain power in Washington for Powell, for Scott it was an affront to her humanity. She announced to the press that she would tour the country in an effort to fight, "DARism." "I know I won't be alone... Many persons of that stamp will come along with me" she added. Scott worked with the People's Council, whose goal it was to "carry on campaigns for enlightenment against prejudice." She explained to the press:

Every nickel that I earn at my Carnegie Hall concert... will go to the People's Council Fund. I know that they and other enlightened groups will fight right along with me... we are living in a so called enlightened age. I am ready to fight now, not for myself alone, but for all my race. Since V-J Day, three Negroes have been lynched in this democracy.²³¹

This pronouncement began one of the many tours in which Scott would battle segregation and discrimination. Hazel Scott's encounters with segregation were initially limited, as she lived most of her life in integrated New York. When she performed at Café Society, her main gig, the crowds were always mixed. As her touring career took off she would have more encounters with segregation. After being stopped from seeing her own film *Rhapsody in Blue* and the incident with the DAR, Scott began to put in her performance contract at the outset of her first nationwide tour that she would not play to

²³⁰ Mack, "Career Curtailed," 156; Mack, "Tea for Fifty Ladies," *Newsweek*, October 22, 1945.

²³¹ "Hazel Scott to Tour Nation in Fight against Jim Crow," *The Chicago Defender*, December 1, 1945.

segregated audiences.²³² Scott's fight against segregation would begin with her performances. Her message was clear – if white segregationists wanted to see her, they would have to sit in a mixed audience or stay home.

Scott may have been able to keep her audiences from being segregated. However, an irreparable racial divide marked America. With her pride and sheltering from the impact of segregation as a celebrated New Yorker, she bumped up against local laws and customs throughout the nation. "I played packed houses everywhere even in St. Louis where I was refused hotel rooms and not because of overcrowding. I finally got rooms with a private family." She pointed out, "...Other mid-west cities were more polite simply because I was Hazel Scott. In fact they told me so."²³³ In Booneville, MO after having her car break down, the staff at Holt's Café dismissively told Scott, "You'll have to eat in the kitchen" to which Scott retorted, "I'm sorry, but I don't eat in kitchens!" The "stony-faced waitress" explained that her party could have takeout, but would be unable to wait at the counter for the order. Defiantly, Scott placed her order and would not move. The waitress, with little choice, finally relented and allowed Scott to wait at the counter. When asked by a reporter if she identified herself, Scott explained, "I don't want any special privileges. There are 13,000,000 Hazel Scott's in America. They just don't play the piano!" Scott also exposed the racial discrimination she experienced in Topeka and

²³² Hazel Scott, "Unpublished Autobiography," (Hazel Scott Papers, 1979); Salem, "Scott," 445-446.

²³³ "Hazel Scott to Tour Nation in Fight Against Jim Crow," *The Chicago Defender*, December 1, 1945.

Kansas City to the press during her tour.²³⁴ Scott was fortunate – a similar incident landed twenties and thirties star Nina Mae McKinney in the hospital after being beaten up by a “soda fountain clerk” in a public waiting room in Lake City, Florida in 1940. McKinney requested a cup of coffee and was physically assaulted by the clerk with a “heavy club.”²³⁵

In 1948 Scott while on tour in Texas she refused to appear before a segregated crowd of 7,000 at the University of Texas at Austin. The promoters assured Scott that the booking would be integrated and that all attendees would be sitting the same level in the orchestra.” Unfortunately, when Scott readied herself to perform, there was a red carpet down the middle of the aisle separating whites from blacks. She asked, “What justification can anyone have who comes to hear me and then objects to sitting next to another Negro?” The Texas reaction was quick and unpleasant. The pianist “was carried out of town by the sheriffs.” Marian Anderson played in the same venue later that year much to the chagrin of the Black press and many Black Texans. The Black press urged Anderson to follow Scott’s example.²³⁶ Two years later Scott caused a stir at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She was scheduled for several performances. Following her initial performance she learned that seating for Blacks from the surrounding community was limited to a small section of the balcony. She refused to play

²³⁴ Howard B. Woods, "Hazel Scott Jim Crowed Again; St. Louis Cafe Bars Pianist," *Chicago Defender*, October 27, 1945.

²³⁵ "Nina Mae Mckinney Beaten up in Dixie," *Amsterdam News*, January 13, 1940.

²³⁶ Karen Chilton, interview by Tony Cox, "Before Oprah, TV Audiences Cozied up to Hazel," *News and Notes*, NPR January 26 (2009); "Marian Anderson, Hazel Scott Split on Jim Crow Issue," *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1949.

until the school relented and allowed the audience to be integrated. An infuriated student wrote in to the school's newspaper, *The Daily Tarheel*, "...I am a native of this state and I did not enter this tax-supported institution to have tolerance shoved down my throat...Is it not indeed possible that a minority might persecute a majority on occasion?" Scott's dismissed responses such as this. She said of her tussle with the Universities,

I am proud of the fact that I am the first colored artist to refuse to play to segregated audiences. I started this four years ago. At this time when our President has been elected on the issue of civil rights and also when my husband is sponsoring all the civil rights legislation in the House of Representatives, I can do no less than refuse to be a silent partner of Jim Crow.²³⁷

Scott and Powell would also be partners in a lawsuit in Spokane, Washington, that also denied Scott service. On April 20, 1950 the Spokane Spokesman Review announced, "A federal court jury awarded \$250,000 in damages, yesterday, to New York concert pianist Hazel Scott, after deliberating more than sixteen hours." In February of that year Scott had been stuck on a train that was stopped by heavy snowfall for three days. She and the other passengers were diverted to a bus for the remainder of their journey to Spokane. At the first rest stop in Pasco, Washington, Scott and a friend traveling with her went into a diner to order some food. Scott had a high fever and was sick from traveling. This mattered little to the wait staff who promptly informed the pianist that "colored" people were not served there. Scott sought out the police and was told, "Are you going to get out of here or am I going to have to run you in for disturbing the peace?" Scott did eat dinner that night. She demanded on her arrival to Spokane, "I want the

²³⁷ Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

following two things in the following order: a bath, a hot drink, a lawyer.” She called her husband that night and they swiftly filed a fifty thousand dollar lawsuit against the owners of the restaurant.²³⁸

The press published the story all over the nation. Langston Hughes condemned the Pasco incident and the American practice of segregation in his column in the *Chicago Defender*. “After those fine speeches the politicians made last November, it would seem that now some of those democratic promises would be kept. Are they being kept? ...The Ku Klux Klan still burns fiery crosses. And right now Hazel Scott can’t get a bowl of soup in Pasco, Washington, U.S.A., because she is a brown girl, not white. If that is democracy it’s not a good brand.” He added that one did not have to be a famous to be served, however, “when a Hazel Scott is refused service it highlights the absurdity of American racial custom.”²³⁹ Scott’s eventual win of \$250.00 was not monetarily significant. However, the case bankrupted the owners and set a precedent in the state of Washington. The case was soon followed by many others that would combine to end statewide desegregation.²⁴⁰ Scott risked her professional reputation and livelihood each time she refused to perform at an engagement and took legal action against segregation. The fight for equality outweighed her hunger in cementing her career and status.

²³⁸ "Damages of \$250 Million for Hazel Scott," *Spokesman Review*, December 30, 1949; Clippings, Hazel Scott Papers, n.d.

²³⁹ Langston Hughes, "It Is Criminal to Refuse Any Person Food Who Has the Cash," *Chicago Defender*, March 12, 1949.

²⁴⁰ "Hazel Scott Wins Suit," *New York Times*, April 20, 1950; Chilton, *Pioneering Journey*, 138-139; Mack, "Career Curtailed," 160.

Conclusion: Fade to Black

In 1948 14,000 attendees squeezed into Lewisohn Stadium to see Scott perform in her first concert as a soloist with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra. Many fans had to be turned away. Her concertizing spread her fame to a whole other segment of the nation. She had become one of the most recognized Black performers of her day. Her films, nightclub appearances, and concert tours made her a household name. Her celebrity rivaled that of Lena Horne, and in some places and times, eclipsed it.²⁴¹

During the zenith of her career the DuMont Network gave Scott her own television show. *The Hazel Scott Show* was the first show hosted by an African-American and featured musical entertainment primarily by its host. Her show premiered a full six years prior to Nat King Cole's variety show. The victory of conquering the new medium of television was short lived for Scott, "...ultimately, the candor that had made Hazel Scott such a distinctive personality also helped to curtail her television career."²⁴² Scott's activism took many forms during the WWII and post WWII years. Her increasing popularity made Scott's activism even more visible to the rising anti-radical, anti communist crusade that was sweeping the nation. It activism did not go unrecognized by the government in a time of red baiting.

A month after her show premiered Scott was listed in *Red Channels*, a compilation published by Counterattack, three former FBI agents with right wing

²⁴¹ C.H., "14,000 at Stadium Hear Hazel Scott," *New York Times (1857-Current file)*, June 20, 1948, 53.

²⁴² Mack, "Career Curtailed," 160.

conservative backers. The book contained celebrity's accused of being communists or communist sympathizers.²⁴³ Publications such as *Red Channels* with their obsessive focus on the infiltration of Communism were peculiar to the post WWII period in which the United States was embarking on a Cold War. In an effort to defend her name and save her career Scott volunteered to be interrogated by the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).²⁴⁴ Adam Clayton Powell III recalled,

And I remember as a - I must have been five years old at the time ... my father thought she was absolutely out of her mind to go before the committee. He said, you can't win. No one wins by going before HUAC. And she said, but I want to go and clear my name. And who are you to say that I shouldn't do something which is right. He wasn't getting into all kinds of political trouble for the Powell amendment and other things, early civil rights legislation that he was writing. So yes, it was a defining moment but a moment which was not taken lightly. And certainly, she wasn't unaware of what could happen.²⁴⁵

This attempt to distance herself from Communism or Communist sympathy was unsuccessful. Hazel Scott testified before the committee and rebutted their statements several times. During her testimony she was defiant but also shaken. She conveyed to the committee her pride and her frustration. She explained of the artists under attack, "We should not be written off by the vicious slanders of little and petty men. We are one of the

²⁴³ Albert Fried, ed., *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 119.

²⁴⁴ Fried, *McCarthyism*, 16, 24-25. This committee was formed in 1938. It was dormant through WWII, but it would turn into a vehicle for the political career of Senator Joseph McCarthy and destroy many people's lives after its revival in 1947.

²⁴⁵ "Before Oprah."

most effective and irreplaceable instruments in the grim struggle ahead.”²⁴⁶ Like many other performers on the Blacklist her career would never be the same. Her treatment by the HUAC will be further explored in the concluding chapter. Vilified in the media and her marriage crumbling Scott toured Europe and finally moved to France in 1957 where she lived for ten years. She returned to the states in the late 1960’s Scott was unable to fully salvage her career in the States.²⁴⁷

Her fight for affirmative African-American women’s representation and image must be merged with her off stage activism for civil rights. Scott was working as an activist primarily within the framework of entertainment but also within the WWII civil rights era. Her refusal to play degrading roles, including those traditionally given to Black women such as maids, mammies or prostitutes and her refusal to play to segregated audiences was only the most visible aspect of her resistance. African-American leaders were expected to battle racism, discrimination and bias in their respective fields by the masses of Black Americans in this moment.²⁴⁸ Scott must be included in the pantheon of those Black performers and artists who used their careers as tools to further Black advancement and quell racial injustice. Most significantly, she created a legacy of

²⁴⁶ House Un-American Activities, *Hazel Scott Powell Hearings*, 81st Cong., 2d sess., 1950.

²⁴⁷ Hazel Scott, “What Paris Means to Me,” in *A Stranger in the Village*, ed. by Farrah Jasmine Griffin and Cheryl Fish (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1993), 187.

²⁴⁸ This era preceded the period traditionally associated with the modern Civil Rights Movement. However there is a rise of historical work being done that connects WWII civil rights with post WWII civil rights in a seamless manner. Peniel Joseph’s *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour* does this successfully for both civil rights and Black power.

uncompromised Black images and representations for Black women that were used as tools of liberation in the 1940's and long after.

CHAPTER 4

"I DID BLACK WOMEN BECAUSE THEY NEEDED TO BE DONE" JACKIE ORMES, ELIZABETH CATLETT, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S IMAGE IN COMICS AND FINE ART

In 1939 Augusta Savage triumphantly presented her sculpture, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* at the New York World's Fair in the prestigious Contemporary Arts Pavilion. She had been commissioned by the fair's Board of Design to create a sculpture – the only African-American woman so honored. The piece themed “The American Negro's Contribution to Music” consisted of a sixteen foot tall harp in the shape of a strong outstretched Black arm. The cylindrical bodies of a Black choir formed each harp string. A kneeling man holding a sign that read, “lift every voice and sing” completed the front of the sculpture. Unlike much of the art produced by male and white artists of the time, Savage positioned African-American women as equal contributors to cultural and social production by alternating a female form with a male form in this work. By doing so she combated the common belief that Black women had given little to the American historical narrative socially, politically, or culturally. The piece attests to the importance of putting modes of cultural production into the hands of Black women. The historical and artistic lens employed by these Black women represented Black women more realistically as complex and three-dimensional subjects. Savage was able to secure the well-deserved exposure for her art through her hard work as an artist in the 20s and 30s, and her unwavering dedication to her craft. This was no small feat for a Black women working through the Depression era. While this Fair exhibit captured the public's attention for only a brief time, it signified the ongoing efforts of Savage and other

African-American artists to present an alternative image of Black womanhood. Savage had successfully hijacked and manipulated American public space.

Unfortunately, like so many other African-American women artists through time, Savage would pay a heavy price for choosing the career path of visual artist. Savage was sometimes ill treated by the world fine art. Despite her brief notoriety, she lost her source of employment as director of the Harlem Community Arts Center due to her commission work with the Fair and the time it took away from her service. This signaled the formal end of Savage's artistic career. In addition, because of time constraints, Savage cast the piece in plaster and painted it to give it the appearance of bronze, and it was disposed of at the close of the Fair as part of the clean up. Her silver medal-winning sculpture was destroyed.²⁴⁹ The short saga of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* was representative of the importance of artistic production by African-American women to the national historical and cultural narrative, of the employment of resistance through art, and, unfortunately, the ill treatment of these artists and their work by the public and fine art communities. Her descendants would face similar trials and would evoke occasional triumphs in the battle against the legacy of stereotyped representation.

