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Civil Rights and the Black Experience During the New Deal Era: Limitations and Possibilities 1932–1948

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Civil Rights and the Black Experience During the New Deal Era: Limitations and Possibilities 1932 – 1948

by Garth Sutherland

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This historiographical essay examines how historians have explored the struggle for civil rights of African Americans and racial equality in the New Deal Era. Historians differ on how the New Deal Era should be understood as a historical time period.[1] The New Deal Era has been understood by some historians as largely congruent with the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Great Depression and the World War II years. Some historians see the New Deal Era as continuing into Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs of the mid-1960s and perhaps into the early 1970s, marking a continuation of the increased role of the federal government to intervene in social and economic problems facing United States society. For the purposes of this project we will consider the New Deal Era to be defined by the response to the Great Depression of the FDR administration beginning in 1933 and continuing through the World War II years, ending approximately with the election of Harry S. Truman in 1948.

Following the abolition of slavery in the United States and the end of the Civil War, the federal government, led by Radical Republicans, greatly expanded the rights of citizenship for African Americans. The Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 was intended to ensure that African Americans had equal citizenship and protection under the law as United States citizens regardless of what state they lived in. The Fifteenth Amendment ratified by Congress in 1870 was intended to ensure that African American men would have the right to vote. The federal government's commitment to upholding the intention of these amendments would end with the retreat of Reconstruction in 1876.

Following the end of Reconstruction the Jim Crow system of segregation and disenfranchisement began to emerge in the south, along with a continuation of violence and terror against African Americans, often taking the form of lynchings. In the North there was also a recommitment in the late 19th century to racism buoyed by the eugenics movement. The 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson solidified the legal standing of Jim Crow with the 'separate but

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1 I take this term, New Deal Era, from the title of Patricia Sullivan's book, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era.* Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1996).

equal' doctrine. By the early 1900s the legal structure of Jim Crow was in place, and almost all African Americans in the South were fully disenfranchised. The last remaining black Congressmen elected by African Americans in the South left office in 1901. There would not be another African American elected to Congress from anywhere in the United States until Oscar De Priest from Chicago in 1928.

The Progressive Era did not mean progress for African Americans, as even reformers and labor unions either excluded African Americans or did not consider their civil rights a cause to fight for. During the Wilson Administration federal facilities like cafeterias were segregated. The Ku Klux Klan experienced a rebirth, as the film *Birth of a Nation* romanticized the Klan's founding. The summer after World War I was known as the Red Summer, as many African Americans returning after serving their country would find themselves and their communities the targets of lynchings and mob violence. Republican administrations in the 1920s ignored African American civil rights and refused to support proposed federal anti-lynching bills. The Depression that began in 1929 hit African Americans harder than other group in the United States, as they were 'last hired and first fired.' The election of FDR in 1932 was followed by the emergence of the New Deal, an innovative response on the part of the federal government to intervene against the problems cause by the Great Depression, namely unemployment and meeting the basic needs of Americans who lost jobs and income.

On the face of it the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and, particularly the early New Deal programs were conservative in terms of race relations and the civil rights of African Americans. The general outlook of historians on the New Deal recognizes that it helped African Americans in terms of immediate economic relief. But, the early New Deal programs were discriminatory and FDR was unwilling to push for legislation that would challenge the racial status quo in the South. He would not throw his weight behind anti-lynching bills, or challenges to segregation or the poll tax. This was largely because FDR relied on the support of conservative, white supremacist Southern Democrats for passage of New Deal legislation and funding for programs responding to the economic conditions caused by the depression.

The Democratic Party, prior to the post World War II years, was the only viable political party in most southern states. Through all white primaries this one-party system in the South, the 'Solid South,' bolstered white supremacy and resulted in the South having a disproportional influence on national politics. Southern Democrats were often unchallenged in general elections and therefore served longer than average terms in Congress, putting them in powerful positions in House Committees and in Senate leadership. As cultural historian Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff put it, "A powerful southern congressional bloc influenced the executive treatment of race relations during the Depression and World War II."[2]

FDR and his administration consistently gave lip service to civil rights and the ideal of equality for all Americans regardless of race, creed, or color. But, structural legislation to promote civil rights for African Americans was also consistently deprioritized. The needs of economic recovery during the Great Depression, and later mobilization for World War II took precedence. The conservative Southern Democrats in Congress maintained a similar pressure on FDR during the war years, as he remained dependent on their votes to support an interventionist foreign policy (particularly prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor) and to fund the war effort. Opportunities to challenge the structures of the Jim Crow South and expand the civil rights of African Americans were shelved as the president, and the nation, moved from one crisis to another. While under pressure from A. Phillip Randolph and NAACP leaders threatening a march on Washington, and during the height of the double V campaign against fascism abroad and at home, Roosevelt only offered an executive order outlawing discrimination in industries with defense contracts. He remained unwilling to spend political capital on desegregating the armed forces.

But, in crises like the Great Depression and WWII there were also profound forces of social change which included possibilities for challenges to the racial status quo in the South and throughout the United States. The New Deal era of the Great Depression and World War II years is marked by an ambiguous legacy in terms of progress for African Americans. Many structures of racial oppression

2 Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1.

and discrimination continued, in some instances federal intervention reinforced this oppression, while in other ways progress was made in terms of the federal government noticing and attempting to ensure equality and civil rights. The struggle for civil rights and freedom by African Americans themselves would also develop in the 1930s and 1940s with continuations and emerging forms of resistance, opposition, and protest against racial oppression, and developments in black political power.

