

INTRODUCTION

Four years after Franklin Roosevelt's death, Eleanor Roosevelt remembered her frustrations when racial issues, such as the antilynching bill and the abolition of the poll tax, reached her husband's desk. "Although Franklin was in favor of both measures, they never became 'must' legislation. When I would protest, he would simply say: 'First things come first, and I can't alienate certain votes I need for measures that are more important at the moment by pushing any measure that would entail a fight.'"¹ A powerful southern congressional bloc influenced the executive treatment of race relations during the Depression and World War II. To the chagrin of many civil rights leaders, the support of this southern contingency always outweighed the administration's commitment to endorsing measures that would explicitly improve political, economic, and social conditions for black Americans.²

Still, the federal government did not completely ignore civil rights in this politically explosive atmosphere. One important method that the Roosevelt administration employed to acknowledge African Americans and to involve them in the president's "New Deal" was through federally sponsored cultural programs. Initially conceived under the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Arts Project (FAP) and then continued under wartime agencies such as the Office of War Information (OWI) and the War Department, fine art and media-based programs represented an important strand of civil rights policy during the Roosevelt era. Through the publications of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), the plays of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), the endorsement of black celebrities such as Joe Louis, and the production of wartime films and radio shows, liberal administrators demonstrated a sustained commitment to addressing the

concerns of black Americans when political pragmatism prevented official support for structural legislation. Beginning in the 1930s, government program administrators imagined that these cultural projects would provide a safe treatment of pressing political concerns and a foundation for the government's policies toward African Americans in the postwar period.

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This history is undoubtedly complex. Not only did government program administrators further marginalize concrete civil rights legislation in adopting certain cultural policies, but each program encountered obstacles that would limit African Americans' power and representation. Black participants worked within the tightest of cultural spaces, facing the scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the racism and aesthetic inflexibility of many state directors, the political exigencies of war, and compromised federal budgets. Nevertheless, under the Roosevelt administration, the Federal Arts Project and wartime media programs served as central methods of imbuing African Americans with a sense of political authority. As the first administration to recognize publicly that African Americans mattered as citizens, New Dealers forwarded a cultural agenda that, despite all of its limitations, marked a significant turning point in the production of black culture. Within the context of a larger cultural apparatus that largely omitted or stereotyped African Americans, the government programs offered creative outlets that were unavailable elsewhere. New Deal cultural development represented a continuous process of negotiation, as both black and white officials championed some symbols, ideas, and media, while discarding others. Therefore, this book recounts a history of creativity, ambition, and unprecedented possibilities; but also a history of limitations, bigotry, and political machinations.

Four major themes illuminate the significance of government-sponsored cultural development in the history of the Roosevelt era and the struggle for African American civil rights. First, programs under the WPA and other wartime agencies served as important locations for black cultural advancement at a time when black minstrel images still predominated commercial culture and popular music, radio, and film industries segregated, demeaned, or excluded African Americans. Second, debates within these cultural projects illustrate the importance of what the FTP Negro Unit director Carlton Moss termed "cultural emancipation" to the civil rights struggle during this period: groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) deemed cultural autonomy and representational agency vital in the quest for racial equality.³ Third, government-sponsored cultural development reflected a

pattern that would repeat itself during the Depression and World War II and that would provide continuity between the 1930s and 1940s, solidifying the Roosevelt administration's reliance on art and media projects as viable forms of racial policy into the postwar era.

Lastly, my focus on the politics of cultural development serves as an alternative model for examining civil rights. Building on the work of historians such as Glenda Gilmore and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who recognize the New Deal era as a critical point in "the long Civil Rights Movement," this book shifts attention to the cultural arena and its place in the African American freedom struggle. As Hall urges, "Finally, we must forgo easy closure and satisfying upward or downward arcs."⁴ *Black Culture and the New Deal* provides less obvious signs of success and failure and an equally important framework for understanding how black and white Americans wrestled with the racial issues that most concerned them in addition to the compromises they often made in challenging the status quo. The significance of these interracial negotiations lies in the fact that racial change was subtle, often incremental; what became advantageous for some people was sometimes damaging for others. Due to varying degrees of white liberalism, the heterogeneity of the black artistic community and black civil rights organizations, and the constant political pressures facing all administrators, this history is one of competing interests yet many shared goals. Nevertheless, conversations abounded concerning the persistence of racial stereotypes, the nature of black artistic directorial authority, and the overall employment of African Americans in the culture industry. This dialogue proved to be as central to civil rights history as the racial politics that unfolded on the shop floor, in the armed forces, or within the legal system.