In her work, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, Lisa Farrington comments on this phenomenon:

A persistent theme in the art of African-American women has been the configuration of their own image without racial or gender stereotypes. Prompted by an unwelcome inheritance of axiomatic

²⁴⁹ Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105-106; Michael Rosenfeld Gallery; Farrington, *Own Image*, 105-106.

portrayals that falsely defined them as lustful, loathsome, and inferior, many women artists of color have chosen to counteract these perversions by portraying themselves with dignity, honesty, and insight. Others have challenged the status quo by doggedly pursuing artistic careers despite prejudices that excluded them from the realm of the artist.²⁵⁰

Farrington illuminates the fact that the images and representations of Black women and Black women artists have been treated with apathy, at best, and more often, with violent disdain. By choosing to engage in an artistic career and challenge dominant images, these visual artists added a significant layer to Black cultural resistance and American visual culture.²⁵¹ Visual culture, including visual art, was a powerful site for disrupting racist and sexist centers of power. Black women who posited themselves as visual artists took ownership over images and representations that had a lasting impact on the American and international popular imagination. Black women may have more steadily found a place in the arts of dance, music, and performance, as these were more expected and acceptable artistic outlets for them. Visual fine and popular art forms, on the other hand, were often barred to them wholesale – if not as African-Americans, then as women. These artists challenged the very foundations of dominant white beauty standards and often brought issues that plagued the Black community to the fore.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which cartoonist Jackie “Zelda” Ormes and fine artist Elizabeth Catlett confronted the negative popular constructions of African-

²⁵⁰ Farrington, *Own Image*, 8.

²⁵¹ Visual culture, to borrow Nicholas Mirzoeff’s definition, is perhaps best understood as the study of the functions of the world addressed through pictures, images, and visualizations, rather than through texts and words. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

American women that proliferated in the media in the mid-twentieth century. Like Dunham and Scott, Ormes and Catlett extended the culture of resistance that emerged amongst these activist artists and performers. Both Catlett and Ormes centered Black women in their artistic creation. They developed an art in which Black women returned a level gaze to a society that subjected them to erasure, or confined them to stereotypical construction throughout visual culture. These two visual artists conveyed a vision in their respective fields during the late 1930s, 40s and 50s in regards to their rendering of Black women. They took the tools of artistic production out of the hands of white or male artists, and delivered an authentic first person examination of the experiences of middle- and working-class Black American women.

Catlett and Ormes hold key positions within visual artistic production, and each represents one end of the wide spectrum of visual artistic production that spans fine (“high” art) to popular (“low” art). Each was very much in conversation with the eras in which they were creative, and each responded critically to the plight of the Black community during these decades, especially that of African-American women. The representations in their art were almost always connected to political and social activism in their communities. The FBI would identify both as engaging in “Anti-American” activities. After constructing brief biographical sketches, this chapter closely examines Ormes’ comic strips *Candy*, *Torchy Brown*, *Patty Jo n’ Ginger*, and Catlett’s 194 -45 series *I am the Negro Woman*. It uncovers the radical contributions of these two artists to the legacy of Black cultural resistance.

The American Media Landscape, Jackie “Zelda” Ormes, and Black Woman’s Image in Comics 1937-1957

The media landscape of the mid 1930s, 40s and 50s was central to American life, yet not as vast as it would be by the mid- and late-twentieth century. This landscape was composed of film, including newsreels and animated shorts, and print media, which included newspapers and magazines. Fine art was an entirely separate sphere. Regardless, every site of media and fine artistic production had become a site for the degradation of Black images and representations, including that of Black women.

Before the advent of television, animated films became a significant, though often overlooked, site for the misrepresentation of Black womanhood.²⁵² A trip to the movies often included a double feature, a newsreel, and the screening of several animated short films. The selection of supplemental screenings often depended on the particular feature shown. Black women were completely absent from newsreels. Stereotyped constructions of the mammy, tragic mulatto, or Jezebel abounded in film. Between 1931 and 1938, thirty two-percent of the characters in animated shorts were Black.²⁵³ It is not known exactly how many of these characters were women; however, they appeared regularly

²⁵² The All-American News, founded in 1942, was the sole newsreel that “featured news and feature material calculated to be of particular interest to black citizens.” This series ran in 365 of the nation’s 451 Black theaters. The Office of War Information believed that 85% of Blacks in the five largest cities received much of their news from this series. This evaluation fails to take into account Black newspapers where Black people more than likely received most of their news. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 187-188.

²⁵³ Henry T. Sampson, *That’s enough, Folks: Black images in animated cartoons, 1900-1960* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 2-3. See also Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon* (2009)

and the shorts employed the same stereotypical constructions of African-American womanhood found in film. In fact, the representations could in the latter genre be considered far more ignoble. A moviegoer who attended a 1934 screening of the *Imitation of Life* may have watched a newsreel on the progress of Franklin D. Roosevelt's recently enacted New Deal and the developments of the Communist struggle in China, accompanied by an animated short from a film series starring *Bosko the Talk Ink Kid*.

The Bosko character became one of several animated acts that were a part of a new Warner Bros. cartoon series called *Looney Toons*. Bosko was drawn to mimic a blackface minstrel. Possessing a large white mouth, round eyes and jet black skin, his features were so exaggerated that they made him look inhuman. One reviewer described him as a monkey. Bosko was so prominent in the *Looney Tunes* arsenal that his original closing line, "that's all folks" became the signature closing to all *Looney Tunes* cartoons. Bosko almost always appeared with his girlfriend, Honey. Honey shared Bosko's exaggerated features, and is identified as female by a single thin braid sticking straight up on her head tied with an enormous ribbon. She is mischievous, has a high silly voice, and breaks out into popular song in almost every episode. These traits are associated with early adolescent Black female film characters, such as Farina of *Our Gang* (later the *Little Rascals*) that showed in theatres from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s.²⁵⁴ Interestingly, a very small amount of tweaking on an animators part would transform Bosko to Mickey Mouse and Honey to Minnie Mouse, characters that first appeared in 1928. These two characters became the animated apex of Americana. Bosko and Honey

²⁵⁴ Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

engage in countless antics during their nationwide run from 1930-38. Other short, animated films would later include characters such as Mammy Two Shoes, a Black domestic whose buxom frame was shown in the Tom n' Jerry Cartoons, and Mandy, also a domestic.²⁵⁵ The formula for a great animated cartoon was comedy and the exaggeration of human nature. In the hands of white male creators, this formula easily lent itself to thin, stereotypical representations of African-Americans.

Newspaper comic strip artists used the same formula when creating their print comics, and with similar results. The appearance of African-American women in the national comic pages was rare, and when they did materialize, the images were degrading. The comic strip was a bastion of white male Americana. Women who appeared in the comic pages were white, drawn by men, and reflected the white male gaze. This can be seen within the most popular strip of the time that featured a woman lead character was *Blondie*. She also reflected a thin one-dimensional construction that was based on white male desire. The Blondie character had begun her career in comics as a dizzy gold digger with the body of a pin up, and was later toned down to a sexy yet wise housewife who was the picture of domestic success. She was also the epitome of virtuous white womanhood, with her sexy blonde appeal and humble domestic focus.²⁵⁶ African-American women had a different role within the white male imagination. Like Blondie some were sexualized yet subservient. However, they were stripped of

²⁵⁵ Henry T. Sampson, *That's Enough, Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900-1960* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 11, 12.

²⁵⁶ Maurice Horn, *Women in the Comics* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 92.

respectability, agency, intelligence, and independence. They were also perpetual servants. One notable strip dating back to 1911, *Mammy's L'il Lamb*, featured African-American women as central characters. This strip featured a Black mother and her little girl in a one-pane strip. Although the rendering of the mother and child are far less offensive than others to follow in the ensuing decades, the strip taps into the familiar mammy and “pickaninny” tropes.²⁵⁷

Black female comic strip characters occasionally appeared as sidekicks or girlfriends to Black male characters, such as the women in the Amos ‘n’ Andy strip of the 1920s and early 30s. The representations and images found in film and print media were troubling not only in their wholesale inaccuracy, but also in how they perpetually placed Black women in a bygone era and denied them membership in the modern world.

African-American women activist artists and performers would be charged with bringing the *national* representation of Black womanhood into the modern world. In the world of the comics Jackie Zelda Ormes took on this role. During her career she would create four central African-American female comicstrip characters. Beginning in 1937 Ormes published her first installment of a new comic strip in the nationally distributed Black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* hoping to combat the negative representations of African-American women in national print venues. African-American newspapers, with their small staffs and budgets, operated differently from their large white counterparts. In a segregated America, Black newspapers had a different audience and a

²⁵⁷ Fredrik Stroemberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle, Wash.: Fantagraphics Books, 2003), 23-24.

distinct mission to “serve, speak and fight for the black minority.”²⁵⁸ Nearly every inch of a Black newspaper was used to that end, including the comic pages. Larger papers with bigger budgets either paid for syndicated comic strips, or had a full staff of comic artists who had separate individuals write the narrative, draw the strip, created the dialogue, and finalized the product. At times several people were involved in the creation of a single strip that took to complete. Ormes, like other Black comicstrip creators, drafted the narrative, drew the images, and inserted the text. For example, *Torchy Brown in Dixie Goes to Harlem* followed the adventures of a young Black woman who migrated from Mississippi in the South to Harlem in the North. Wilbert Holloway and later, *Society Sue* and *Family* by Sam Milai, initially published *Torchy* alongside *Sunny Boy Sam*. In the pages of national white newspapers, Black women were non-existent. The comic pages were no exception. Black newspapers did publish some strips that had Black women characters, for example, *Society Sue*. Ormes’ *Torchy* was different from other female characters in the Black newspapers, or white newspapers for that matter, in that a Black woman created the *Torchy* character. *Torchy* was not a maid, and *Torchy*'s life did not center on being a wife or girlfriend. She was a woman in charge of her own destiny. To navigate life Ormes imbued *Torchy* with the wit, beauty, intelligence, ingenuity, and dignity that she saw in the Black women in her community.

The very first strip provided the context of *Torchy*'s life in the South as a very young woman who knows little beyond her rural existence. The first few installments of the strip found *Torchy* longing for the North and deep in thought about joining those

²⁵⁸ Roland Wolseley, *The Black Press, USA*, 2nd ed., (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 3-4.

brave women who were taking part in the Great Migration. In the strip Ormes concentrated on Torchy's desire to leave home to explore a wider world, and avoided a direct focus on the overt racial oppression of the South. A visit by her cousin Dinah Dizzle, who showcased her big city success, only furthers Torchy's yearnings for exploration. Not only does Dinah project a slick representation of African-American womanhood, she embodied Black women's access to urbanity and cosmopolitanism, something that eluded most African-Americans located in the segregated rural South. Torchy sold off her farm animals to fund her trip, and soon headed to Harlem where she became a star at the famed Cotton Club. Fictional Torchy accessed all that Harlem had to offer. Within the nearly twelve-month run of *Torchy*, the main character participated in activities rare for most Black women, including resisting segregation laws by sitting in the "whites only" train car, traveling across country, flying on a airplane, and working as a showgirl in exclusive New York nightclubs. By the strip's end in April of 1938, Torchy gained fame and fortune and makes the discovery that her long lost mother is none other than Josephine Baker.²⁵⁹ Torchy's fanciful story represented an extraordinarily rare life narrative for African-American women in this moment. However, aside from the Baker embellishment, it was not entirely unheard of for women like Ethel Waters and Florence Mills, who followed a similar trajectory, rising to prominence from obscurity. Cleo Hayes, a dancer who performed during the 1930s and 40s at popular New York nightspots, including the Cotton Club and Apollo Theater, and appeared in the star-studded *Stormy Weather*, lived a life comparable to the fictional Torchy. As a teenager in

²⁵⁹ Nancy Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 74.

the 1920s, she fled Greenville, MS, and headed north. She exclaimed in an interview, “I don’t have to tell you why I left!” Torchy’s predicament is much like that of Hayes. Hayes explains “ I had stars in my eyes. When I left Mississippi I went to Chicago. Oh, I just thought that I had arrived, like I had stepped into another world.”²⁶⁰ Although exaggerated, this view of the utopian, urban North cannot be entirely dismissed.

Both Hayes’ and Torchy’s reasons for migrating are well founded. For a young African-American woman in the South in the late 1930s, securing a livelihood was wrought with struggle and uncertainty. Torchy lived on a family farm with her caring aunt and uncle. In a country deeply immersed in the Great Depression, her fictional family would be among a fortunate and tiny minority. Most African-American women located in the South lived in conditions not far removed from those seen by their grandmothers in the aftermath of slavery. They worked as agricultural workers on land that was not their own. If a young woman stayed in the South, two possibilities awaited her: agricultural work or domestic service. A 1937 Women’s Bureau Report indicates that female cotton pickers earned a mere \$41.67 yearly in the lower South.²⁶¹ Routine and horrifying racial violence also dampened life prospects for both Black men and women. Ormes’ work as a reporter and part-time cartoonist at the *Pittsburgh Courier* exposed her to all of the economic and social struggles of Black Americans at the time. She explained, “I had never been to Dixie but I worked in a newspaper office. I read everything that was

²⁶⁰ *Been Rich All My Life*, DVD, Heather MacDonald et al., Toots Crackin Productions, and First Run Features (New York: First Run Features, 2005).