It was at the end of the New Deal era, as understood in this essay, that Harry S. Truman, in 1948, would desegregate the U.S. military. The Civil Rights Movement as classically understood would emerge following the Board of Education ruling in 1954 and the Montgomery Movement of 1955-56, and achieve significant legislative victories for Civil Rights in the 1960s. This essay explores only a small sampling of how some historians have grappled with the status of the African American struggle for civil rights between the beginning of the Great Depression and 1948. As civil rights do not always capture the differences in political projects that these historians have explored, we might also say the possibilities and limitations of racial progress and race conscious politics during this time.

A number of historical monographs which engaged with the New Deal and the struggle for civil rights of African Americans emerged in a cluster in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Two that will be detailed in this essay are Harvard Sitkoff's *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* and Nancy J. Weiss' *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR,* published in 1978 and 1983 respectively. Additionally, John B. Kirby published *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* in 1980. The more general historiography of the New Deal and the FDR years was already in full swing with histories beginning to emerge in the late 1940s and many produced in the 1950s and 1960s, notably Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Age of Roosevelt,* published in three volumes between 1957 and 1960.[3]

The publication of the monographs with titles explicitly addressing black politics and civil rights coincides with trends in the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

3 Roger Biles, "Bibliographical Essay," *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 187.

Historian Steven F. Lawson, in a 1991 article on the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, described three generations of scholarship which had emerged (or were emerging in the case of the third generation) between the late 1960s and his vantage point in 1991. The first generation of scholars, writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, were concerned with nationally recognized leaders and a political history centered around their influencing of judicial decisions and legislation in Washington D.C. The second generation in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1980s sought to emphasize the role of "local communities and grass-roots organizations," and highlight the contributions of women and the diversity of local leaders, voices, and motivations. It broadened the understanding of the movement(s) as rooted not just in protest to bring about federal legislation, but in a larger context of black liberation struggles and resistances.[4] This second generation and the third described by Lawson will be touched upon in more detail later.

All of the monographs that I will discuss in this historiographical essay were written not only after the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, but after the emergence of its initial stage of historiography (or perhaps for Sitkoff coextensive with the beginning). The watershed of protests and triumphs, along with heartbreaks, which defined the mid-1950s to the 1960s as the era of when African Americans struggled for and won the most important legislative victories in terms of Civil Rights since Reconstruction casts a shadow over the decades preceding it. Harvard Sitkoff wrote his study, *A New Deal for Blacks*, in part motivated by his experience of participating in the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s as a white college student from the North. In his preface, he also reflected on his sharing in "the bitter disillusionment of those who continued to risk their lives in the post-Watts struggle." The context of historians writing after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, when stock was taken of how much more was to be done, despite the achievements, to achieve equality and liberation for African Americans and other marginalized groups in the Unite Sates is also important. In

4 Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 456-457.

describing his research which led to the creation of *A New Deal for Blacks* during "the retrogression in race relations during the Nixon years...," Sitkoff wrote, "The diminution of the campaign for black rights heightened my concern about its origins and the preconditions for its success."[5]

Sitkoff argues that the New Deal Era, while largely disappointing in terms of structural legislation to challenge segregation and Jim Crow in the South (or in the military), saw the emergence of civil rights as a subject of national concern and laid groundwork for the victories of civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. Although primarily drawing on sources that suggest a political / institutional history, Sitkoff also locates what he calls the emergence of civil rights as national issue in wide ranging social and cultural changes, for example in literature, art, and in intellectual history. Of the monographs which will be discussed Sitkoff's provides the most comprehensive overview of major developments on the national level for this topic.

Sitkoff's work and Nancy Weiss' *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* both detail a similar narrative that begins with the devastation caused by the Great Depression on African American communities which is compounded by discriminatory practices in early New Deal programs. These authors then highlight developments on the national level which show changes in the status of civil rights and African Americans within the politics of the New Deal. They both look at positive developments like Eleanor Roosevelt becoming a champion of civil rights and a vital link between African American leaders and New Deal administrators. They detail the importance of the Black Cabinet, notably organized around Mary McLeod Bethune, which saw a group of African Americans advising and holding government positions in New Deal programs.

Sitkoff and Weiss also note the limitations of this progress translating into structural challenges to the racial caste system in the South. Drawing on NAACP papers and correspondences between NAACP secretary, Walter White, and Eleanor Roosevelt, both look at the campaign led by White and

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5 Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), viii.

the NAACP to pressure the president and Congress into passing anti-lynching legislation, notably the Costigan-Wagner bill which appeared before Congress many times between 1934 and 1938. The bill increasingly gained support inside Congress and from liberal groups who joined the NAACP in the pressure campaign. In 1938 it was blocked only by a filibuster led by Southern Democrats in the Senate, and FDR's unwillingness to tie up his legislative agenda by attempting to break the filibuster.[6]

Farewell to the Party of Lincoln is more purely a political history than *A New Deal for Blacks*. John Tosh, in *The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history,* defines political history as "the study of all those aspects of the past that have to do with the formal organization of power in society."[7] Weiss focuses on explaining the shift in voting of African Americans from strongly Republican from Reconstruction through to the election of 1932, and then switching to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. This is reflected in her title, as African Americans voters left the 'Party of Lincoln' during FDR's presidency. Her argument involves why this realignment took place.

Weiss argues that the African American vote switched to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party because of the economic benefits of relief and jobs, not because of gains in civil rights or issues related to racial equality. Based on this argument and additional sources that she utilizes, Weiss distinguished her study from Sitkoff's which appeared five years earlier. In her preface, Weiss writes, "...Sitkoff's *A New Deal for Blacks*, argues that the New Deal moved affirmatively to embrace the cause of civil rights, and that its positive record on race brought blacks into the Democratic party. That argument is at odds with the one developed in this book."[8] She states, "It was Franklin Roosevelt's ability to provide jobs, not his embrace of civil rights, that made him a hero to black Americans."[9]

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6 For treatment of the Black Cabinet see Sitkoff, 79-80; and Weiss 136-142; For correspondence between Eleanor Roosevelt and Walter white and the anti-lynching campaign see Sitkoff, 283; and Weiss, 102-111.