Black Culture and the New Deal chronicles the relationship between two groups. On the one hand, liberal white administrators during the New Deal developed artistic programs to recognize the talents and contributions of African Americans, enveloping black men and women with the mantle of federal programs as no presidential administration had ever considered or attempted. On the other hand, black Americans who participated in this federal enterprise capitalized on the political power of culture in their fight for respect, recognition, and—most significantly—an equal form of American citizenship. Among white officials such as Harold Ickes, Archibald MacLeish, Hallie Flanagan, and Elmer Davis, the production of federally sponsored media projects embodied the New Deal's larger ambition to embrace and promote a multiracial, multiethnic nation. In the

FWP's American Guide Series, the plays of the FTP, and the "Americans All" mantra that resounded in most World War II propaganda, white administrators stressed that Americans of all colors and nationalities not only built the nation, but that America's progress depended on their continued contributions. These officials believed that giving attention and devoting resources to formerly underrepresented groups would better facilitate both economic recovery and wartime mobilization. As government officials reiterated this message in cultural bureaucracies such as the FAP and the OWI, they incorporated "Negro Studies" or "Negro Affairs" into program initiatives. Thus, if cultural programs came to assume a central role in forwarding New Deal racial progressivism, it was because many white men and women believed that the treatment of black Americans was not just important but critical to the nation's future as an inclusive democracy.

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The fact that the currents of a larger national agenda often shaped cultural development, which was stewarded under primarily white direction, does not mean that intellectuals, musicians, and artists did not wield authority. It is precisely *because* the New Deal government sponsored these programs that African Americans were offered a unique opportunity. As the historian Nikhil Singh contends, during the New Deal era black activists and intellectuals constructed a "black counter-public sphere," which mobilized against economic and social injustices.⁵ During this genesis of black political thought, improvements in the cultural arena featured prominently on the political agenda. For organizations such as the NAACP, struggles for representational agency, the obliteration of racial stereotypes, and the excavation of black history from the margins accompanied the fight against segregation and other forms of discrimination. The Roosevelt era, therefore, represented a significant moment in the history of civil rights because African Americans played an integral role in shaping the course of government-sponsored cultural programs and in negotiating their own representation. As historians have come to explain more recently, the advancement of black cultural politics did not solely occur within isolated developments, such as the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement, but rather as an ongoing dialogue in tandem with calls for structural political change.⁶

This notion of the cultural as the political was explicitly promoted in the 1920s, when Harlem Renaissance artists developed a literature and imagery that broke from the Anglo-American literary cannon and championed a "New Negro." Scholars have long evaluated the political character of

the Harlem Renaissance and its impact within the larger civil rights movement.⁷ For historian David Levering Lewis, the Harlem Renaissance served as a form of “civil rights by copyright”—a hallmark of African American artistic achievement that allowed men and women to explore and condemn America’s tortured racial past. Despite the creativity that flourished, both black political organizations and white influence largely compromised the movement’s success.⁸ Other scholars, however, have challenged Lewis’s criticism, urging more precise historicizing and arguing that the cultural arena was the only outlet for black political activity during the 1920s. As scholar Ann Douglas contends, “the most pressing reason for the New Negro’s decision to work through culture, not politics, was that this was the closest Harlem could come to so-called real politics.”⁹ Regardless of the scope of its political impact, the Harlem Renaissance served as a foundation for the artistic developments that emerged during the Roosevelt era. While some scholars mark the death of the Renaissance with the 1935 Harlem riot, the dynamics it generated, and many of its complications, moved into New Deal cultural programs.¹⁰ Historian George Hutchinson argues, “the movement’s legacy was amplified throughout the late 1930s and institutionalized in programs such as the Federal Writers’, Arts, and Theatre Projects, which incubated the next generation of African American artists.”¹¹