²⁶¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* Rev. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 169.

in that paper. It was a whole lot about struggles.” In fact the columns adjoining the first *Torchy* strip tell of the “plight of the Negro in the Depression” and report on the troubles stemming from racial segregation in Memphis.²⁶² The paper carried articles that called attention to the horrors of the South and trumpeted the gains of “the race” in the North. Black newspapers acted as a vital internal web of communication in local and national Black communities. Before the close of WWI, *Chicago Defender* founder, Robert Abbot, had gone so far as to suggest to African-Americans that they seek their fortunes and recover their dignity in the North.²⁶³

While Hayes fled to Chicago, *Torchy* fled to Harlem, a Black center with an even greater reputation as a Black utopia. African-Americans and Caribbean immigrants created an exceptional space in Harlem. There is a clear connection between the communities, businesses, institutions and cultural environment slowly and painstakingly built by Black migrants during the Great Migration, and the opportunities that the children of the “New Negroes” accessed. This can be seen in Ormes’ first strip in which a young Black woman accessed urban space, personal freedom, and a burgeoning Black modernity. In fact, Black women are key progenitors and harbingers of modernity for their community in the strip. *Torchy* is encouraged to migrate North by her glamorous cousin Dinah and the possibility of meeting her famous mother. Eventually, *Torchy* herself became a link to urbanity for those at home in her small southern town. Personal freedom and Black occupation of popular and public space was what Hayes construed as

²⁶² "Plight of the Negro in the Depression," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 1, 1937.

²⁶³ Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 158-59.

forming “another world.” Like Cleo Hayes, Torchy Brown represented the emerging modern African-American women. She was determined, fearless, outspoken, demanding of freedom, and a symbol of future possibility for her community.

Jackie Ormes was born Zelda Mavin Jackson in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1911. Born to William Winfield Jackson and Mary Brown Jackson, she was the second of two daughters raised by the couple. The 1910 census shows William Jackson newly married and living in Pittsburgh with his wife and in-laws.²⁶⁴ Jackson’s World War I draft registration card identified his occupation as a printer. He also owned an outdoor movie theater where he would screen silent movies. Ownership of these businesses would place the Jackson’s solidly in Pennsylvania’s Black middle class. The majority of Blacks in Pittsburgh worked as maids, laundresses, coachmen, and custodians. However, there were a surprising number of Black-owned businesses. As well; a 1909 investigator surveyed at least 85.²⁶⁵ Unlike many Black poor families they were able to have a single breadwinner while Mary Jackson labored as a housewife. Ormes had an idyllic life as a toddler. Unfortunately tragedy befell the family when Ormes’ father tragically died in a car accident when she was not more than eight years old. This event changed the family’s fortunes. Ormes and her sister, Delores, were temporarily boarded with an aunt and uncle while their mother looked for work. Mary Jackson found employment as a head

²⁶⁴ US Bureau of the Census, “1910 (Thirteenth) Census of the United States, Pittsburgh Ward 5, Allegheny, Pennsylvania.” Accessed through Ancestry.com.

²⁶⁵ 1917-1918. William Winfield Jackson, Draft Registration Card. edited by Draft Board. Allegheny County, PA: National Archives and Records Administration; Joe William Trotter and Eric Ledell Smith, *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 410.

housekeeper for a wealthy white woman. The separation from her children and the employment as a housekeeper lasted less than a year when Jackson married Porter M. Simmons in 1918. He moved his new family to Monongahela, PA. Unlike Jackson's first husband, the Simmons family traced their roots to the North. They had lived in Western Pennsylvania long before Emancipation, being one of the pioneer families of Monongahela.²⁶⁶ This small integrated suburb of Pittsburgh was seventeen miles from the city. Ormes spent the rest of her childhood and adolescence here. She remembered her life in Monongahela with fondness: "[It] was like suburbia: spread out, and simple. Nothing momentous ever happened there. Nobody had much, but we were OK. We grew up around music –nice sounds! –and no bad language and no violence. So we thought the world would be a pretty nice place to go chop up. I was ready for it, honey!"²⁶⁷

Ormes' had plenty of talent to "chop up" the world. She had been drawing since she could hold a pencil. Paper and pen were her constant companions. She was a true natural artist, using bars of soap to make lifelike carvings. As a teenager she drew for the Monongahela High School yearbook, becoming its art editor. Intricate illustrations showed her attention to detail as well as her emerging personal, artistic style.

It is apparent that Ormes, nicknamed "Jackie," had plenty of spunk and moxie as well. The 1930 census identified a 17 year-old Zelda Jackson as the stepdaughter of the

²⁶⁶ Frank E. Bolden, "The First Hundred Years," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1, 1950.

²⁶⁷ Goldstein, Goldstein, Nancy. 2008. *Jackie Ormes : the first African American woman cartoonist*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1-9 . Goldstein's work on Ormes is the only full-length work on the life of the cartoonist and contains interviews with Ormes' sister who passed soon after the publishing of the book. This interview is one of the few sources on Ormes' early and later life. David Jackson, "The Amazing Adventures of Jackie Ormes," *Reader: Chicago's Free Weekly* 14, no. 46 (1985): 18.

Simmons household that included her 20 year old sister Delores, her mother, now Mary Simmons, and Percy Simmons.²⁶⁸ That year she wrote a letter to the publisher of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Robert L. Vann, appealing to him for a job. “I guess I said something funny in it. He said ‘write us another letter.’ I wrote another letter. He said, ‘How would you like to go to a boxing match?’ This was my first assignment.” Although, or perhaps because, this may have seemed like an odd assignment for a young women, Ormes was excited to go. The paper sent their sports editor to bring young Jackie to the match, “I couldn’t go by myself I was just a punk --still in school.”²⁶⁹ Ormes days as “just a punk” came to a close at the end of the school year when she graduated from high school. She continued to work for the *Pittsburgh Courier* as an editor, proofreader and reporter. “[I] had a great career running around town looking into everything the law would allow and writing about it. I had a whole lot of comeuppance, and I found that I could make people laugh. I said, well that’s fun, but I want to draw.”²⁷⁰ Ormes’ dreams of becoming a full time comic artist at the *Courier* had to be put on hold. Soon after meeting a “soft spoken, gentle” man named Earl Ormes, the two were married in 1931. He was beginning a career in banking, working at Steel City Bank, and attending Pittsburgh School of Banking. They became a fixture on the Black middle-class circuit of parties, benefits and nightlife. Amongst the couple’s circle of friends were future bandleader Billy Eckstine and aspiring actress Lena Horne, who was living in Pittsburgh with her husband and

²⁶⁸ Goldstein, *First Cartoonist*, 12.

²⁶⁹ Jackson, “Amazing Adventures,” 18.

²⁷⁰ Jackson, “Amazing Adventures,” 18.

small children at the time. The Ormes' were married for several years before Jackie Ormes gave birth to their only child, Jacqueline. The couple was ecstatic to add to their family. Horror struck the couple when their three year-old was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Ormes' would bury her only child soon after the devastating diagnosis, and refused to have any more children for fear of further heartache and loss. Jackie Ormes would imbue her longest running strip, *Patty Jo N' Ginger*, with the spirit of her little girl. Patty Jo would be wise, brave, outspoken, and full of spunk. This may have been the way she imagined her little girl whose life was cut short. It is clear that Ormes saw all of these characteristics as appropriate and necessary aspects of Black girlhood and womanhood. A year after Jacqueline's death, Ormes would bring this same approach to Black womanhood to her first strip, *Dixie to Harlem*.²⁷¹

During its short one year run, *Dixie to Harlem* brought a different prospective on the Great Migration, Black urban life, and the possibilities of Black women's lives given that it centered a Black female character drawn by a Black women cartoonist. Responding to the economic wrath of the country's depression, Jackie Ormes and her new husband Earl moved to his hometown of Salem, OH in 1938. The last installments of the *Dixie to Harlem* strip would be drawn here and ended more than likely due to the move. Perhaps Ormes was unhappy in Ohio because there was no opportunity to continue her career, which was highly unusual for any woman to have, even in the cities. Salem was also a place that bordered on full segregation and, like many educated Black men of the time, Earl was underemployed as a crane operator at a mill. Four years after moving

²⁷¹ Goldstein, *First Cartoonist*, 16-17; Jackson, "Amazing Adventures," 18, 24.

to Ohio, Ormes persuaded her husband to move to Chicago. “Earl wanted to be near his family. He wanted to feel secure –that was his big need. I needed Chicago. I talked him into it.”²⁷²

Chicago was a bustling metropolis; by 1942 it had an established Black community that had been steadily increasing due to the Great Migration. Ormes' trajectory was unusual in that she traveled from the East Coast to the Midwest. Most African-Americans who arrived in Chicago between 1915 and 1950 traveled north from the South. They left severely oppressive and economically depressed conditions in search of a better existence. On the one hand Chicago, like New York, was plagued by racial tension and de facto segregation. On the other, there was tremendous Black progress. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's 1945 publication, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* provided a historical sociological study of the city and outlined the ebb and flow of Black Chicago,

Here were colored policemen, fireman, alderman, and precinct captains, state representatives, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Colored children were attending public schools and the city's junior colleges. There were fine churches in the Negro areas, and beautiful boulevards. It seemed reasonable to assume that this development would continue with more and more Negroes getting ahead and becoming educated...on eight square miles of land a Black Metropolis was growing in the womb of the white.²⁷³

The Ormes' connected their destinies to Bronzeville, Chicago's Black metropolis. Despite the fact that they had moved to Chicago in midst of the Depression, Earl Ormes

²⁷² Jackson, “Amazing Adventures,” 20.

²⁷³ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*.

was soon employed. He began working as a manager at the prestigious DuSable Hotel, frequented by the Black elite, while he also worked as an assistant comptroller for the Supreme Life Insurance Company, a leading Black insurance company.²⁷⁴ With the debut of the first Torchy strip in 1937, Ormes gained a position from which she could manipulate Black female popular image and representation calling on one layer of resistance to impact another. Jackie Ormes would not begin to have a major impact on images of Black women again until 1945. However, her work with the *Courier* helped her in establishing a foothold as a cartoonist.

Ormes began work at *The Chicago Defender* and drew the character Candy for the paper. *Candy* ran from March to July of 1945. Despite its short run, its representation of African-American women was unrivaled within the comic pages, on stage, or on screen. *Candy* centered African-American women and, specifically, an African-American woman domestic, giving her voice and reconfiguring her image. By drawing *Candy* in the pin up style of the moment, Ormes added an important new expression of Black womanhood to the pantheon of forties and fifties pin ups. Ormes points to the beauty of Black women, gives Black female domestics a space within the popular imagination. *Candy* pitted historical memory against historical reality. Although Black domestics were often thought to be a silent presence in white households, this was not always the case. Evidence of the outspoken Black female domestic can be found in other places in nineteenth and twentieth century. Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of Mammy in 1939's *Gone With the Wind* contributed an enduring character to American popular

²⁷⁴ Ottley, Roi, "Owners Invest \$300,000 to Give South Side a First Class Hotel," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1956, 112.

culture. Based on the stereotypical construction of the sassy yet subservient mammy, McDaniel's portrayal transforms Mammy into a wise and resistant character. Alice Childress' Mildred, in her collection, *Like One of the Family*, exposes the hypocrisy of her white employers, and the 1970's sitcom *The Jefferson's* famously employed Florence, the maid who refused to perform functions, which were traditionally associated with her position. Florence answered the door when it suited her, and she often refused to cook or clean.²⁷⁵

Black women domestics often functioned as both servant and sage, keeping the families they worked for on track. The portrayal of African-American women domestics as silent and docile attests more to the needs of white America to perpetuate the mammy construction than to the interior feelings and exterior expression of real Black female domestics.²⁷⁶ Ormes modeled Candy after the living-breathing domestics she knew in Chicago and Pittsburgh. This will be a central form of resistance in Ormes' work – portraying what she understood to be closer to an authentic Black woman's experience. Of course, for the sake of the comic pages, Ormes takes literary license to exaggerate Candy's agency within a white household in the 1940s. However, Ormes always portrayed Candy as she reflected to herself.

²⁷⁵ Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations From a Domestic's Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

²⁷⁶ In her book *Clinging to Mammy* Micki McElya discusses this phenomenon. Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

In 1944 Black women made up 60 percent of all private household workers, up 13 percent from 1940 figures.²⁷⁷ It is well documented that in slavery and beyond, Black female domestics, because of their economic and racial positioning and proximity to their male and female employees, were often subjected to verbal, physical and sexual assaults. Historically, this relationship was one of acute inequality in every way imaginable, including earnings, the respect awarded, and intellectual and emotional contribution. The unseen employer is also representative of the historical wrongs perpetuated against Black female domestics and the unfortunate hierarchy of womanhood that held white womanhood at its top. The political and social commentary offered by Candy upends this historical relationship radically. Indeed, Candy posited herself as smarter, more gracious, more sophisticated, more clever, kinder, and more beautiful than her white female employer Mrs. Goldricks. At the height of WWII, Candy also audaciously posited herself as more patriotic than her employer. In one edition of the strip Candy, wearing her full maids uniform, turns to the viewer and says, "I'd better answer this GI mail for Mrs. Goldrocks so SHE'LL have something to brag about at her club meeting."²⁷⁸ In another, Candy, who Ormes draws looking down at a party from a higher landing, laments, "This job's good for me...the more I see of her friends, the more I appreciate my own."²⁷⁹ Appearing on the editorial page, mirroring Black opinions of the day and drawn by a Black women cartoonist, the fictional Candy commented on the state of a country at war.

²⁷⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love*.

²⁷⁸ Ormes, Jackie. "Candy," *The Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1945.

²⁷⁹ Ormes, Jackie. "Candy," April 7, 1945.

This included wartime shortages, a developing Black market for rationed products, so called patriotic activities, hypocrisy, and the complications of wartime womanhood. Due to its limited four month run, the *Candy* strip had a limited impact. It is unknown why exactly *Candy*'s run ended, as research material on Ormes is considerably limited. However, it may have been due to the end of the war. Germany surrendered to the Allied powers in May of 1945, and *Candy* ended in July of that year. *Candy*'s heavy emphasis on wartime issues may have run their course.

Ormes' most enduring characters would spring from her *Patty-Jo 'N' Ginger* strip, which ran from 1945 to 1956. The fact that Ormes was able to begin a comic strip that would run fifty-two weeks a year for over a decade in 1945, even in an African-American newspaper, was both remarkable and unprecedented. Comic historian Trina Robbins said of the period, "it goes without saying that all those white-shirted men working for Disney were white, white-shirted men. If, after the war, action-oriented comics became a male-only domain, all nationally syndicated comics were, and had been, a white-only domain." Just three African-American comic artists had national runs during the first half of the twentieth century, and all had been men.²⁸⁰ Ormes broke through the all white, all-male precincts and left a lasting legacy with *Patty Jo N' Ginger*.