7 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 59.

8 Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), xv.

9 Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, xvi.

Weiss and Sitkoff largely agree that the FDR administration failed to tackle issues like segregation, lynching, or disenfranchisement in the South. They both recognize that racial discrimination pervaded the early years of New Deal programs like the AAA, the NRA, and the CCC.[10] Weiss' disagreement with Sitkoff is argued on two levels. On one level she draws different conclusions as to the seriousness and continuation of discrimination in New Deal programs and she argues that the gestures which FDR and his administration made to African Americans were merely symbolic, a pandering for votes while not making meaningful attempts at addressing civil rights. On another level Weiss uses opinion polling, statistics on African American socio-economics, and voting records to argue that when African Americans voted for FDR they did so because of economic considerations like jobs and relief, and not gains in civil rights or racial equality.

One of the many major national events that Sitkoff and Weiss both analyze is the Scottsboro Case.[11] Sitkoff devotes multiple pages to the case of the Scottsboro Boys taken up by the Communists and their affiliate the International Labor Defense (ILD) in 1931. He describes the movement to free the Scottsboro Boys as an example of civil rights and the attack on Jim Crow forcing its way into the national consciousness in the 1930s. Communists staged protests in major cities like New York City, Washington D.C., and Chicago, and internationally. Sitkoff claims, "Simultaneously, Communist propaganda transformed Scottsboro into the most searching indictment of the Jim Crow yet to appear in the United States."[12] On the other hand, Weiss only mentions the Scottsboro case in a single paragraph. While mentioning that the Communist Party made the case "into a cause célèbre," Weiss brings it up only to illustrate an example of FDR ignoring requests for interviews with organizations promoting civil rights and racial progress. In 1933 Roosevelt had ignored a request by the ILD to meet with the

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10 The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, National Recovery Administration, and Civilian Conservation Corp.

11 The Scottsboro Case refers to nine African American youths who were charged with raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. They were not provided adequate council and quickly found guilty in a 'lynch trial' by an all white jury. In a courtroom surrounded by a mob atmosphere the young men, 'the Scottsboro Boys' were initially sentenced to death by electrocution.

12 Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks,* 146-147.

mothers of the Scottsboro Boys when the young men were again found guilty in Alabama after the Supreme Court ordered a retrial.[13]

The unique sources that Weiss introduces to the conversation, and that she uses to support her argument are statistics on the black vote in major Northeast cities in the elections between 1932 and 1940. There was a consistent trend of African Americans voting Democratic beginning with Senate elections in 1934 and increasing in percentage with the 1936 presidential election and holding steady through the 1940 presidential election. Weiss emphasizes that African Americans began to vote for FDR before voting for the Democratic Party, pointing to lower percentages for Democrats in off year and local elections than for presidential elections. She also points to statistical and anecdotal evidence which indicates that it was the black working class who overwhelmingly supported Roosevelt and the New Deal, while the black middle and upper class were more reluctant supporters. Weiss draws on voting statistics from a vast array of sources including the boards of elections in Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, and city records in New York City and Philadelphia.[14]

Roger Biles' study *The South and the New Deal*, published in 1994, is a regional history of the South in relation to the New Deal during the Depression years. It examines how the New Deal programs effected the South mostly in terms of economic and political changes, but also how Southern politics and the way that programs were administered locally changed the nature of the New Deal. Biles' central focus is not race relations in the South or civil rights, but he devotes a chapter to the topic, equally dividing the book between changes in agriculture, relief, labor, and race relations, and Southern politics. Of course, all those topics, especially in the South, affect and bleed into each other.

For the historiography and conversations of concern to this essay, *The South and the New Deal* provides a useful perspective because of its focus on the South as a region, and particularly continuity and change in its political economy. What Biles offers is similar to how Anna Green and Kathleen Troup in *The houses of history: A critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory* describe the

13 Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 42.
14 Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 293.

medium durée in Braudel's classification of historical time. Green and Troup describe the medium durée as "...comprised of [of] economic cycles, trade, population fluctuations, and prices."[15] This is not to say that Biles' work has the theoretical sophistication of the Annales school, or that much of his work is focused on traditional political history, "the ephemera of history," following Braudel.

Biles offers an of account of the long-term effects of one-party Democratic rule in the South. He argues this lack of political competition led to control by political machines at the state and city levels through the early 20th century and into the 1930s. He argues that a traditional planter elite kept a share in power but shared it increasingly with industrialists, usually steel, mining, or textile magnets, who dominated cities like Birmingham. This sharing of power is indicative of the economic changes leading to increased industrialization and growth of business in the South often termed the 'New South.' Biles writes, "In Birmingham, for example, the executives of the giant iron, steel, and coal companies, the so-called Big Mules, played the dominant role in the city's politics."[16]

I emphasize this aspect of Biles' work because in terms of a historical insight into the African American struggle against Jim Crow oppression in the South Biles does not offer a great deal. But, he does illuminate the business elites who profited from this system and aspects of the Southern political economy which remain often in the background in other studies in this essay. Biles argues powerfully that the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration) operated in the interest of large landowners (planter elites). Those in the planter class were able to benefit the most from the AAA which sought to maintain cotton prices by subsidizing farmers / land owners who voluntarily did not plant acreage. "Because the federal subsidies went to the farmers able to take the most land out of production, large landholders prospered most"[17] This analysis is found in his section on agriculture, *From Sharecropping to Agribusiness* in which he describes small farmers and sharecroppers, white and black, as driven from