Similar to the Harlem Renaissance, the FAP and wartime media projects witnessed the kind of interracial cultural exchange that both fueled and circumscribed African American cultural expression. The interracial relationships fostered during the New Deal era, however, were not inherently exploitative. Like those scholars who have recently worked to give a rich description of the complex cultural interworkings of the Renaissance, I argue that the interracial dynamics that undergirded New Deal cultural production was not always to the detriment of African Americans. As Hutchinson attests, “historical dramas have been interpreted in such a way as to fit relatively fixed ideas about interracial relations, and the complexity of these dramas is lost.”¹² In addition to continuing the kind of interracial alliances formed during the Renaissance, New Deal programs also carried on the practice of utilizing culture as a political weapon. While white government officials may have understood artistic developments as racialized programming, which could serve in place of “real” racial politics, African American political leaders and program participants considered New Deal cultural projects as tantamount to organized challenges against economic and social inequality. If in the 1920s African Americans in Harlem were

“translating politics into cultural terms,” then during the New Deal this process was reaffirmed and extended within the programs of the federal government, even in the midst of increasing activism among both formal

6 political organizations and grassroots movements.¹³ During the Roosevelt era, black political mobilization did not negate the need for artistic cultivation; on the contrary, activism made positive developments in the cultural arena all the more critical.

For many black leaders, the “cultural self-determination” woven throughout federal art and media projects was a pivotal step in combating discrimination.¹⁴ According to FAP directors such as Sterling Brown and Carlton Moss, if white Americans could understand their black counterparts beyond minstrelsy, perhaps they would deem black men and women worthy of other civil rights. Indeed, as historian Grace Hale forcefully contends, a culture of segregation underpinned both the de jure and de facto structures that institutionalized racial inequality.¹⁵ For black Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, this culture of segregation—minstrel images, exclusion from historical narratives, and other commercialized distortions of blackness—needed eliminating in the same way that discrimination in other areas was under attack. Although African Americans recognized that a more positive racial imagery or black control of cultural representation could not substitute for the political and economic rights which they so ardently sought, black participants understood culture as central in procuring civil rights. Far from Harold Cruise’s later charge that African Americans could not understand “the strategic importance of the cultural front in relation to the political and economic fronts,” during the New Deal era African Americans involved in federal programs and black political organizations conceptualized culture and politics as inherently intertwined.¹⁶

In this braided narrative, it is also important to understand the limitations of a methodological framework that separates black and white individuals into two groups with distinct political agendas. First, while white officials most often served as project directors, African Americans exerted varying degrees of power and influence, blurring the line between administrator and artistic participant. The black poet Sterling Brown served as a director for the FWP in his own right, establishing criteria not only for other African Americans but also for white writers in the program to follow. Black performers who worked on the *Jubilee* radio shows disseminated important racial meaning in their delivery of melodies and lyrics, whatever the intent of white producers. In these cases, black intellectu-

als and musicians obscured the role of “producer,” making racial lines more difficult to demarcate. Second, this book is not a history of generous liberals and eager black participants but rather of negotiations between individuals who shared many of the same interests. Although liberalism always revealed its limits, and African Americans often displayed a more intense personal investment than their white colleagues in the content of artistic productions, the ideas of white and black individuals echoed each other as frequently as they contrasted. Finally, a binary opposition may at times mask the intraracial politics that shaped the contours of programming. Black individuals debated with each other over the structure of the FTP’s Negro Units and over the kinds of roles black actors and actresses should assume onscreen. Here, the influence of white officials was one of many competing factors. In response to new artistic outlets, black opinion was never homogeneous, and as they asserted agency at the level of production, black individuals often voiced opposing ideas and disparate aesthetic agendas.

Although I emphasize the significance of new artistic opportunities and representational improvements for African Americans working within the federal apparatus, New Deal programs never reached the potential that black participants and political leaders hoped for. Directors such as Sterling Brown became encumbered with the racism of state directors; Hollywood proved less willing than black leaders expected to create a broad range of films that would accurately depict the lives of African Americans. The FTP’s Negro Units could only develop productions approved by a primarily white Play Bureau, and both the *Jubilee* radio show and the nature of Joe Louis’s wartime activities were dictated by a military that was not interested in disrupting the racial status quo. While all of these programs were ambitious within the context of the New Deal era, they revealed their limitations and left some black men and women frustrated and disappointed. In addition, the irony of government-supported cultural inclusion in the face of political negligence or outright discrimination was not limited to African Americans; similar cultural initiatives undoubtedly applied to other minority groups during this period, and they warrant further treatment by historians. Yet the obstacles embedded within each project do not negate the importance of New Deal cultural programs; indeed, the ways in which African Americans worked to create artistic expression within tightly confined spaces are a critical part of this history.