In the same way that *Candy* reflected the World War II moment, *Patty-Jo N' Ginger* was very much representative of the Civil Rights era. The main character in the strip is Patty Jo, a little girl with big opinions. Ormes is able to speak to major issues of the day through this character's innocent musings. Patty Jo's ever-silent teenage sister,

²⁸⁰ Trina Robbins and Kristy Valenti, *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists, 1896-2013*. (Seattle, Washington) Fantagraphics Books, n.d.), 105.

drawn in a style akin to pin up-worthy Candy, accompanies her. In this strip Ormes again works to claim and manipulate popular public space and shares an image of African-American women that was seldom seen in print nationally. Both sisters are beautifully drawn, adorned in the latest fashions, and Patty Jo freely shares her opinions about the world around her. Through the one-pane strip, she comments on everything from the Civil Rights Movement, the unequal treatment of women, to international politics. Her reflections are always quite innocent, but with a bite. *Patty Jo N' Ginger*, like other parts of the Black newspaper, spoke to both the conditions of the Black community as well as its aspirations. Although Patty Jo and Ginger are drawn in a way that prominently displays a middle-class lifestyle, with all the accouterments that typically come with it such as home ownership, access to quality education, and evidence of disposable income. The comic also continuously points to the conditions of the Black community as a whole and the national issues that faced Black America at mid-century. In a particularly pointed strip, Patty Jo stands in a room within a home that is suffering badly from the impact of poverty. Ormes depicts blight by drawing unsanitary conditions that include leaky ceilings, broken windows, cracked and peeling walls, and falling rafters. Patty Jo announces facetiously to the three poorly attired kids and mother who occupy the wretched space, "Now you folks can REALLY stop worryin'... Uncle Sam's blowing our national wad on an H-bomb for your protection... course that don't spell HOUSING, but you gotta admit, it ain't HAY either!"²⁸¹ Here Ormes alludes to the hypocrisy of a government that poured money into the development of the hydrogen bomb and the arms

²⁸¹ Ormes, "Candy", February 11, 1950.

race with its rival superpower, Russia, while it neglected domestic issues like urban blight, particularly in African-American communities. Much of Ormes' work was focused on presenting a very middle class construction of African-American life. This can be seen in Patty Jo's clothing in the strip, which contrasts with her impoverished surroundings. However, in those strips that survive, the reader is regularly reminded that Patty Jo and Ginger are living within a larger Black community without access to wealth or necessary resources. This range of experiences, one may assume, imbues Patty Jo with her progressive opinions. She understands the complications of Black life, the impact of conservative political structures, and the fallout of gender inequality.

Patty Jo often espoused feminist ideals. In one strip, she complained to her sister, "why don't they tell it like it is...all they really want is somebody to WORK!" as they stroll past a bakery with a "Girl Wanted" sign in the window. In another strip Patty Jo complained, "What'cha mean it's no game for girls? We got feet, too, ain't we?"²⁸² as she walks into the house, disheveled, carrying a football. In addition to using her strip to critique sexism, Ormes used the strip as an outlet for the frustration over segregation and racial inequality on behalf of the Black community. She also very often included commentary on the changing political climate of the late 1940s and early 50s, as America moved into a second Red Scare following the War. Countless men and women, who were considered Left-leaning by the FBI and other federal agencies such as the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), had their careers and lives destroyed during this period. HUAC targeted organizations and individuals that it identified as associated

²⁸² Jackie Ormes, "Patty Jo N Ginger," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 14, 1953, and October 10, 1953.

with Communism, and became the primary governmental body that prosecuted those seen as espousing Communist ideals. In her July 12, 1947 strip, Ormes critiqued this committee. As Patty Jo and Ginger are out for a summer walk, they stop at a flower cart in their neighborhood. Apparently Patty Jo is familiar with the vendor. She warns him about his stock of red roses, "You're stocked pretty heavy, Leo...Ain'cha scared they'll be viewed with alarm by that new committee an' tagged un-American beauties."²⁸³

Ormes continued her assault on the developing red scare. In a July 24, 1948 strip Patty Jo casually explained to her sister, "Naw...I don't see much of Benjie anymore. His dad gave him an important job of pulling wings off of flies...Left Ones!"²⁸⁴ Benjie was a friend of Patty Jo's who sometimes appears in the strip. His father is a character used to represent more conservative views. Although he never appears, his beliefs are mouthed through Benjie's character, and he acts as an important counterweight to the progressive views of outspoken Patty Jo. Ormes likely built in this voice to talk back to a conservative element that also were avid readers of the *Pittsburgh Courier* as she and her strips drew readers to the paper.

In 1953 Ormes was featured in the *One Tenth of a Nation Newsreel* series that was put out by *All-American Newsreel* and shown nationwide. This newsreel featured prominent African-Americans and was an attempt on the part of the newsreel producers to acknowledge African-American contributions. This signaled the status she had earned in the Black community and the nation. It also speaks to her impact. By this time she had

²⁸³ Ormes, "Patty Jo," July 12, 1947.

²⁸⁴ Ormes, "Patty Jo," July 24, 1948.

created the first Black, mass-marketed doll, which was modeled after fictional Patty Jo.²⁸⁵ The year 1953 also marks the time when the Federal Bureau of Investigation took a keen interest in her activities. Apparently her political activity, along with the political views inferred from her comics, raised suspicion. The Bureau investigated anyone that it saw as being too Left politically. She was under surveillance for at least the next five years. The major concern of the Bureau was Ormes' possible connection to the Communist Party and its influential members such as Geraldine and Claude Lightfoot, as well as Ormes' alleged involvement with the Civil Rights Congress.²⁸⁶

The inevitable investigation of Ormes by the FBI stemmed from her regular participation in activist organizations. For example, despite her resistance to taking on formal memberships, she was a member of the radical South Side Community Arts Center and NAACP. This was in addition to her support of community activities sponsored by the Freedom Associates, Progressive Party, and American Peace Crusade, among others.²⁸⁷ Various agents conducted several interviews of the cartoonist over the years. If these files are to be believed, Ormes used a number of tactics to confuse, charm, or frustrate agents. According to her file she put off agents as long as she could and was finally cornered at her residence on May 18, 1953. In her first interview, an agent included questions that were "designed to give the subject an opportunity to express her

²⁸⁵ Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 13.

²⁸⁶ "Claude Lightfoot, Chairman of the State Communist Party," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1991.

²⁸⁷ US Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], Chicago Field to Director, FBI* (Chicago: Chicago Field Office Jackie Ormes Bureau File, 2/27/56).

views...” and includes questions about “Korea, Russia, the Smith Act, the Communist Party and the Negro question.” The questions appear to be a litmus test for patriotism, as all of these were controversial topics related to Communist infiltration. On each subject Ormes’ response is polite but defiant. She feels America should not have been involved in the Korean conflict and sees Russia as advancing socially and culturally, but posing no threat to the US.²⁸⁸

In contrast to many individuals interviewed who distanced themselves from the Party and its philosophies, Ormes is defiant and, it would seem, outspoken concerning her political views and her evaluation of the CP. In several interviews she discussed the merits of the Party. On one occasion she “engaged the agents in a rather lengthy discussion of the Communist movement...she had stated she felt the Communist movement ...constituted no apparent threat to the continued existence of this country’s form of government...” she added that she believed “Communists were being investigated and persecuted because of their activities in breaking down racial barriers, exacting more benefits from capital interests for the working class...” She told another interviewer that she had worked “on the fringe” with many of the organizations in Chicago that were considered subversive by the FBI, and that “if her alignment with any such organization was considered tantamount to CP membership by the FBI or CP, she

²⁸⁸ US Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], Chicago Field to Director, FBI* (Chicago: Chicago Field Office Jackie Ormes Bureau File, 5/18/53).

had no defense.”²⁸⁹ Ormes' responses point to the danger inherent in past or present association with the CP or related organizations. Many members were forced to deny their involvement. Alternatively, her responses reflect another reality. Many African-Americans who were active in social and political activism viewed the CP as simply another venue of activism, but also held reservations about their motives within the Black community. Ormes does not save her criticism for the CP. She also critiques the work of the NAACP and the Black Press, both of whom she believes should do more for African-Americans. Ormes' relationship to radical groups and ideas may never be known. The full history of the brave activism of African-American men and women on Chicago's South Side has yet to be written, as their connections to radical organizations were cloaked in secrecy or erased over time. But Ormes' outspokenness on progressive and radical issues was expressed clearly in the comic pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Despite governmental harassment, Ormes continued to use her comics as a political platform and mass media space in which to deliver powerful societal critiques. Her October 8, 1955 strip has Patty Jo walking into the living room from the kitchen explaining to her sister, “I don't want to seem touchy on the subject...but that new little white tea kettle just whistled at me!”²⁹⁰ This dialogue is a reaction to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old who had visited his great Uncle in Money, Mississippi. After whistling at a white woman in a shop, Till was taken from his home, beaten to

²⁸⁹ US Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], Chicago Field to Director, FBI* (Chicago: Chicago Field Office Jackie Ormes Bureau File, 5/18/53).

²⁹⁰ Patty Jo N Ginger Strip, 10/8/1955.

death, and weighted down in a river with a gin fan. African-Americans reacted with horror and outrage. This murder further galvanized the Civil Rights Movement. Ormes reflected this sentiment in her strip. She was able to voice anger and dissatisfaction in the strip by using innocent Patty Jo in a way that others would not have been as free to do. Through *Patty Jo N' Ginger* Ormes also contributed to representations of Black womanhood that challenged traditional stereotypical tropes. Despite age, race, or gender, Patty Jo and Ginger created a mold for Black womanhood that evoked esteem and relied on a combination of beauty, intellect, political astuteness, wisdom, and worldly sophistication.

While the *Patty Jo N' Ginger* strip continued its run until 1956, Ormes created another dynamic, woman-centered strip called *Torchy in Heartbeats*. That ran from 1950 to 1954. *Torchy* was based on the life of a single African-American woman, Torchy, who travels the world, becomes involved in a slew of adventures, and practices several professions along the way. This strip contained an alternative construction of Black womanhood that embraced all those things that made all of Ormes' strips significant in the history of the representation of African-American women in visual culture. In many ways, due to her exploits, Torchy can be seen as the first African-American superhero of sorts. She is a fearless independent woman who uses her skills to combat injustice. This image was not found in comic or mode of artistic creation during Ormes' strips run.

Throughout her career, Ormes herself became an extraordinary representation of African-American women. She claimed popular public space and created a Black female image that refuted stereotypical tropes. She acknowledged Black female beauty and sensuality, but avoided its exploitation. She also contributed to support Black political

agitation within her artistic creation on and off the page. Jackie Ormes, *Torchy's* creator, even more than her fictional character, represented the possibilities of the increasing access to Black Urban modernity, bold images, and positive representations of African-American woman. She is without a peer in her field, an African-American woman illustrator who created a Black comic strip with a Black female central character. Ormes' characters would become so popular that by 1948 writer and leading cultural figure Langston Hughes declared, when asked what he might take with him to a desert island, "I would miss...Jackie Ormes cute drawings."²⁹¹ Throughout her life Ormes positioned her self so that she could claim and manipulate popular public space and impact the representation and image of Black women in print media. This is an aspect of her resistance to the destructive images and representations of African-American women that dominated popular culture. Ormes understood that they had a real impact on the ways in which Black women were perceived in society. Within her small corner of the paper she would present Black women as sophisticated, smart, fashionable, hip and sagacious.

Elizabeth Catlett, *Black Working Class Representations, Black Diasporic Womanhood, and The Negro Women Series, 1943-1947*

Elizabeth Catlett had a much different trajectory than Ormes. However, the two shared the motivation to correct the misrepresentation of African-American woman, and shared a talent for generating cultural products that held lasting power and significance in the cultural landscape. In 1946, exhausted from teaching, hoping to refocus on her art,

²⁹¹ Langston Hughes, "Colored and Colorful," *Chicago Defender* June 26, 1948, 14.

and desperately trying to complete a series of pieces for a Fellowship project, Catlett left the US for Mexico. Her intention was to spend a few months there. She was also leaving the country during a period in which the Black Left was being subjected to the beginnings of an intense persecution and redbaiting that arose at the close of WWII. This trip would first transform her artistic production, then her life. She became enamored with Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera, who created beautiful sweeping political murals. Catlett was impressed with the direction taken by radical Mexican artists. The goal of muralists like Rivera was not to please the critics of high art, but rather to create art that was intellectually and physically accessible to the masses. This mode of cultural production and approach to artistic evaluation was familiar to Catlett, although the scale may have been delightfully overwhelming to her senses. From her social, cultural, and political location as an African-American woman she understood the Mexican artists as comrades within a struggle to use art as a tool of liberation. In Mexico Catlett would continue a struggle in which she had been engaged all of her life. During her initial stay in Mexico, Catlett would create a series of fourteen linocuts entitled, "I am the Negro Woman," that would act as an artistic narrative outlining Black women's historical contributions and struggles within the United States. The linocuts were very much informed by what Catlett witnessed in Mexico, as well as her exposure to activist Black art of the era. She brought with her the populism, radicalism, and reified Black images from her time spent at Howard, in Chicago and in Harlem. The marriage of activist Black art and communal Mexican muralism was an easy one. This atmosphere would also influence Catlett's representation and image of working-class Black women that

redefined understandings of the beautiful and centered dignity. Her representations of working class Black women in the 1940s would be peerless.

Early Catlett: Art, Education, and Activism

Elizabeth Catlett was born in Washington, DC in 1915. She says of her parents, “My mother met my father and they married they had two boys, one died, and a girl and then my father died and I was born.”²⁹² Her father, John Catlett, died a few months before her birth – never knowing that his wife, Mary Carson Catlett, was pregnant with their last child. Alice Elizabeth Catlett was born into an educated and talented family. Her father was a former professor of mathematics at Tuskegee and taught mathematics in the District of Columbia School system after moving to Washington, DC. He was also a capable musician and hobbyist wood carver. Her mother was trained at Scotia Seminary in North Carolina, located near her family’s hometown.²⁹³

Her husband’s death left Mary Catlett the single mother of two. In order to support herself, she first worked as a cleaning woman and coat clerk, and later became a truant officer in the District of Columbia Public Schools.²⁹⁴ Despite hardship, Mary Catlett encouraged her daughter's desires to be an artist. “My mother would buy me paints and crayons,” Elizabeth Catlett recalled.²⁹⁵ Mary Catlett was her daughter’s first

²⁹² Catlett, author interview.