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15 Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The houses of history: A critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 88-89.
16 Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 12-13.
17 Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 43.

their land in large numbers and suffering under the AAA. In this section Biles draws on secondary sources with a specific focus on changes in the agricultural economies of the South.[18]

In his section on race relations Biles mentions that the AAA adversely affected black farmers. He uses different sources in this section than in his section on agriculture. Biles draws on sources which are largely the same ones used by Weiss, a report published in 1944 by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal and *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* by Raymond Wolters published in 1970. He cites Myrdal's estimate that 200,000 black farmers and sharecroppers were evicted from their land and "uprooted" as a result of New Deal programs.[19]

Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression by Robin D.G. Kelley, published in 1990, is a work of social history which highlights the agency of working-class African Americans in the oppressive environment of 1930s and 40s Alabama. It is a study of the activities of communists and the Communist Party in Alabama during the Great Depression and into the World War II years. But, the Communist Party in Alabama was largely composed of African Americans durin this time. Kelley illuminates how when the CP took shape, in early 1930s in Alabama, it "evolved into a "race" organization, a working-class alternative to the NAACP" [quotation marks used by author].[20] Furthermore, he dispels, in the case of the CP in Alabama, the popular conception that African American communists during the 1930s were passively accepting of communist ideas from white left-wing intellectuals and radicals, or used cynically by the Party. "Far from being a slumbering mass waiting for Communist direction, black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle."[21]

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18 Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 39-47; Secondary sources include: Gilbert C. Fite's *Cotton Fields No More Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980,* Pete Daniel's *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880*, and Jack Temple Kirby's *Rural Worlds Lost*: *The American South, 1920-1960*.
19 Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 112; Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 55; the sociological report by Gunnar Myrdal is *An American Dilemma.*
20 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xii.
21 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 93.

In his preface Kelley describes his project in writing *Hammer and Hoe* as motivated in part by historian "Victoria de Grazia's appeal to historians of the American Left for "a social history of politics""[quotation marks used by author]. He writes that he has attempted to "construct a narrative that examines Communist political opposition through the lenses of social and cultural history..."[22] Kelley succeeds exceptionally in constructing this narrative that weaves elements of social, cultural, labor, and gender history to provide a viewpoint that is certainly from below (as in history from below).

Especially in Sitkoff and Weiss' studies the focus was on efforts centered in Washington D.C. to promote civil rights through national politics, and it was emphasized how the federal government under FDR did not challenge the structural status quo in the South in terms of segregation, lynching, or disenfranchisement. In Kelley's work the viewpoint shifts primarily to poor and working-class black men and women struggling against this structural oppression based on race, class, and gender in Jim Crow Alabama. Sitkoff and Weiss wrote about civil rights and politics in the New Deal era much like the first generation in the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement as described by Lawson. Lawson writes, of the scholarship in the late 1960s and 70s, "The techniques of social history, which were beginning to reconstruct the fields of women's, labor, and African-American history by illuminating the everyday lives of ordinary people, at first left the study of civil rights virtually untouched."[23] Kelley uses these techniques and a rich theoretical approach to illuminate the lives of ordinary people, while recognizing that ordinary lives are inherently political.

Researching and writing his book in the 1980s, Kelley shared an approach with Lawson's second generation. Kelley also belongs within Lawson's third generation, described as a "more interactive model, recognizing the need to connect the local with the national, the social with the political." This interactive model includes many different forms of connections between external influences on the Civil Rights Movement - such as from the mass media and liberal philanthropic organizations, and "internal dynamics of local movements, including relations between the sexes and

22 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, xi.
23 Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 456.

the races." Lawson included in his 1991 essay, "scholars are beginning to reexamine the ideological roots of the freedom struggle, exploring the legal, theological, and political legacies left by leaders and organizations of the 1930s and 1940s." Within this strand of historiography Lawson noted a development as,

> Scholars of African-American history have begun to scrutinize more closely the ways in which the shared economic and political concerns evident in earlier decades, particularly as embodied in the radical wing of the labor movement and Communist party alliances with local black activists, provided ideological inspiration and even personnel to the postwar movement.

Lawson mentions Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* as an example of this scholarship within African-American history.[24]

In *Hammer and Hoe* Kelley offers through the experiences of black radicals who gravitated to the Communist Party an extensive insight into the dynamics of the local movement in Alabama. Kelley 's work is not a women's history or particularly focused on gender, but his theoretical and methodological approach call for him to examine every aspect of the grass-roots movement as it was lived by ordinary men and women. In this way the role of women is focused on in a more extensive and sophisticated way than in the other monographs discussed. Kelley considers as well the role of white communists in the party and those in positions of regional party leadership, but within crafting this local history of the party, Kelley keeps his attention on how the party was navigated by and transformed by the local, grass-roots black working-class.

Two sources that Kelley draws on extensively in *Hammer and Hoe* are life stories based on oral histories: Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* published in 1974 and Nell Irvin Painter's *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* published in 1979. Nate Shaw is a pseudonym for Ned Cobb, who was a member of the, black Communist led, Alabama Share Cropper's Union (ASCU) which united black sharecroppers to fight against exploitation by plantation style landlords in the mind-1930s.[25]

24 Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 457, 463.
25 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 44; Kelley uses Ned Cobb in the book, while referencing *All God's Dangers*.