This book offers a new interpretation of the New Deal era not only in conceptualizing federal race policy but in recognizing the interconnected-

ness of culture and politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Historians have long evaluated the transformative character of the New Deal; this study turns to the government's cultural arena, explaining how the Roosevelt administration was the first to implement a wide-scale federal arts program that aimed to acknowledge black Americans publicly as a voting constituency.¹⁷ In addition, the personnel and the cultural motivations behind WPA relief programs such as the FWP and the FTP reemerged during World War II. When it came to matters of race, art projects seemingly endemic to the 1930s quite naturally extended themselves to the exigencies of war and into the more prosperous postwar era. But it was the 1930s and 1940s that witnessed the genesis of government-sponsored cultural development. Thus, I have limited my discussion of the New Deal to this period and use the terms "New Deal era" and "Roosevelt era" interchangeably.¹⁸

Within the field of American cultural history, the Roosevelt era is one of the most studied periods, as scholars continue to probe subjects such as radicalism within films and literature, the activities and perceptions of working-class audiences, and the permutations of wartime political ideologies.¹⁹ Yet the notion of the government as an important cultural producer—at least in the context of a broader cultural apparatus—remains rather marginalized. Among those who study the federal arts projects of the 1930s, most signal the death knell of these programs by 1939; scholars view plays such as the FTP's *Swing Mikado* or the guidebooks written under the FWP primarily as representations of the Depression era's pluralistic ethos.²⁰ While this characterization is important to recognize, the FAP marked a government impetus on racial issues that would continue for decades. In addition, although none of the federal projects could compete with commercial industry, neither their financial profitability nor their public reception represents the only means of measuring their significance. These programs were important not because they were the most widely acclaimed by American audiences or because they were deemed the most beloved cultural products of the Roosevelt era (although some that the government sponsored were extremely successful), but because they were part of an explicit policy discourse that has received little attention in this historical context.

While this book builds on the work of cultural and social historians who posit that a "culture of unity"—films, radio programs, and mass-produced items—garnered support for the New Deal among previously disengaged groups, the federal government's cultural arena was not solely a means to

an end. Government-sponsored culture engendered a political landscape in which government officials and civil rights leaders probed the nature and meaning of black Americanness. Many cultural historians have examined themes of this period: an embrace of everyday people, a critique of managerial authority, and a turn to new American “roots.” This study, however, does not situate racial liberalism under the larger rubric of a working-class agenda or the plight of organized labor. Mobilized workers and preponderantly left-wing organizations frequently displayed sensitivity to the plight of African Americans; yet race was often treated independently from class-based concerns.²¹

Still, the influence of the Left warrants consideration, particularly as Communism in America was at its apogee during the New Deal era. The Communist Left played a critical role in mobilizing both whites and African Americans against racial oppression in the South, expressing the immediacy of granting black men and women full social equality decades long before the 1950s. As Gilmore asserts, “The presence of a radical Left, in this case a Communist Left, redefined the debate over white supremacy and hastened its end.” In this book, several participants of government projects supported Communism, some as party members with more peripheral political affiliations and some who embraced particular dimensions of Communist ideology without accepting the doctrine as a whole. As historians have come to explain, in conceptualizing the Popular Front, the structure of the Communist Party (CPUSA) was quite nebulous. Men and women adapted particular philosophies that were not always consistent with a party line emanating from Moscow.²² Certainly, Communist ideology buttressed an overall concern about racial inequality, but it was only one component of the larger struggle for civil rights. And CP membership or fellow traveler status was not always synonymous with the promotion of racial reform. Conversely, many men and women who did not consider themselves Communists nevertheless worked as strong proponents of black inclusion. More significantly, the cause of anti-Communism served as an effective means for government officials to quash cultural programs and to tarnish individuals they deemed “un-American.” The testimonies of cultural participants before the House Un-American Activities Committee explicitly questioned the federal role in cultivating racial imagery and in employing African American as workers. Thus, while some individuals profiled in this book considered themselves Communists and at certain moments the Communist Party did exert influence, it is most useful to

question how those who embraced and those who shunned Communist ideologies influenced racial programming, rather than whether they stood with the party line.