²⁹³ Catlett, author interview.

²⁹⁴ Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Elizabeth Catlett: The Power of Human Feeling and of Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (1983):48-56.

²⁹⁵ Catlett, author interview.

example of strong and determined Black womanhood. It was exceptional that she allowed Elizabeth Catlett to pursue her internal impulses toward the arts. The pursuit of fine art as a career would have been highly unusual for an African-American woman in the early 20th century. Added to this was the pressure of the Black middle-class ethos that pervaded Black DC and the Catlett family.²⁹⁶

Along with developing her artistic ability, Elizabeth Catlett, growing up in a segregated city, cultivated a keen sense of justice and radicalism. By the time she attended high school she was already a serious activist, “When I was in high school, I was always very radical...I remember...standing in front of the Supreme Court building in Washington with a noose around my neck protesting lynching...all I remember is that the police took us away.”²⁹⁷ Upon graduation Catlett encountered and continued to confront social injustice in her education in the arts. She applied to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. After taking the entrance exam, she arrived in Pittsburgh for a required two-week summer preparatory course. During the course her work was admired and she excelled. Unfortunately she bumped up against racial discrimination and bigotry within this new context. Near the end of the course, she overheard two teachers discussing her work, “It’s too bad she’s a Negro, isn’t it?” Such racial attitudes only deepened Catlett’s resolve, “That was my first experience with that kind of thing. I began

²⁹⁶ Catlett, author interview.

²⁹⁷ Glory Van Scott and Elizabeth Catlett, "Interview of Elizabeth Catlett by Glory Van Scott, December 8, 1981," *Artist and Influence* 10 (1991):5.

to fight it wherever I found it.”²⁹⁸ A future at the Carnegie Institute was not to be for Catlett. Frustrated with the harsh racialized treatment and barred from attendance she explored other options.

Catlett ultimately studied painting at Howard University. Founded in 1921, Howard University at the time contained the only Art department in the country seated in a historically Black university. Catlett studied with well-known Black artists including faculty members James Wells, Louis Mailou Jones, and James Porter. She recalled, “At Howard there was James Porter and Louis Jones. I started out with Louis Jones. She wanted to make me a commercial artist, so I switched to Wells.” Her original intention was to become a commercial artist, but she was strongly influenced by Porter and Wells to become a fine artist. Jones likely was encouraging Catlett to become a commercial artist due to the racist and sexist climate within the fine art world. As an African-American woman in the fine arts, Catlett’s ultimate success is made that much more astounding. Her change of major from commercial art to painting was also spurred by her discovery of the Mexican muralists early in her Howard studies and Porter’s masterful works. While a student Wells and Porter also recommended her to the Works Progress Administrations Federal Arts Project. She worked briefly for the project doing murals. Her attraction to the art of the Mexican muralists and introduction to the work of radical artists who were a part of the WPA was significant. This would mark the beginning of

²⁹⁸ Elton Fax, *Seventeen Black Artists* (New York: Dodd, 1971), 17.

her interest in forms of activist art and artists whom would have such a profound impact on her later in life.²⁹⁹

Upon graduating in 1935, Catlett traveled south to secure a position, “My mom told me they needed an art teacher in Durham.” She pursued the job and taught for two years in Durham Public Schools. Continuing her activism, she, along with other Black teachers, and lawyer Thurgood Marshall, rallied for equal pay, albeit unsuccessfully.³⁰⁰ Catlett had little time to practice art and did not enjoy teaching. She returned to college to pursue a graduate degree, Catlett enrolled at the University of Iowa to study with painter Grant Wood. Her newly developing interest in sculpture stemmed from exposure to Wood, as well as more practical factors: “...I went there because of him and it was only \$7 a semester.” Her experiences at Iowa would lead to a life-changing shift in artistic focus from painting to sculpture. Iowa’s segregated campus provided her with life-long friends. Many of the small number of African-American students formed close bonds. Catlett struck up enduring friendships with Charles Stallings, a future dean of faculty at Bowie State College, and Margaret Walker, a soon-to-be-well-known writer.³⁰¹

Catlett would become the first student to graduate with a Masters in Fine Arts from the University, a feat characterized by struggle against racial discrimination. Initially the Chair of the Art Department encouraged her to apply for a Master of Arts degree, as there was some resistance to bestowing the first Fine Art degree on an African-

²⁹⁹ Fax, *Seventeen*, 17.

³⁰⁰ Lafer, Steven, "DC Sculptress Unveils Work," *Daily World*, June 29, 1976, 15.

³⁰¹ Lewis, *Harlem Was in Vogue*, 12; Catlett, author interview.

American woman. Fine art and fine art education was generally dominated by white men. Further, the art of sculpture was an almost sacred white male space within fine art. Catlett's 1940 thesis exhibition centered on a limestone sculpture entitled *Negro Mother and Child*.

Within Catlett's early artistic production we can see her in conversation with the concepts of gender, motherhood, and issues of injustice.³⁰² *Negro Mother and Child* is significant in the way its chosen theme centers on Black women, claims a sacred space for Black women within fine art, and creates an image of Black women that forces the viewer to acknowledge their humanity. Rather than offering a thin representation of Black womanhood, it presents a multidimensional portrayal that evokes emotion and demands a quiet respect. Catlett explained the goal of this piece in her thesis as one of creating "a composition of two figures, one smaller than the other, so interlaced as to be expressive of maternity, and so compact as to be suitable to stone, seemed quite a desirable problem. The implications of motherhood, especially Negro motherhood, are quite important to me, as I am a Negro as well as a woman."³⁰³ Looking upon the sculpture offers not only a chance to see astounding beauty, but also to imagine how the pain of slavery and racial injustice might separate the interlocked mother and child, or work to hinder their relationship. This power of this theme and Catlett's piece can be seen in her winning of the First Award in Sculpture at the 1940 American Negro Exposition. It

³⁰² Catlett, author interview.

³⁰³ Melanie Herzog, "Elizabeth Catlett in Mexico: Identity and Cross-Cultural Intersections in the Production of Artistic Meaning," *International Review of African American Art* 11 (1994): 21.

was clearly moving to African-Americans en masse. This piece also marks the beginning of the centering of African-American women within her work.³⁰⁴

Following graduation, and after a short stint teaching at Prairie View College in Texas, Catlett brought her considerable artistic skill and sense of justice to Dillard University in New Orleans. She joined the faculty of the Art Department serving as its Chair. She taught drawing, painting, and printmaking. The latter included linoleum cuts and silkscreen – both arts of the people. Catlett waged pitched battles against segregation while in New Orleans. For example, she challenged the lack of access to cultural spaces that arose because of segregation for African-Americans in the city. Blacks were disallowed from entering entire parts of the city, and it was no accident that institutions of culture, such as museums, were normally in the white-only areas. When a large Picasso exhibit came to the Delgado Museum that was surrounded by a segregated park, Catlett cleverly circumvented the system of segregation. She made arrangements for her students to visit on a day that was closed to the public, and bused them directly to the steps of the museum. All 160 of them entered without stepping foot on the segregated park grounds in which the museum was located. Because of segregation, none of these students had been to an art museum prior.³⁰⁵ Catlett remarked, “Well you’re not supposed to go in the park and the museum is in the park so we rented a bus to the museum. They didn’t say the museum was prejudiced, I mean separated...we saw the whole museum...”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Gouma-Peterson, "Power," 49.

³⁰⁵ Catlett, author interview; Lewis, *Vogue*, 16.

³⁰⁶ Catlett, author interview.

This incident brought to the fore three key themes of Catlett's life and work. First, viewing the exhibit helped the working- and middle-class students gain an understanding of their positioning within a national and international context. Second, the exhibit experience represented the insertion of Blackness, American or diasporic, into national and international spaces. Third, the museum visit is representative of the impact of injustice that Catlett would battle with in her art and life. All these themes can be interrogated within Catlett's life and experiences in the US and Mexico.

Because of her outspoken battles with segregation, Catlett never completely fit in with the conformist Dillard middle class staff. Artist Samella Lewis, who was at that time Catlett's student, recalled that she was the first professor to introduce nude models in her drawing class. This act was considered quite an activist one given that her predecessor, painter Vernon Winslow, had been fired for placing the painting of a female nude in plain view. She also protested police brutality and segregation in public transportation. Catlett additionally stood apart from her colleagues in her choice of living space and neighborhood: "... people didn't want to come to my house...I lived in the French Quarter. I had a little house and I went down the alley to the back door and went in. I never used the front door or the front room because there was an area of prostitutes. People would ring my bell. I didn't answer it." Across the street a prostitute ran her business from the stoop and waited for customers to come by. Catlett was undisturbed, "...she didn't bother me." She recalled all kinds of activity that would not have met the approval of Dillard's middle-class staff. In addition to prostitution, there was a couple that lived across her back courtyard that included a husband who regularly beat his wife, "She would run to the patio screaming and we would all run to the window to see what

was going on. I can remember it clearly.” The ease with which Catlett blended into this neighborhood and its circumstances speak to her direct connection to the working class and their struggles. It also speaks to her connection to the day-to-day struggles that were often faced by African-American women.

Catlett left her position in 1942 hoping to focus on her art. She had recently married painter Charles White, whom she met at in Chicago while studying ceramics in the summer of 1941. Catlett became associated with the South Side Community Art Center and artist Margaret Burroughs, one of its founders. Burroughs was friends with White and introduced her to Catlett. All types of artists were attracted to the center, including cartoonist Jackie Ormes. It was a locus of artistic creation as well as progressive agitation; most importantly it was a gathering place for a disenfranchised community. Burroughs and Catlett must have connected instantly as they had a similar focus on Black women and Black humanity within their work. Burroughs explained, “Elizabeth came to Chicago to go to the Art Institute to take some summer courses and was looking for a place to stay. Somebody told her that I had a studio and some extra space. She called me and came to stay in my coach house”.³⁰⁷

White was a talented and recognized painter who was known for social realist paintings and murals. Like the themes found in Catlett’s work throughout her career, his work emphasized African-American contribution and humanity, and also often showcased the working class. He had created murals for Works Progress Administration projects. His political and social temperament also matched that of Catlett’s. He had been

³⁰⁷ Van Scott, Glory, "Interview of Margaret Burroughs by Glory Van Scott, June 6, 1975," *Artist and Influence* 24 (2005): 43.

raised on Chicago's South Side, an experience that must have been very similar to Catlett's in segregated Washington, DC. He participated in Black Left circles there that included people like Katherine Dunham, Richard Wright, and Catlett's classmate, Margaret Walker. The connection seemed as if it were immediate. Six months after they met, Catlett and White were married.³⁰⁸

New York, The Black Left, and Transformation

The couple moved briefly to Chicago, to Virginia, then to New York. They became associated with the Black Left in New York when they arrived in 1942. "From New Orleans, I went to New York—Mecca. Soon after I arrived, I met many many Black artists. I had occasions to meet and talk with Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Gwendolyn Bennett, and numerous other individuals who were involved in the creative expressions of Harlem." She added, "There were many Black visual artists working there at that time: Charles Alston, Jacob and Gwen Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Ernie Crichlow, and so many others who were beginning to make important contributions to art and education."³⁰⁹ Catlett and White sublet an apartment that was vacated by a friend at 409 Edgecomb Avenue, a now historic building in Harlem. 409 Edgecomb was the home at one time or another to Joe Louis, A. Philip Randolph and many more of Harlem's Black

³⁰⁸ Fax, *Seventeen*, 17.

³⁰⁹ Lewis, *Vogue*, 17.

elite. Living and working in Harlem would further radicalize Catlett and expand her understanding of internationalism and people's struggles.³¹⁰

One important factor in the development of Harlem as a unique Black international space was the overwhelming number of immigrants and migrants relocating to Harlem. Between 1910 and 1930 New York's Black population grew from approximately 30,000 to more than 100,000. A majority resided in Harlem.³¹¹ Many Black residents were able to recreate their home communities within Harlem's boundaries. This would be key in Catlett's development as an activist and artist.

The couple also spent some time downtown. Baritone Kenneth Spencer and his wife Dorothy became good friends. Spencer was a regular at Café Society. Catlett laughed at the memory, "they had two [cafes]. When they ran out of liquor at one they would run over to the other one to get some."³¹² During her visits, she became acquainted with many activist musicians, actors, and artists, including Hazel Scott and Josh White.³¹³ It would be hard to believe that she did not encounter actor and Black freedom movement icon Paul Robeson as well.

But the White's acquaintance with these progressive artistic and political circles would soon be cut short. In 1943 the couple traveled south to Hampton, Va. White had been commissioned by the Julius Rosenwald fund to paint a mural at Hampton Institute

³¹⁰ Catlett, author interview.

³¹¹ Gill, *Harlem*.

³¹² Catlett, author interview.

³¹³ Fax, *Seventeen*, 22.

that would bring to life African-American history. Once the mural was complete they returned to New York hoping to continue their work there. However, White was drafted into the army where he contracted tuberculosis. He spent several years upon his release from the military recovering and shuffled between upstate New York and Washington, DC (at the home of Catlett's mother). Catlett found an apartment in New York's Greenwich Village and shared an apartment with Margaret Walker. Catlett describes her work at the George Washington Carver School in Harlem at this time as an important turning point within her life.³¹⁴

While in Harlem Catlett will begin working at the George Washington Carver School. Several leaders in the Harlem community, including Adam Clayton Powell and Max Yergen, founded the institution in 1944. Canada Lee and Melva Price sat on the school's board. Like those that Catlett found in Chicago and other places in Harlem, the school was a progressive hub. Its mission was emblazoned on the front of each semester's George Washington Carver School catalogue: "A People's institute, A school to develop thinking citizens who can take their rightful place in the modern world, An aid to understanding the People's War and the role of the Negro in it, a guide to a postwar world of peace, freedom and equality for everyone, and, finally, an educational and social center belonging to the people of Harlem".³¹⁵ The intersection of artistic production, leftist ideology, and the struggle for racial justice and Black internationalism can truly be

³¹⁴ Herzog, "Catlett in Mexico," 34-36, Catlett, author interview; Vanessa Cross, "Charles White: The Art of a Chicago Son Beautifies Experiences of Common Black Folk," *Afrique*, June (1996), 196.