Kelley draws on his own interviews with Hosea Hudson, an iron worker, who was an early black Communist organizer and active throughout years covered in *Hammer and Hoe*, in Birmingham and surrounding counties. Kelley's utilization of these oral history narratives as well as other interviews with black working-class communists who formed the backbone of the party, allow a picture to emerge of how the struggles against Jim Crow and economic exploitation was experienced on the ground by these individuals, and many other black communists who were illiterate or semi-literate. As John Tosh illustrates the importance of oral histories which enable historians to "reconstruct the lives of ordinary people in their own words, instead of relying on the official record and the observations of elite writers."[26]

In *Hammer and Hoe* with the possible exception of the Scottsboro case there are very few points of culmination into victories or defeats (for the CP as a working-class black organization struggling for civil rights) that would act as points of closure within the narrative. The defeats are not as final and nationally resonate as the failure of the anti-lynching bill to pass a Senate filibuster, or FDR's unwillingness to desegregate the army. Nor, the victories as clearly visible as Marian Anderson signing at the Lincoln Memorial (detailed beautifully by both Sitkoff and Weiss). Instead, the focus is on specific localities in or around Birmingham or in Alabama Black Belt counties. Kelley focuses on black Americans who are often represented in the other monographs as an abstraction, the numerical figure of sharecroppers displaced by the AAA or discriminated against by the TVA or WPA projects. In Kelley's work we see not just black sharecroppers exploited by the planter class and displaced by the AAA, but we see confrontations and shootouts between armed black sharecroppers and the landowner's posses of thugs and police. Kelley details the trajectory of the Alabama Sharecropper's Union from its formation in 1931 through its dissolution in 1935 largely because of so many black farmers being displaced by the AAA. The Sharecropper's Union (SCU) was communist led and ended up attracting

26 Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 313.

exclusively black farmers. White landowners responded to the meetings and organization of the sharecroppers with violence, and SCU members often needed to use arms for self defense.[27]

Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*, published in 1996, focuses primarily on how progressive New Dealers and civil rights activists waged a campaign to democratize the South, by fighting against disenfranchisement and discrimination. This campaign largely took place between Roosevelt's reelection in 1936 and Truman's election in 1948. By 1936 according to Sitkoff and Weiss relations between the Roosevelt New Deal administration and African Americans had greatly improved. Weiss demonstrated how in the election of 1936 African American voting switched from solidly Republican to solidly for Roosevelt. Sullivan follows the trajectory of a split in the Democratic Party. In the late 1930s a liberal / progressive wing of the Party emerged which sought to maintain and expand New Deal programs. This wing was bolstered by the support of African Americans in Northern cities voting Democratic and joining the party. Against this coalition of New Deal supporters committed to expanding democracy, was pitted an increasingly anti-New Deal bipartisan block of Southern conservative Democrats and Republicans. It is in this context that Sullivan details national level political struggles such as the effort to abolish the poll-tax. But, primarily Sullivan looks to political organizers and activists within the South. They sought to transform the region by breaking down racial barriers which kept African Americans and whites from joining together, and barriers to voting such as the poll tax which kept the poor, both white and black, from voting.

Sullivan makes very little reference to the historiography of civil rights and race in the New Deal Era. She does include *A New Deal for Blacks*, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, and *Hammer and Hoe* in her bibliography, and she draws on these monographs occasionally in her narrative. In her acknowledgments section, which serves largely as a preface, Sullivan does give insight into her formation of the research project and her use of sources. The author recalls meeting Palmer Weber in

27 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 39-42, 49-50.

1978. Weber was a student activist in the 1930s and a progressive New Dealer in the 1940s. Sullivan says, "Several months earlier I had completed a graduate seminar paper on the 1948 southern campaign of Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. I was curious to meet the man who had helped orchestrate Wallace's southern effort." She then recalls Weber encouraging her to see her research not as a seminar paper, or even a dissertation, but the beginning of a book. Sullivan continues,

> Palmer spouted a litany of names, places, and events that had shaped the political landscape of the 1930s and 1940s... Charlie [Charles] Houston, Mary McLeod Bethune, Osceola McKaine, Cliff and Virginia Durr, Bob [Robert] Weaver, Mojeska Simkins,... Louis Burnham, Clark Foreman, Beanie Baldwin,... the Scottsboro Case, efforts to gain the admission of black students to the University of Virginia, the poll tax fight, FEPC" [Fair Employment Practices Committee], wartime voter-registration drives...[28]

Sullivan's *Days of Hope* acts as an extension of this "litany of names, places, and events." It is primarily a political history, but with an emphasis on the stories of individuals and how they worked together to create a movement to democratize the South, and promote racial equality and progressive ideals nationally in the New Deal era. The names listed by Palmer Weber, with a of couple additions, are the individuals whose roles Sullivan illuminates.

Many of these activists / leaders and events are discussed significantly in the other monographs examined in this essay. Sullivan's examination of the roles of less well known African American civil rights leaders such Mojeska Simkins, Osceola McKaine, and John H. McCray is an example of her unique contributions. Through these civil rights leaders and others in the South Sullivan is demonstrates that there was much more considerable voter registration by African Americans, especially in the 1940s, than is commonly noted in histories.[29] John McCray and Osceola McKaine founded the Progressive Democratic Party in South Carolina in the early 1940s. It sought to challenge the Democratic Party of South Carolina which retained an all-white primary in defiance of *Smith v. Allwright*.[30] The PDP contested the seating of the Democratic delegation from South Carolina at the

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28 Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, xi.

29 Although of course not without resistance and backlash including violence from the upholders of white supremacy and the status quo.

30 In *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) the Supreme Court ruled that all-white primaries were unconstitutional.

Democratic National Convention in 1944, foreshadowing the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party of 1964.