10 The scope and approach of this book differ from other histories of race relations during this period. Many scholars have highlighted the gendered and racialized nature of New Deal policies. Delving into this oppressive atmosphere, others have uncovered the activism of white liberals and African American political organizations, demonstrating that even despite the Roosevelt administration's intransigence, black men and women were able to campaign against racial inequality. Particularly in excavating the grassroots mobilization of black communities, historians have provided a more nuanced analysis of the New Deal era. In addition, scholarship has begun to demonstrate the long-term political consequences of Roosevelt's judicial policies, which perhaps reflected the president's most racially progressive actions. While all of this research has been fundamental, my focus on the cultural arena provides an alternative perspective in examining the quest for racial equality.²³

Organized opposition to concrete forms of discrimination is not utilized as a yardstick of success or failure; thus, the racial dynamics within this book may often seem muted. New Deal cultural developments, nonetheless, were significant in the lives of participants and within the larger contours of federal civil rights initiatives. Because the arts projects were a form of direct outreach to African American performers, artists, and writers, and because the establishment of "Negro Affairs" divisions entailed sustained debates over both administrative form and aesthetic content, they represent a departure from the negligence of previous administrations and a vast difference from those relief agencies driven solely by economic concerns.

The term "cultural apparatus" apparent throughout the book identifies the nascent bureaucracies and personnel encompassing federal arts and media-based programs. Although the discussion of the cultural apparatus centers on projects operating under government auspices, many individuals in commercial industry were often influential in federal programs. Commercial radio shows and films often overlapped with government developments, particularly during the war years. Scholars have understood the New Deal as a critical moment in the history of the American nation when questions of federal responsibility intensified and the beginnings of a welfare system emerged. Shifting the focus to agencies spawned by the WPA, the OWI, and the armed forces—and the "Negro Affairs" divisions

that developed within them—I offer an examination of central sites in the history of state building. Like other histories, this study articulates how bureaucratic growth engendered new conceptions about American citizenship and new narratives of inclusion and entitlement. However, when government officials invited African Americans into the artistic process, it was not merely as recipients of federal largesse but to become influential actors in determining the direction and continuation of American cultural institutions. Through this prism, I locate a unique series of debates concerning the nature and orientation of national cultural development.²⁴

This book centers on the process of production. Here, the significance of New Deal cultural programs is not measured by the reception of all African Americans, nor are projects evaluated by their impact in changing white attitudes at large. Rather, I examine the importance of the FAP and wartime media programs through the politics that unfolded between and among participants, administrators, and black political organizations. Yet many of these federal projects were disseminated to broad, interracial audiences, and I have ascertained their reception where sources permitted. While a relatively small number of African Americans were involved in government-sponsored programming, the products of their labor received detailed discussion in the black press and literary organs such as the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*.

Each chapter analyzes an important moment in the cultural formulation of racial policy. All of the chapters feature a similar structure, first focusing on the exchange between administrators and then on a program that officials ultimately selected as a means of disseminating a particular racial agenda. While debates over the content and structure are distinct among different media, the same central questions resonate throughout the book: What is considered “black culture”? Can racial programming develop adequately under white direction? How should cultural administrators reconcile the often conflicting ideas of black political leaders, individual artists, and the African American communities often targeted as audiences? Can culture become truly integrated, or should black political expression be addressed in separate programs and publications? While these projects were not the only ones that addressed such issues, each chapter demonstrates an important component of cultural exchange and offers a different example of how African Americans wrestled with varying aesthetic and political choices.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the complexities of racial liberalism in the Roosevelt administration, explaining why, even with the endorsement

of progressive New Dealers such as Howard Ickes and Eleanor Roosevelt, civil rights legislation could never be passed. The chapter also offers a description of the increasing black commitment to the Democratic Party, explaining why black Americans changed their political allegiance after a long-standing dedication to the party of Lincoln. Finally, it presents a background to the development of the art projects, demonstrating how federal sponsorship of writers, artists, and performers merged neatly with reigning concepts of cultural pluralism.

Chapter 2 examines the federal government's attempt to highlight black talents through the FTP, which established separate "Negro Units" and, in doing so, created several highly popular performances for black and white audiences. After analyzing the kinds of plays officials decided both to endorse and to reject for the Negro Units, the chapter moves to the congressional investigations of the FTP and the ways in which a hostile political climate shaped the content of particular play performances. This political scrutiny led the FTP to focus on seemingly more sanitized productions, such as the *Swing Mikado*, which the Chicago Negro Unit performed to a sold-out house for a sustained period of time. Here, although the production achieved popularity through its classic form as a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, black actors were able to imbue the opera with their own racial meaning.