³¹⁵ "George Washington Carver School Catalogue, Fall 1945," in Schomburg Clippings Collection, ed. by Amherst College Robert Frost Library. Amherst, MA.

seen in the creation of the school and its curriculum. Overlapping and interlocking political ideologies, social groups and many immigrant groups of color made the school a unique and inimitable learning environment.

The progressive environment created by the school also made the school a political target. In spite of, or perhaps because of, its radical reputation, the school attracted hundreds of students.³¹⁶ The school's offerings had a Marxist framework and included practical as well as theoretical approaches. Catlett offered a course on dressmaking and sculpture intermittingly. Other classes included "Modern Dance," taught by Pearl Primus, and "the Negro in Latin America," taught by Jesus Colon.³¹⁷ Carver's instructors represented the best of Black leadership in the arts, politics, literature, and the sciences. They often encompassed members of the Black diaspora. The notion of Black diaspora implies a unity of historical experience and cultural expression involving a crossing of rigid national boundaries, and focusing loosely on the creation of a borderless Black community. The Carver school would provide Catlett with a firm foundation in this concept and a lived experience among those in the working class. These sources of enlightenment would serve her in her years in Mexico. An astute Catlett learned about diverse Black cultures as well as the struggles of the poor and disenfranchised.

Despite Catlett's positioning as a progressive activist artist who had lived in several cities and had been exposed to all kinds of people, she viewed the world through

³¹⁶ Fax, *Seventeen*, 23.

³¹⁷ Carver School Catalogue, 13.

a middle-class lens and adhered to many of the assumptions that accompanied it. She explained, "...it was a turning point, artistically, and in my life." An example of this shift in her understanding can be seen in her dress making class, "...My experience was that all the Black women in Harlem were always buying dark clothes because they could wear them longer than light clothes. They didn't show the dirt...they always brought dark colors like navy blue and brown and black. I started out with red and pink. We had a fashion show." Her time in Harlem was spent both as a teacher and a student. The encounters with her working-class students also changed her art. She became convinced that art should be accessible to the masses of people, and should portray their humanity. The George Washington Carver School was a catalyst in this, "the experience made me conscious about who I should do art about, which is Black people, because all the art in New Orleans, Chicago, even Harlem was about white people." Catlett also reconsidered her artistic medium; "I wanted to work with poor people so I started doing prints" At the school she also discovered that the interests and needs of the working class included the consumption of culture. During one class on a particularly hot day, 350 students squeezed in to hear a lecture and classical music provided by a Julliard Music School professor. When there was time for a break between the movements of the classical piece, the enthusiastic students refused a break that would provide access to some cool air and cold punch. This was a revelation for Catlett. Her worldview and artistic approach was forever changed.³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Catlett, author interview.

Catlett also functioned as the chief fundraiser for the school and performed some secretarial duties, such as mimeographing. Her days were long. She commuted downtown after her work was completed. This often amounted to ten-hour days. “I had to be there by 9 in the morning, which was terrible. I would get out about 9 at night, usually hungry and I lived in the Village, which is a long way from Harlem. I would stop off in the Italian Restaurant and I would eat a pizza.” The regular pizza stops also spoke to her economic condition, as her earnings were low. Francisco Mora Catlett, her son, recalled speaking with a former student of his mother’s at the Carver School, “she said that [Catlett] ran around and did fundraising and still taught class. She doesn’t know how [she] did it all.”³¹⁹

Aside from her work with the Carver School, Catlett was deeply immersed in political and social activism. She was the head of the Russian War Relief Fund in Harlem, served on the Arts Committee of the radical National Negro Congress, and also taught ceramics at the Marxist-based Jefferson School.³²⁰ Catlett’s artistic production suffered due to her teaching and activist schedule. Her contributions as an artist were often overlooked during this period because she was now viewed as an artist in relation to her husband. She was considered a single part of a greater whole that was completed by White. She remembered this time as one in which her gender impacted her negatively. She was now the wife of a great artist instead of being one herself. This was not far from

³¹⁹ Catlett, author interview.

³²⁰ Bill Chase, "Judge Delany Is Married," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, September 26, 1942; Catlett, author interview.

White's preference.³²¹ A 1942 article in the *New York Amsterdam News* announces, "Meet Mr., Mrs. Charles White" The article is an example of how the societal norms that focused on male success worked to conflate the two artists. Charles White was the name recalled in many circles in spite of Catlett's talent. This and many other issues would create a rift in the White-Catlett marriage.³²²

In 1945 Catlett wrote a successful proposal for a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship where she proposed a series of prints, sculptures, and paintings that would express the beauty, struggles, and contributions of "the Negro woman." She was, in part inspired by her work at the Carver school: "Suddenly I wanted to draw these people, these women, who were to me so strong and so wonderful, and from whom I was learning a lot."³²³ Of course, this was only an additional layer of encouragement to focus on Black women as Catlett's work sometimes focused on these women even as a student.

Her decision to continue teaching at the Carver School was ill conceived, however. She continued to be uncreative in the midst of a demanding schedule. When her Rosenwald Fellowship was renewed in 1947, Catlett decided to work on her art in Mexico as a result of her attraction to the mural painters and the political and social milieu there. She was also in the midst of a failing marriage and in need of a new beginning. Mexico may seem like an unusual locale for this Black women artist to choose

³²¹ Catlett, author interview.

³²² Chase, Bill, "Meet Mr., Mrs. Charles White," *New York Amsterdam Star- News*, September 5, 1942.

³²³ Melanie Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 47.

to produce in the mid 1940s; however, a brief exploration of the history of the Black diaspora dispels any mystery. Close to 95% of those enslaved on the African continent during the transatlantic slave trade would be transported to western countries other than the United States. As a result, a member of the Black diaspora would more likely be a citizen of a South American or Caribbean country. The 1920s, 30s and 40s found a wide array of scholars attempting to reconstitute the contours of the Black diaspora. In fact, in the 1940s several prominent anthropologists began a short-lived international association in Mexico City to coordinate research on the diaspora, and they published two issues of a journal entitled *Afroamerica*.³²⁴ These scholars, who included Melville Herskovits, came to the conclusion that West African cultural retention abounded throughout North, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. Catlett carried an element of diaspora with her as well. As biographer Melanie Anne Herzog explained, “[She] has...carried with her a ‘core’ of African-Americaness.”³²⁵

In their essay, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin Kelley point out that “diaspora is both a process and a condition.” They explain that, “as a process it is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle. Yet, as a condition, it is

³²⁴ Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D G Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (May 01, 2000), 16.

³²⁵ Herzog, “Artist in Mexico,” 5.

directly tied to the process by which it is being made and remade.”³²⁶ By traveling to Mexico, and eventually living there for fifty years, her presence with all of its “African-Americaness” remade Black diaspora and recreated Black womanhood.

I Am the Negro Woman

In 1946, under the collective influences of her exposure to the Black working class, her high level of artistic training, the political ideologies of the Black left, and the social movements that anchored the Mexican popular muralists, Catlett created *The Negro Woman* series.³²⁷ The series consists of fifteen linocuts. Lithography is considered an accessible artistic production for the masses. To create a linocut, images are cut into linoleum (an art material available to the masses), covered with ink, and pressed to create a print. The form that this series takes and the technology it employs are a direct outgrowth of Catlett’s encounters with the Mexican school. They focused on art for the people, by the people and accessible to the people. In addition, by creating these prints on “the Negro woman” while in Mexico, she is inserting Blackness into an international context. She does so by claiming a position for herself and her sisters within an international community, and challenging racial injustice in America as well as internationally. She is simultaneously acknowledging their unique experience with oppression, celebrating their history of contribution in the US, and recognizing their penchant for survival.

³²⁶ Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” 20.

³²⁷ It has also been referred to as The Black Woman Series.

The 15 linocuts create a narrative detailing the collective experiences of African-American women in the US. They are at once intense and stark. Catlett's approach to the lines and shape were sometime sparse. They were purposefully lacking in embellishment and do not seem to be to meant to evoke comfort in the viewer. The images are accompanied by text that enhances their meaning and create a more direct message and there is little room for artistic interpretation in relation to her message. The first image, *I am the Negro Woman*, is that of a closely cropped face. The woman in the image looks away from the viewer and seems to be partly in shadow. The harsh style of the linocut etching provides a graphic quality that speaks to struggle, dignity, and survival. This introductory image sets the tone for the narrative and each image will add to the story of African-American women's historical and contemporary experience in America. The second image entitled, *I have always worked hard in America*, points to the endless toil of African-American women. In this linocut Catlett repeats the figure of a woman who is performing domestic tasks. The circle formed by the images also speaks to the repetition and drudgery of the work. Her third and fourth images continue the focus on work and the working-class Black women. *In the fields* depicts a woman holding a hoe wearing a large straw hat with her small wooden frame house in the distance beyond the rows of vegetables to be harvested. *In other folks homes*, a gorgeous waist-up portrait of a domestic holding a broom places emphasis on the travail and isolation of life as a Black domestic.

There seems to be a shift in the next portion of the narrative. In addition to her honoring of the Black working-class women, Catlett turns to cultural and historical icons by looking at the contribution of African-American women to music and culture in the

fifth image *I Have Given the World My Song*, later retitled *Blues*. This image not only exposes the significance of Black women in American music, particularly the blues, but also to the way that these women had often served America as emotional conduits. It presents an African-American woman sitting on a stool looking reflectively at the floor. The faint background illustration of a Ku Klux Klan figure beating a young Black man and the implication of death represented by a tombstone points to the ill treatment, racial violence, and segregation that would lead the women to have the blues. Linocuts seven, eight, and nine celebrate historical figures Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Here Catlett adds movement history to her narrative. The sixth piece *Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of Women as well as Negroes* shows an etching of Truth standing powerfully at a lectern with a Bible. She holds up one hand with her index finger raised in the air while the other hand rests on the Bible. Truth's countenance is serious and her gaze is directly on the viewer, as if to demand respect for her contribution.

The seventh piece *Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom* is one of the most reproduced prints in the series. In a fierce and determined portrait, the potent outstretched arm of Tubman points the way to freedom to a line of enslaved beside her. Finally, *In Phyllis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery* her eighth linocut Catlett continues her trifecta of contributions regarding the themes of movement, intellectual achievement, and resistance. Wheatley sits in the foreground in profile writing at a desk, as shackled women slaves are pictured beside her in the background. In the *Negro Women Series* Catlett reveals the future and the past. Her linocuts reflect the experiences of her ancestors and her theoretical sisters in the struggles against injustice. She traces her roots and Black identity to Africa and recognizes the imprint of slavery.

She explains, “ I am Black because my great, great grandmother was kidnapped on the beach at Madagascar and was brought to the United States as a slave. Both of my mother’s parents and my father’s mother were slaves.”³²⁸

The ninth linocut *My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized*, continues Catlett’s account of Black women’s lives and history. A central female figure stands in the middle of a circle with her fist extended. The exaggerated hand speaks to her authority as four men huddle around her. Catlett's tenth image, *I have studied in increasing numbers*, presents a classroom with a teacher and four seated students. Here Catlett draws upon both her experience as a teacher as well as what she was seeing around her in the Black communities in which she lived. She acknowledges the resolve of Black female students during an era of intense racism, sexism, and the obstacles created by class. Her next three images numbers eleven, twelve, and thirteen expose the hypocrisy of segregation and Jim Crow, in both the North and the South. They are particularly striking images. *My reward has been bars between me and the rest of the land* shows a woman standing behind a barbed wire fence. Its close cropping adds to the intensity of the harsh image. *I have special reservations* is a rough-cut etching of a solemn-faced Black woman seated just behind the “colored only” sign on a segregated bus. Black women who share her fate and fill the back of the bus flank her. The thirteenth linocut is entitled simply, *Special houses*, and presents two women standing in the foreground as project housing looms behind them. One stares directly at the viewer as the other looks away lifelessly.

³²⁸ Catlett, author interview.

The fourteenth linocut, *And a special fear for my loved ones*, is a haunting image of a lynched Black man. It is easy to imagine him as someone's son or younger brother. He lies at the feet of his attackers with a noose around his neck. Catlett points to the fears internalized by Black mothers. She again references her ongoing theme of Black motherhood, both in the image and accompanying text. Her final and fifteenth image, *My right is a future of equality with other Americans* is that of a closely cropped head of a woman looking upwards. This image can be interpreted dually as looking to the heavens filled with hope, or simply holding one's head high. In each case there is hope in the future. The piece is consistent with and culminates Catlett's progression within the series.

Each part of Catlett's linocut narrative is essential to understanding African-American women's historical positioning and contribution. However, many parts of her narrative were particularly salient in the mid-1940s. Looking at each linocut singularly provided glimpses into Black women's lives; however, the collective was essential in seeing the totality of their contributions and struggles. In the collection the viewer could see the connections and interlocking oppressions that intersected for them.

African-American women, who had increasingly been given work in factories during World War II, were now being forced back into domestic work; and some returned to farming. *I have given the world my songs* contributes another message to her narrative. The female guitar-player calls up images of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, both a gospel and secular singer, who was an inspiration for countless Rhythm and Blues as well as Rock and Roll musicians. Her 1944 hit, *Down by the Riverside*, and colorful musical

persona were undoubtedly known to Catlett.³²⁹ The ninth cut, *My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized*, spotlights the endless organizing being done by African-American women before, during, and after WWII. Catlett had been exposed to many Black women organizers and activists during her life and work up to that point. She also provided prophetic glimpses of the future. *I have special reservations* held a striking similarity to the well-worn image of Rosa Parks at the close of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. Both images attest to the deplorable treatment and quiet dignity of Black women on the segregated southern buses. Lastly, *Special Houses* presaged the consequences of the building of projects and eventual vertical ghettos in which many working-class African-American families would become trapped. The initial goal was to provide livable housing for lower-income residents. However, neglect and segregation doomed these housing experiments to failure. Catlett may have been aware of the rash of building following the end of the War. For example, the Frances Cabrini Row-houses and the William Green Homes (later known as Cabrini-Green) were built in 1942. At its peak they would be home to 15,000 low-income families. Catlett must have foreseen the havoc that would be wreaked on families living in this substandard housing within cramped quarters living in both New York and Chicago.³³⁰ The power in the series is rooted in the ability of Catlett to convey multiple meanings and messages within a single image.