Sullivan's contribution is somewhat similar to Kelley's in *Hammer and Hoe*, in that she looks to localized leadership and struggle. But, instead of a focus on a single state, like Alabama, and political group, she weaves a narrative that looks at a number of local and regional sites of civil rights organizing. But, although providing something of a social movement history, Sullivan's analysis and narrative remain focused almost exclusively on leading individuals within the civil rights organizations.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Sullivan conducted oral interviews with many of the individuals who were participants this Southern struggle for civil rights organizing and contest over the direction of the Democratic party in the late 1930s and 1940s. Her friendship with Palmer Weber allowed her introduction and access to many of these participants and of course to interviewing Weber. She mentions in her acknowledgments extensive interviews and conversations with Virginia Durr and John McCray. Sullivan does cite interviews throughout her narrative, but *Days of Hope* is not significantly influenced by oral history. It is more that through the interviews, Sullivan was guided to and given access to personal papers, and the questions which she brought to manuscript collections such as Clark Forman's papers and the NAACP papers of Charles Hamilton Houston were sharpened.

Days of Hope provides significant insight into African American attorney, Charles Hamilton Houston's, vital role in growing the NAACP into a civil rights organization with grass-roots resonance and membership among the black communities in the South. Prior to the mid-1930s Sullivan suggests that the NAACP was primarily an elite organization which primarily focused on its, national level, political and legal battles. Local branches of the NAACP existed in the South but were limited by small memberships usually composed of the black middle and upper class in urban centers. This is also reflected in Sitkoff and Kelley's examination of how the NAACP was unable to respond effectively and swiftly to the Scottsboro case, and was overshadowed by the Communist Party and the ILD mobilizing legal aid and mass support for the Scottsboro Boys in the early 1930s.

Sullivan details how Houston after taking charge of the NAACP's legal team in 1934, along with his protege, Thurgood Marshall, organized extensively in the South; to build organization membership, encourage voter registration, and document inequalities in Jim Crow schools and public facilities. Beginning with inequalities in segregated institutions of high learning, they "crafted a strategy that steadily eroded the foundations of segregation" and disenfranchisement. Sullivan traces a series of cases led by Houston that would lead the way to *Brown v. Board of Education*, but also less well known legal challenges to the Jim Crow system, like the challenge to the all-white primary. This fight would culminate in a challenge to the practice in Texas, and lead to the Supreme Court's 1944 decision in *Smith v. Allwright* against all-white primaries. Throughout this fight, Sullivan emphasizes not only the successes in court, but the importance of decisions made by Houston - such as African American lawyers taking the lead in courtrooms. "...Often for the first time, black people witnessed one of their race functioning in a context of total equality, calling white state officials to account in full public view."[31]

The last monograph considered in this essay is Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff's *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* . Sklaroff takes as her starting point the recognition of the limitations for structural legislation for civil rights during the Roosevelt era which would disrupt the Southern status quo. She draws on the ground covered by Sitkoff and Weiss in their treatment of national politics to understand this limitation. *Black Culture and the New Deal* is similar to the studies by Kelley and Sullivan which look away from the national political stage to navigated opportunities for the advancement of civil rights, or the struggles and experience of African Americans which may not have led to concrete victories for civil rights, but are nonetheless significant. Sklaroff's intervention within this historiography is a recognition of the degree to which African Americans were able to promote social and political aims through art and culture supported by New Deal federal work

31 Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 91.

programs, and later during WWII through federal wartime programs aimed to forge national consensus and promote the image of American democracy.

Sklaroff's provides more attention to the historiography of the struggle for civil rights in the New Deal Era than the other monographs discussed. With her books publication in 2008, she is also able to take into consideration a greater extent of this historiography. Sklaroff notes that despite the liberalism and the economic progressive nature of the New Deal, "many scholars have highlighted the gendered and racialized nature of New Deal policies." The author draws, among other examples of this scholarship, on Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's article "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" which was published in 2006 to note how many New Deal policies created a gendered and racialized welfare state.[32] Recognizing this understanding of the New Deal era as in many ways conservative and oppressive, Sklaroff mentions Sitkoff, Kelley, and Sullivan as examples of scholars who have demonstrated how white and black activists were able to organize and push for civil rights despite the "Roosevelt administration's intransigence," and "particularly in excavating the grassroots mobilization of black communities, historians have provided a more nuanced analysis of the New Deal era."[33] Sklaroff's focus is on the "cultural arena," as her work is an excellent example of a cultural history which includes the political nature of how culture(s) and representations are produced.[34]

Sklaroff investigates how liberal minded New Deal administrators within the Federal Arts Project (FAP) part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), particularly between 1935 and 1939, sought to not only employ African Americans through arts and cultural programs, but to "represent them in a contributory fashion." Sklaroff recognizes this as no substitution for structural civil rights legislation. But, she understands it as a way that liberal minded New Dealers who wanted to promote

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32 See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's analysis of a "two-track welfare system" that emerged based on the idea of the worker as a male head of house hold and sole breadwinner. A result of this thinking, agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from unemployment insurances programs and other benefits of Social Security when it was created in 1935. African Americans and women workers were disproportionately represented in these forms of labor. Jacquelyn Down Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1241.
33 Sklaroff, *Black Culture and The New Deal*, 10.
34 Sklaroff, 3,10.

racial equality could do so within the confines of a Southern dominated Democratic party. The author indicates that Walter White and the NAACP's national program viewed this as an avenue to accomplish one of their goals, to "eradicate racial stereotypes and to preserve black cultural autonomy."[35] Carlton Moss, a negro unit director in the FTP (Federal Theater Project), termed this goal - "cultural emancipation."[36] *Black Culture and the New Deal* examines the Federal Theater Project and the Federal Writers' Project as sites of possibilities and limitations for achieving these goals.