Chapter 3 examines how noted poet Sterling Brown, as editor of the Negro Affairs section of the FWP, attempted to revise traditional narratives of black history. As his largest task was the incorporation of black history into the FWP's largest undertaking, the American Guide Series, Brown and his editors urged state guide writers to reconsider the past of their own regions and to account for discrimination and racism. The chapter discusses the successes and limitations of Brown's participation in writing the American Guide Series, as well as the way he ultimately turned to separate studies of black life as the most effective means for achieving his goals. Like chapter 2, chapter 3 also shows how congressional conservatism affected the larger intentions of the FWP, defining what should be considered "American" and "un-American" materials. The chapter ends with the termination of the Federal Arts Project and its focus on high culture during the 1930s; federal interests shifted to utilizing the mass media during wartime mobilization.

Chapter 4 investigates how the issue of "low Negro morale" came to plague administrators during World War II and how the government endorsed particular media in an attempt to boost black patriotism. In particu-

lar, the OWI and the War Department constructed the symbol and persona of Joe Louis to provide black Americans with a model of heroism, sacrifice, and black inclusion in the war effort. Through Louis, the Roosevelt administration could demonstrate that black Americans were indeed important to American victory, while temporarily skirting the issues of segregation in the armed forces and racism in home front industries. The chapter also demonstrates how Louis held a symbolic political meaning for many black Americans, who understood the “Brown Bomber” as a victor over white opponents as well as one whose celebrity had transcended racial lines.

Drawing on the government’s discourse about the use of mass media, chapter 5 analyzes how officials conceptualized radio as an outlet for addressing black Americans during wartime. As the War Department developed a radio broadcast entitled “America’s Negro Soldiers,” administrators came to adopt the variety show format as preferable for creating racially oriented programs. Taking this idea still further, the newly formed Armed Forces Radio Service developed *Jubilee*, an “All-Negro Variety Show” broadcast to both black and white servicemen. Yet, despite its musical base, *Jubilee* offered a highly charged commentary on American race relations. The chapter demonstrates that as black performers coded racial messages in song, or drew attention to army segregation in their dedications to soldiers, they proved that broadcasting could be an effective medium for political expression.

Chapter 6 examines government officials’ reviews of motion pictures and evaluates the government’s challenge of visually depicting a multi-racial America amid the competing interests of Hollywood, the NAACP, and a larger community of black actors. Acting more as a regulator than as a producer, the OWI confronted Hollywood with a series of directives for creating films that would offer particular portrayals of black Americans. While Hollywood was not always complicit, some motion pictures reflected the most progressive racial imagery in government-sponsored cultural programming by featuring an integrated army. Divisions in the black community widened over those wartime films that maintained standard racial conventions, such as *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, which different parts of the black press criticized and applauded. Thus, this chapter argues that even if the cinematic fantasy of racial egalitarianism contrasted with the reality of segregation and discrimination, black Americans stressed the centrality of control over cultural imagery and production in the larger struggle for civil rights.

This book outlines a process that is not without contemporary reso-

nance. The cultivation of a cultural policy implemented during the Depression and the Second World War featured prominently in the postwar era, while the passage of widespread civil rights legislation lagged behind until the mid-1960s. Although the focus of this book remains on the prewar period, the development process—sifting and discarding, revising and reinterpreting—laid the groundwork for federal initiatives after World War II, when cultural figures such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington assumed important roles in the State Department’s goodwill tours, and when images of American racial democracy spread across the globe. As the modern civil rights movement gained momentum, the cultural arena remained a vital source for promoting liberal integrationism, with some individuals and media employed more frequently than others. Whether the official promotion of black entertainers and athletes continues to deflect larger racial conflicts remains a heated topic; yet our familiarity with the federal and commercial elevation of African American celebrities should not obscure the origins of this policy initiative. However much a pervasive imagery of black inclusion now obscures America’s troubled racial history, we must understand the specific historical meaning federal programs held for both white and black Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. How American culture initially addressed the “Negro Problem” is as vital a question as why, fifty years after the civil rights movement, the policy still lingers.