³²⁹ For more on Rosetta Tharpe see Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

³³⁰ Susan Saulny, "At Housing Project, Both Fear and Renewal," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2007.

Conclusion

Catlett's work during the 1940's reflected Black American concerns and struggles, and it came to be embraced internationally. Her focus on the working class, women's struggles, and accessible cultural production made her art particularly salient for her time. Catlett's pieces must be seen as technological and historical artifacts of the decades in which she created.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION “YOU’RE GETTING THE SINGER NOT THE WOMAN,” LENA HORNE, THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF DEFINITION, AND AN ALTERED LANDSCAPE OF BLACK FEMALE REPRESENTATION

World War II and Gains for Black Women

The 1940’s were ripe for Lena Horne’s popularity. “The whole thing that made me a star was the war,” she explained in retrospect, “Of course the black guys couldn’t put Betty Grable’s picture in their footlockers. But they could put mine.”³³¹ She was only one of many African-American women transforming the American media, political, and social landscape. At a time when a sudden emphasis on the rhetoric of equality and democracy filled the national consciousness, Black women from all walks of life inserted themselves into the country's consciousness by constructing and propagating local, national, and international images and representations that spoke to an affirming articulation of African-American womanhood. This affirmation of African-American womanhood and Black femininity was a tenuous and extremely temporary phenomenon. But playing a major role in this struggle were African-American women artists who garnered national exposure during World War II and post-war eras.³³² America looks

³³¹ Aljean Harmentz, "Lena Horne, Singer and Actress, Dies at 92," *New York Times*, May 10, 2010.

³³² Maureen Honey’s *Bitter Fruit* contains an extensive discussion of the representations and images of Black women being propagated nationally. Her introduction includes a look at the importance of Black women artists and entertainers in this image production. She speaks directly about the image production of Dunham, Scott, and Horne as well (p. 28-29). Jones’ *Labor of Love* includes a similar discussion of African American women,

back at WWII as a watershed moment in its history. World War II is, in many ways, a revered entity that breaks the stranglehold of the Great Depression and propels the country into decades of sustained economic growth and security, overall prosperity, as well as military superiority. For African-Americans World War II will be equally important in the continuously constructed counter narrative of African-American history for reasons that are connected but much different. The onset of the war prompted the second wave of the Great Migration in Black communities, which had begun in WWI. The migration would help Blacks make marked economic gains. It must be noted that the diversity of groups existing within the varying strata of the African-American community, such as women and the working class, engaged this historic moment in innovative ways that will make critical gains for their communities. Wartime mobilization led to significant changes in all of African-American life including the beginning of the eventual shift from rural centered to urban centered Black life, increased access to economic advancement and stability, a nascent occupational shift away from agricultural work and domestic service, small gains in education, as well as a passionate and renewed focus on civil rights protest that would foreshadow the Modern Civil Rights Movement. Black Americans, including women, co-opted the WWII era rhetoric of democracy, humanitarianism and egalitarianism for their own goals of equality. African-American women made unique contributions to this movement for citizenship and equality. As a group African-American women took advantage of opportunities arising during and after World War II.

including artists, and their increased visibility in non-traditional roles and as image producers (p. 232-274).

Black women organized women's political councils and other groups to press for integration of public facilities –hospitals, swimming pools, theaters, and restaurants –and for the right to pursue collegiate and professional studies. Women such as Rosa Parks and Ella Baker, whose names would become virtually synonymous with the modern civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's, helped lay its foundation in the World War II era.³³³ The representational tropes of the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire continually undermined the African-American woman's fight for equality throughout the decade and in the midst of World War II. Yet others created lasting works in the arts, literature, and popular culture and expanded the representation of Black women.

Helena Horne

Helena Horne was born in 1917 into what was considered, a “first family” of Brooklyn's Black bourgeoisie. The Horne's were an exceptionally light-skinned family who had been deeply involved in uplift groups and organizations such as the colored women's club that existed during Reconstruction and after the turn of the twentieth century. Horne's birth seemed to have the promise of an unfettered middle class life. Unfortunately, several obstacles lay between this imagined existence and the life that

³³³ There are several books that provide an incredible overview of the work of African American in the Civil Rights Movement as well as their activism that stretched back in the 1940's. For more discussion on this see McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street : Black Women, Rape, and Resistance - a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010; Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement : A Radical Democratic Vision*. Gender & American Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Crawford, Vicki L., Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*. Black Women in United States History. Brooklyn, N.Y.:Carlson Pub., 1990.

Horne would actually live. Although Horne was born to a “first family” their placement within this strata of African-American society was more related to social status than finances. What most complicated Horne’s life were her parents’ tumultuous lives. They divorced when their only child was three years of age and left her intermittently with her paternal grandparents.³³⁴ In addition, abandoning any status he might be assigned by way of his family connections, Horne’s father made a living as a numbers runner, card shark, and hustler while his ex-wife pursued a career in acting. This created a very unstable childhood for Horne, one in which she was continually shuttled between the homes of her mother and her paternal grandparents. Horne spent her childhood living in several additional households as her mother left her with friends, foster families, and babysitters to follow stage shows and productions around the country. In 1933, at sixteen, Horne went to work at the Cotton Club as a dancer, principally to help support her mother and new stepfather in the midst of the Great Depression. After returning from the South they lived in the Bronx with a short stint in Brooklyn.³³⁵

Horne’s light skin and keen features helped to advance her career. She described herself as a sheltered young woman who knew little about the world with little talent for dancing or singing. Although she was not under her grandmother’s roof she also faced considerable backlash from Black bourgeois types of Brooklyn who believed that “respectable girls were not supposed to go to work in Harlem nightclubs known to be

³³⁴ "Lena Horne Is Still on the Way Up." *PM*, December 15 1942, 23.

³³⁵ Gail Lumet Buckley, . *The Hornes : An American Family*. New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1986, 119.

owned by white hoodlum, or any other hoodlums for that matter.”³³⁶ Horne’s star rose steadily in spite of misgivings about her talent. Through her exposure at the Cotton Club she was landed gigs as the featured singer for Nobel Sissle and, later, Charlie Barnett’s orchestras.

In 1937 Horne was featured in a small Black film, *The Duke is Tops*.³³⁷ During that same year she met and married Louis Jones, a young printer, from Pittsburgh. This union quickly dissolved and ended by 1939. Horne gave birth to a son and a daughter during the marriage. Motherhood and divorce did not slow her career. She had worked continuously and intensely by the time she began singing at Café Society in 1941.³³⁸ This venue became a springboard to appearances at exclusive nightclubs such as the Savoy-Plaza Café Lounge. Horne broke the color barrier at the elite venue, and one newspaper reported, “attracted capacity houses every single night...the management has had to turn away up to 500 guests.”³³⁹ Undoubtedly because of the white elite customer base there were audience members who had never seen a Black women perform at all, particularly in the way that Horne did. This may have accounted for, at least, some of the sell out crowds. Horne’s groundbreaking appearances would encompass more than nightclub performances.

³³⁶ Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 48, 61.

³³⁷ “Lena Horne, How a Girl from Brooklyn Became This Season’s Biggest Nightclub Hit...And How She’s Quietly Using Her Unrehearsed Success to Win Respect for Her People,” *PM*, January 10, 1943.

³³⁸ This groundbreaking café is discussed at length in the Hazel Scott Chapter.

³³⁹ “Lena Horne Is Still on the Way Up,” *PM*, December 15, 1942.

She would soon be seen on movie screens across America. 1943 was a major year for Blacks in film mostly due to the release of two all Black-cast movies, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Stormy Weather*. Horne had a starring role in each. *Gone With the Wind* was also released that year and included now iconic performances by Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen. The latter actresses transformed the roles given them. Unfortunately, their roles were both written as dutiful mammy types, one wise and one dimwitted. Horne's roles allowed her a bit more room for reinterpretation. *Cabin in the Sky* found her assigned a role that was another portrayal of a Jezebel character who stole another woman's husband. Still, African-Americans were able to sense a level of dignity within this production that was absent from other productions. This was mostly due to the rare phenomenon of an all-Black cast of top talent as well as their character treatment. *Stormy Weather*, conversely, had more in common with the white musicals of the day as it focused on a girl-meets-boy story that occurs behind the scenes of a touring musical company. Horne portrays an independent woman in the film and chooses her career over marriage. There were dozens of musical performances that put Black talent on display. This did not, however, stray far from the formulaic films whose aim was to distract the masses from the war raging overseas, which may have been its mass appeal. It did not saddle African-Americans with a picture in which they were a problem to be solved or served as benevolent sidekicks to white characters.

Following release of these films Horne's national exposure expanded beyond the Black press. In 1943 she was featured in dedicated pictorial layouts in *Life*, *Look*, *Harper's Bazaar* and full interviews in *Collier's* and *American Magazine*. None of these magazines had featured Black women in full pictorial layouts before. *Life* identified

Horne as the number one nightclub singer in the country in 1947.³⁴⁰ She also appeared in a string of all-star musicals, but usually as the sole Black character and never in a speaking role. She appeared in *Thousands Cheer* (1943), *Broadway Rhythm* (1944), *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), and *Words and Music* (1948). With her light-skinned beauty and soft singing voice she became the face of African-American women on film. As a result many African-Americans described Horne as the first Black woman they remember seeing at the movies, although a majority of them had seen other Black women prior to her appearance. This speaks to the impact of her image and representation. Horne opened doors that more Black women singers and actresses, of all shades, would eventually walk through.

Lena in Performance and Politics

Lena Horne became one of the biggest stars of the 1940's and would push the national representations and images of African-American women into a new realm. Although work in film is recognized her role as a singer in nightclub and stage performance is sometimes forgotten. She is described as exuding coolness on stage. Some music critics and fans saw in her as an almost Beat like performer who did best in intimate settings. Her signature technique during performances was to sing without a microphone in a low volume that forced her audience to listen. She required audiences to access her, her emotions, and her song. She explained; "I had developed an isolation from the audience, that was probably a cover for hostility; most of them were so bemused

³⁴⁰ Untitled Lena Horne article, PM Jan 10, 1943.

by their own occupation with what a Negro woman should be onstage, and my difference from that preconception, that they did not see hostility. The image I gave them was exactly ...that of a woman they could not reach.” Horne built a kind of wall around herself in performance. She denied complete access to the audience, the onlookers – particularly in all-white spaces. This strategy of aloofness was an effort to exercise agency over intimacy. In his article, “Lena Horne’s Impersona,” Shane Vogel discusses the way in which Horne’s performances “renegotiated the fraught intimacies of the segregated cabaret stage.”³⁴¹ Horne says of herself, “ In a funny way the audience and I reversed roles. Usually performers seek the audience’s approval, but in my appearances they, in a sense, had to seek mine.”³⁴² Reflecting on her performance during this time she says she thought to herself, “you’re getting the singer not the woman”³⁴³ She commented on her employment of aloofness as an act of resistance and a direct strategy.

Horne insisted that she wanted to present “a different image of Negro women.” That difference was not only predicated upon her proximity to white beauty but also her ability to construct a popular public representation of Black women whose access to popular public space was determined by their seeming openness. This approach is exceptional in a national cultural landscape that was marked by representations of Black women as mummies, tragic mulattos, and Jezebels who were by their very definition,

³⁴¹ Shane Vogel, "Lena Horne's impersona," *Camera Obscura* 67 (2008) :11-44.

³⁴² Horne and Schickel, *Lena* , 197

³⁴³ Michiko Kakutani, “Lena Horne: Aloofness Hid the Pain Until Time Cooled the Anger,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1981.

accessible. This lack of openness is another expression of Horne's layered politics of resistance.

Off stage Horne's political activism offered an additional layer of resistance for her. What she represented on stage intersected with her political views. As a touring artist she encountered segregation and bigotry. Jim Crow made no distinction based on status, class, gender, geography, or complexion. Analogously to Dunham and Scott, Horne layered legal and extra-legal confrontation with segregation within her brand of resistance. One of the most strident examples of this resistance was her challenge to segregated military performances. At a United States Organizations (USO) show held on a military base in Little Rock, Arkansas, Horne was asked to perform for the troops. When she got to the stage white troops were seated immediately before her, while African-American soldiers were relegated to the rear. She was allowed to sing for Black troops only in the mess hall the next morning. Upon her arrival there German prisoners of war were seated in front of the troops. In protest Horne circled past the POW's and sang directly to the Black soldiers. Hotly leaving the base without military assistance, she headed for the nearest NAACP office, one that happened to be run by Daisy Bates who was the president of the Arkansas chapter. Her suggestion to Horne was to use her celebrity status to disclose the ill treatment. Horne immediately quit the Hollywood USO and discussed her experience in countless interviews. What ensued was a media storm brought on by the performer.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ Alfred E. Smith, "Lena Horne Quits Tour in Row over Army Jim Crow," *Chicago Defender*, January 6, 1945; Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 175-177.

Café Society had been as politicizing a space for Horne as it had been for Scott. Horne adopted many of the views and causes of the patrons and performers she met there and carried these views as she moved forward in her career. For example, undoubtedly, her experience at the café was one of the influences that led her to endorse Benjamin Davis, the first Communist member of the New York City Council. Horne also sued more than one establishment, including Caruso's in Chicago that refused her service based on race. When Horne and five friends were turned away at the door, she sued for five hundred dollars in damages.³⁴⁵ There exist far more examples of political activism throughout her career, and each speaks to the ways in which Horne confronted the ideology of white supremacy and the constructions of African-Americans as subhuman.