Sklaroff stresses the importance of understanding this cultural arena as not a single dimensional process of white liberal administers providing opportunities for cultural representation to African Americans. She shows how the lines were not always clearly drawn between white administrators and African American artists employed by the federal arts projects. The study highlights the role of African Americans such as the poet, Sterling Brown, who was an administrator heading the American Guide Series within the Federal Writers Project (FWP). Sklaroff focuses on other examples of black leaders in the federal arts project such as Carlton Moss who was a creative director of a black theater unit in New York City. Her focus is on the navigations that took place as African American and white members of these federal arts projects contested how this representation should take place. Sklaroff also highlights debates and differences between black artists and community leaders on these questions. The author draws on the history of racist minstrel depictions and the extremely limited roles that were offered to African American actors such as butlers and maids before the 1930s, to show how these federal art programs offered a considerable new opportunities for greatly expanded roles and representation. But, there remained significant contest around how the black experience should be depicted. Sklaroff particularly depicts through records from the Play Bureau in the National Archives which show how play readers judged submitted plays and decided which were suitable for production in the FTP.[37]

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35 Sklaroff, *Black Culture and The New Deal*, 32.
36 Sklaroff, 2.
37 Sklaroff, 52-57.

Sklaroff also pays attention to the larger political environment which constrained the possibilities for representation and artistic freedom for African Americans, particularly the House Un-American Activities Committee attacked the arts section of the WPA for 'subversive' material. What the HUAC often deemed subversive is an example of how critiques of racism and structural inequalities were often deemed 'communist.' Within the theater project Sklaroff focuses extensively on how African American representation achieved greater success, and was more likely to evade censor by the conservatives in Congress, with the 'blackening' of theater classics with mass appeal like Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Sullivan details how *Swing Mikado*, with a syncopated music score to make it 'swing' and a black cast became one of the biggest hits by WPA arts projects in the 1930s. Through analysis of cultural representation, artistic choices, and popular reception Sklaroff again demonstrated a navigation, as a musical by white authors nevertheless was adapted in away that challenged existing stereotypes and paved the way for African American roles in theater and in in cinema.[38]

Within the Federal Writers project Sklaroff focuses on the work of Sterling Brown in his efforts to include local and social histories of African Americans in the American Guide Series project.[39] This perspective shows an African American administrator based in Washington D.C. struggling to make sure his directive were carried out by local white project leaders who sometimes balked at his instructions to hire local African Americans and depict the contributions of African Americans with their state or city. This focus highlights the agency of leaders like Sterling Brown as well as the support her got from liberal New Deal administrators within the WPA, but also the challenges that remained on the ground in local WPA administration. Sklaroff draws among other sources on the papers of Sterling Brown and his correspondences with other administrators from the records of the Federal Writer's project in the Library of Congress.

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38 Sklaroff, 66-72.
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Black Culture and the New Deal narrates the switch during the World War II years from the fine arts and literary approach of WPA art programs to the mass media film and radio supported by the government to boost moral and solidify public opinion behind the war effort.[40] Sklaroff details how popular films were produced with collaboration between the Office of War Information and Hollywood to attempt to positively depict African Americans and black soldiers.[41] At the same time there continued to be segregation in the armed forces. The navigated opportunities within limited circumstances is exemplified by the black boxer Joe Luis's role as a celebrity soldier in U.S. war propaganda. Although he did not challenge segregation in the army, Sklaroff argues that his image as a black man holding a gun in army recruitment posters had influence among African American communities far beyond what was imagined by government propagandists.[42] Particularly with the Hollywood films but also with FTP plays and wartime propaganda Sklaroff offers her own analysis of their content as a cultural critic. But, she also draws on the correspondences of NAACP leaders like Walter White or Whitney Young and opinions expressed in black newspapers, *The Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier, The Baltimore Afro-American*, to gauge reception in the African American community.

Sklaroff, Kelley, and Sullivan more so than the other historian discussed in this essay challenge this historiography to continue to develop and for historians to pose new questions. There is a consensus formed around the limitations and conservatism of FDR and his administration's approach to the politics of racial equality and civil rights. But, historians can look beyond this conservative atmosphere at the national political level to uncover wellsprings of resistances and organizing for black liberation and civil rights in localized movements and struggles. The influence of the white supremacist southern block of Democrats to limit the liberalism and radicalism in terms of race of FDR's New Deal

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40 Sklaroff, 164-171. *Jubilee* was the most influential radio show examined, produced by the Armed Forces Radio Service as variety show for soldiers, it featured a black host and mostly black performers.
41 Sklaroff, 210-227. *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* are examples of popular films with an all black cast analyzed, and *Bataan* and *Sahara* are examples of combat movies that positively represented black servicemen.
42 Sklaroff, 154-157.

is fairly well documented. This is not to say that there could not be further investigations into the Congressional influence of this Southern block. What is most compelling and prompting of questions in this sampling of monographs is the relationship between political organizing of African Americans and allied groups for liberation, or black freedom, or civil rights and the watershed history of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s.

There are debates and contention surrounding the significance of gains that were made in the struggle for civil rights or in political organizing among African Americans and allies that would influence the classical Civil Rights Movement. Often the concerns that are present and contemporary to the historian drive the questions they bring to history. In this historiography we can see Sitkoff's search for roots and wellsprings of the civil rights movement as part of his discontent with the retrogression in terms of racial equality and progressive politics following the Nixon years. While Weiss may appear to be offering a more radical and critical perspective on the FDR years, it may stem more from a lack of critical perspective on the work that still needed (and still needs) to be done to achieve racial equality and full democracy from her vantage in the early 1980s.