Horne was blacklisted and kicked out of the Screen Actors Guild in 1951 as a result of her activism as the specter of McCarthyism began to descend on the nation.³⁴⁶ She would not be removed the list until 1956. Like many other Black activist artists and performers, much of the cache and celebrity that Horne had gruelingly built up throughout the preceding decades was wiped away due to her political activity. Some of this activity was considered displays of patriotism just a few years earlier within the false aspiration of American unanimity and calls for interracial harmony. Horne responded by making her living by engaging in limited tours in America and extensive performances in Europe. Her career would never regain the prominence it achieved before the blacklist.

³⁴⁵ "Lena Horne Sues, Says Chicago Restaurant Barred Her," PM, September 20, 1949.

³⁴⁶ Ted O. Thackery, "Lena Horne and the Smear," *Daily Compass*, September 11, 1951.

This fate would befall many Black performers and artists at the end of the 1940's and would have an indelible impact on Black image and representation in the 1950's.

1950's & the Black image

While primarily identified as the decade in which the Modern Civil Rights Movement flourished, the 1950's were also an era in which national Black popular images were scarce. It was a decade filled with contradiction. Because of the mass agitation of brave Civil Rights organizers and protesters African-American images proliferated national news coverage. Regrettably, outside of Civil Rights coverage it was, in fact, a decade nearly scrubbed clean of Black representation within major movie studio film productions as well as popular and fine art production. Some of this absence was due to the villainization and blacklisting of the top echelon of Black performers and artists of the 1940's. Major stars such as Paul Robeson and Hazel Scott lost career standing based on allegations of radicalism. Film historian Donald Bogle describes this period in film and television as one in which African-American actors were given highly selective "star turns." This was the disastrous practice of allowing a single Black actor to gain major success in film and television. Unfortunately, very few Black stars were able to achieve stardom in the fifties. For the studios these actors were important symbols that they thought might help thwart a civil rights backlash by presenting African Americans as an integrated part of a post war nation in film. For Black actors, especially women, it meant fewer roles and ever more limited influence on the media landscape.

Whenever it was found, Black female imagery and representation relied heavily on the tropes that Americans were comfortable with. Shows such as *Beulah* (1950), whose main character was a wise and selfless African-American maid, kept the mammy

trope alive and well. Several actresses –Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers- fought over and starred in the show at different times in its production. Cast as maids or mammies throughout the 1940's, each actress was perpetually placed in these roles for the duration of their careers. Another Black female representation that thrived in the 1950's was that of the tragic mulatto who often was also portrayed as a Jezebel. Dorothy Dandridge was one of the most visible African-American woman stars in the 1950's but was saddled with this reductive construction in film after film. Her title role in *Carmen Jones* (1954) was grounded in both constructions. The film was a sweeping epic of love, obsession, and betrayal that was based on *Carmen* the opera. Dandridge portrayed the character in a way that brought complexity to the screen. However, she was limited by the scripts dependence on rehashed tropes. Almost all of the films in which she appeared during the 1950's include a portrayal of her as Tragic Mulatto, Jezebel, or Exotic Primitive. Historically thin, unaffirming, and one-dimensional the Black image had at least garnered peppered representation in the previous decades. The 1950's centered an America that was stark white. In America's attempt to focus on postwar American bliss African-Americans and the inequality that they experienced were made completely invisible in mass culture. Damaging African-American images could formally be found during the rise of mass entertainment at the turn of the nineteenth century via racialized minstrel shows. They could also be found in the 1940's film and media that were flush with a façade of inclusive egalitarian and democratic principle. This is why Horne had been unrivaled in her significance to filmic representations of African-American women. Representing a shift in their representation, she created a mold, although flawed in many ways, which would eventually allow Black actresses more

access to an expanded choice of roles and, sometimes, included greater dignity. The rise of the Civil Rights Movement, unfortunately, would not coincide with this access for African-American performers and artists, it would have other more salient foci.

Civil Rights, Respectability, and Women's Roles

As reporters clamored to speak with the esteemed male leaders at the historic March on Washington in 1963 Lena Horne introduced Rosa Parks to foreign press correspondents. Gloria Richardson, the leader of the Cambridge Non-Violent Committee, had joined Horne and Parks as they walked to the press tents. Thus far the day had been a challenging one for the women leaders at the march. Although they participated in the triumphant mood and experienced the joys, there was also a heavy feeling of disappointment among many present. Women were made to march separately during the march to the capitol and were allowed very little participation. Officially, there was only one female speaker, Myrlie Evers, who had been hastily added to the program. There were also two women singers, Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson. Outside of these women's contributions men would dominate the program.³⁴⁷

On the day of the march the opportunities for women would slightly expand as a few female voices were added to the predominant male voices. Among them was Josephine Baker, in full French uniform, who gave a moving, impromptu, twenty-minute speech and Odetta, who offered yet another musical tribute. Much of the women's formal participation at the event was made possible at the behest of women organizers who pressed male leaders for inclusion. The official program included a "Tribute to Negro

³⁴⁷ Faith S. Holsaert, *Hands On the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 287-288.

Woman Fighters For Freedom.” It was originally conceived as tribute led by Randolph Prince Lee, the wife of Herbert Lee, and Myrlie Evers, wife of Medgar Evers slain Civil Rights Leaders, Diane Nash, head of SNCC, Daisy Bates, an organizer in Little Rock Nine, Parks, and Richardson were to be seated on stage as Randolph conducted the tribute. Women would not be asked to speak at all, on behalf of their own work or on the work of others in the movement. Persuaded by Anna Arnold Hedgemen, the sole woman on the planning committee, Randolph agreed to allow one woman, Evers, to speak in his stead.³⁴⁸

None of this agitation would enable Richardson to speak or Lena Horne to complete her introductions of Parks to the press. Richardson had been contacted to give brief remarks two weeks prior to the march. On the day of the march the women who were a part of the tribute left the waiting area to go on stage, purposely leaving Richardson behind. When she arrived at the stage Horne and Baker informed her that the chair with her name on it had been removed and suggested that she “raise hell.” After the conversation with the two entertainers her seat had been restored and she approached the podium when her name was called. A simple “hello...” was all that was uttered before a marshal grabbed the microphone from her grasp. Not long after Richardson was escorted off the stage she joined Horne and assisted in her introduction of Parks. NAACP officials approached the two women and insisted that they would “cause a mob”, due to Horne’s celebrity and Richardson’s notoriety. They were placed in a cab together and sent back to

³⁴⁸ Lynne Olson, *Freedom's daughters: The unsung heroines of the civil rights movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 278-290. Daisy Bates filled in for Myrlie Evers who was unable to make it to the march prior to her slated time.

their hotels just prior to King's "I Have a Dream Speech."³⁴⁹ Richardson explained "So we did that, and we heard just part of Martin's speech on the radio in the taxi...in retrospect, I think it was because [Horne] was determined to see that Rosa Parks was recognized, and I had worn the denim skirt and hadn't dressed up properly and was a woman, and a series of things."³⁵⁰ Paramount among those "things" was Richardson's perceived radicalism and her refusal to stay within prescribed gender boundaries that she describes. Neither Horne nor Richardson was present for the famous speech considered by most in attendance as the capstone of the march. These two women who seemed to have severely disparate lives were seen as equal threats to both the African-American politics of respectability and an ingrained imbalanced narrative around gender in that moment. What united them was their engagement with a layered politics of resistance.

Horne used her celebrity to spotlight the tremendous and foundational contributions of both Parks and Richardson to disrupt the gendered narrative at the March on Washington. She wanted to underscore the significant roles that African-American women occupied in the movement. Black people were well aware of women's key roles and audacity as activists and supporters of the Civil Rights Movement. However, many people remained uncomfortable with women adopting national leadership roles. This also violated the code of the politics of respectability in the middle class Black community.

³⁴⁹Gloria Richardson, interview by Amy Goodman, "Civil Rights Pioneer Gloria Richardson, 91, On How Women Were Silenced at 1963 March on Washington," *Democracy Now!*, August 27, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2015. http://www.democracynow.org/2013/8/27/civil_rights_pioneer_gloria_richardson_91 ; Holsaert, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 287-293.

³⁵⁰ Richardson, interview by Amy Goodman.

Elements of whom dominated the march's leadership. For example, they were pleased to have Horne there as a glamorous symbol of African-American tokenism. As a top Black female entertainer they saw this as her role. Her use of her celebrity as a political platform to introduce Parks was not an expected or acceptable role. Surely they did not foresee her use of celebrity (garnered through her accessing of popular public space and unique approach to representation) in service of her political activism. Horne must have understood the fight to spotlight Parks regardless of her gender, or specifically because of it, as a part of a larger mission to showcase the grassroots work of the Civil Rights Movement.

Another area of resistance for both women was connected to image and representation. Richardson discussed her "jean skirt" and the reaction it caused. Upon seeing the women's attire at the event she recalled thinking "I sure would like to see the police running them down the street with stockings and dress shoes and fancy hats on."³⁵¹ Photographs of Horne show her glamorous image strategically obscured by large dark sunglasses and a black scarf wrapped over her head tied under her chin. Her goal for the momentous day was to function as an activist not a turned out Hollywood star. Neither image presented by Richardson or Horne likely aligned with the organizers expectations around representation. Both their image and conduct were allied more with Black women's self-determination, self-definition, than the visions of the organizers. During the March on Washington both women used separate and simultaneous strategies of resistance through their presentation and political actions to disrupt gender inequity.

³⁵¹ Holsaert, *Freedom Plow*, 288

Despite Richardson and Horne's existence in separate spheres both engaged in a multi terrain resistance. Their actions were a testament to the organic reliance on a layered politics of resistance by African-American women historically in all walks of life as they confronted gender expectations, image, and assumed political voice simultaneously.

In her work, *How it Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* Ruth Feldstein discusses the way in which Horne saw herself during her early career. In her autobiography, *Lena*, and elsewhere, Horne often described herself as non-political and a symbol of Black celebrity who was wholly coerced. Feldstein's portrait looks closely at the activist work and sentiment that Horne took part in during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and during the 1940's.³⁵² I believe, like Feldstein, that her actions at the March on Washington may speak against this narrative. Although her activism occurs within the context of a larger awakening of political consciousness, the experience of being a Black woman pioneer isolated in Hollywood is what she drew on as she supported Richardson and Parks. The pressure to conform to unyielding expectations around gender and race were familiar to her. Throughout her career African-Americans had particular expectations of her on film and whites another, and both communities held tight to established gender constructions. For Horne, her survival and impact on Black women's popular image and representation meant that she had historically engaged a layered politics of resistance to multiple layers of oppressive forces. African-American women's image and representation during the era

³⁵² Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels To Be Free: Black Women Entertainers And The Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2013), 10.

of the Civil Rights Movement was as salient as during the preceding decades of the century.

Five Women: An Altered Landscape

For Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott the late 1940's and 1950's were troubling times that greatly contributed to the near erasure of their cultural labor grounded in Black female image and representation. Their off stage political work was likely obscured. Most meaningfully, the brand of resistance created by the compiling of these layers became obscured. Their acts of continuous resistance were purposely downplayed. It is no small amount of irony that an era in which incredible events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* occurred was also an era that found the abandonment of so many advocates for equality and freedom. The forms of activism engaged in by these women through their layered politics of resistance made them unlikely heroines of the Civil Rights Movement, as they had been blacklisted and had entered into complicated relationships with the politics of respectability. Few among the five would identify themselves as radical in their political work or in their engagement of Black female representation and image. They saw their work as a natural outgrowth of the needs and tenor of their communities. The small-minded ideology of the fifties Red Scare targeted activism and, many times, difference of any kind in its precincts. Each woman suffered the wrath of the anti-communist/anti-radical movement. The thick atmosphere of anti-radicalism and suspicion ruined the lives and careers of countless African-American actors, musicians, singers, filmmakers, and artists. For others it arrested their artistic production at the height of their careers, robbing the world of their full artistic possibilities. The five women in this dissertation belong to

the latter group. However, they would forever alter the landscape and possibilities of African-American women's image and representation on film, in dance, on stage, and in art.

For Dunham the 1950's and the conservative backlash met her near the end of grueling twenty-year dance career. The added weight of scarce funding and the propensity of audiences for staid European-derived dance and white Americana precipitated the collapse of her company. She eventually moved to St. Louis, MO. Calling on layered resistance bred in the 40's she became a community activist opening a Dunham dance studio in the impoverished neighborhood to which she had relocated. The studio remains open today after her death in 2006. Scott relocated to France after she was blacklisted. Her home became a haven for other activist-artists fleeing American oppression, such as James Baldwin. She also created space for battered women in her home, having experienced abuse herself. Her son describes the seeming revolving door of visitors sleeping on their couch for weeks at a time.³⁵³ She returned to the US in the 1960's and, like many others who had left the country, felt the pull of the Civil Rights Struggle and simply missed home. Horne returned to the US in the late 50's as well and donated her time to the movement. Never reaching her original prominence, she did become the most well known of the five. Jackie Ormes contributions continued in her community work on the South Side of Chicago. She died in 1985, the least known of the women. However, because of her long vocation as a cartoonist and her vast collection of cartoons she may be resurrected as more people discover her art. Elizabeth Catlett moved

³⁵³ Adam Clayton Powell III, Interview.

to Mexico in the mid 1940's and remained a citizen there until her death in 2012. The American and Mexican governments identified her as being a member of radical organizations and relentlessly pursued her. She continued to speak to the fullness of African-American woman's image through her art throughout a long and fruitful career. Many in the art world consider her one of the best African-American artists of the century.

I would like to suggest that in many ways these women, because of their use of a layered politics of resistance, were both ahead of their time and radical daughters of their foremothers. They did not only lay the groundwork for the African-American women activist performers of the 1950's (of which there were many) but also of the progressive 1960's. Some would be unable to draw a connecting line and legacy between the eras. However, that connection is there and, hopefully, made apparent herein. Women such as singer and actress Abbey Lincoln, South African activist and singer Miriam Makeba, Actress Cicely Tyson, and actress Diahann Carroll all continued a legacy perpetuated by the web of female activist-artists and performers of the 1930's and 40's. The battle over Black female representation and image continues into our present with images of welfare queens, the drug-addled crack whore, and the ever-durable Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy stereotypes. Still, we can look back and say that there were these activist women; Catlett, Dunham, Horne, Ormes, and Scott and the complicated images and representation that they meticulously constructed in a not too distant past.

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