All the monographs discussed in this essay are part of the historiography that Jacquelyn Dowd Hall engages with in her influential 2005 article “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” Hall argues for historians to reexamine the temporal and spatial parameters of the Civil Rights Movement. Her article is meticulously researched and dense, positing a 'Long Civil Rights Movement' reaching from the 1930s into her present moment in 2005, and into our own. Hall's main purpose is to ensure that the Civil Rights Movement remains dangerous to the status quo, that it remains unfinished business, not celebrated and sanitized through closure. I cannot within the concluding thoughts of this essay detail Hall's argument and range of sources, but it furnishes a conceptualization for this conclusion. Hall, like Sitkoff, Sullivan, Kelley, and Sklaroff, recognizes

(American) history not as a stable march toward progress, but through what Troup and Green describe Hayden White categorizing as a radical ideological view that utilizes a tragic mode of narrative.[43]

43 Troup and Green, *The houses of history*, 208.

Primary Source Documents

<u>All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw</u> is an oral history life narrative of a black Alabama sharecropper written by Theodore Rosengarten. Nate show is a pseudonym for Ned Cobb who was member of the Alabama Sharecropper's Union in the early 1930s. Rosengarten captured the voice and story of Cobb through extensive interviews. The sharecroppers union was an example of black Communist led resistance to the exploitation of sharecroppers by planter class landowners. In this excerpt Ned Cobb describers a confrontation between himself and a deputy sheriff in December, 1932.

The deputy said, "I'm goin to take all old Virgil Jones got this mornin."

…I begged him not to do it, begged him. You'll dispossess him of bein able to feed his family."

Our teacher, the man that put out this organization in this part of the country, he told us to act humble, be straight; his teachin, to not go a thing too rapid and forcible. Be quiet, whatever we do, let it work in a way of virtue. They got a song to this effect, did have years ago: "Low is the way to the bright new world, let the heaven light shine on me." …humble and low is the way for me.

That's what I tried to give Logan, too. I tried to go by the union's orders.

…I knowed it was Watson gived him orders what to do,… or the High Sheriff Kurt Beall…

The deputy said, "I got orders to take it and I'll be damned—"

I asked him humble and begged him not to do it.

…He said, "I got orders to take it and I'll be damned if I ain't goin to take it."

Well, that brought up a whole lot of hard words then. I just politely told him he weren't goin to do it…. "Well, if you take it, I'll be damned if you don't take it over my dead body. Go ahead and take it."

He got hot. After a while I seed Cecil Pickett go in the lot with bridles in his hands to catch Virgil Jones' mules. That was a colored fellow had no sense; white folks could get him to do anything they wanted him to do…

…I said, "What are you goin in there for?"

Mr. Logan said, "He's goin in there to catch them mules…"

I said, "You just as well to come out. Catch no mules there this mornin, till a further investigation."

Kept a walkin—I said, "Well, you can go ahead and catch em but you won't get em out of that lot; go catch em, go on."

Somebody got to stand up. If we don't we niggers in this country are easy prey. Nigger had anything a white man wanted, the white man took it; made no difference how the cut might have come, he took it.

Mr. Logan seed I meant it—I was crowin so strong and I was fixin to start a shootin frolic then. "Come out, Cece," Logan said, "Come on back, Cece. Let em alone. Come out."

Source: Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 306-308.

The following is excerpted from Angelo Herndon's autobiographical reflections, You Cannot Kill the Working Class, published by the International Defense League (IDL) and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights in 1937. Angelo Herndon was a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s organizing African American and white workers. The Scottsboro Case referred to nine African American young men, who became known as the Scottsboro Boys. They were accused of raping two white women. They were quickly tried in a mob atmosphere in Alabama without proper representation. Their case was taken to the Supreme Court by the Communist led IDL.

It was while I was in New Orleans for a few weeks as representative of the Trade Union Unity League, that I first saw the name Scottsboro. I want to go into that a bit, because the Scottsboro case marked a new stage in the life of the Negro people — and the white workers too — in the United States.

One morning I picked up a capitalist paper and saw that "nine black brutes had raped two little white girls." That was the way the paper put it. There was a dock strike on at the time in New Orleans, and the bosses would have been glad to see this issue, the Scottsboro case, used as a method of whipping up hatred of white and Negro longshoremen against each other.

I knew the South well enough to know at once that here was a vicious frame-up. I got to work right away organizing committees among the workers of New Orleans. We visited clubs, unions, churches to get support for the Scottsboro boys.

On May 31, 1981, I went as a delegate to the first All- Southern Scottsboro Conference, held in Chattanooga. The hall where the conference was to be held was surrounded by gunmen and police, but we went through with the meeting just the same. The bosses and dicks* were boiling mad because we had white and Negro meeting together — and saying plainly that the whole Scottsboro case was a rotten frame-up. I spoke at that conference.

While I was in Chattanooga that trip, I went to a meeting in a Negro church addressed by William Pickens, field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Pickens made an attack on the International Labor Defense. He said we shouldn't get the governor and the courts mad. We should try to be polite to them. He said: "You people don't know how to fight. Give your money to me and to lawyers and we'll take care of this." Then he attacked the mothers of the Scottsboro boys as being a lot of ignorant fools.

Well, I was so mad I hardly knew what I was doing. I spoke up and said that the Scottsboro boys would never get out of prison until all the workers got together and brought terrific pressure on the lynchers. I said: "We've been polite to the lynchers entirely too long. As long as we O. K. what they do, as long as we crawl to them and assure them we have no wish to change their way of doing things – just so long we'll be slaves."

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* Police

Source: Angelo Herndon, *You Cannot Kill the Working Class*, as excerpted in *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*, 2nd ed., ed. Thomas R. Frazier (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), 282-283.

The following are excerpts from an article published in the October 1935 issue of The Crisis, a monthly publication of the NAACP, written by John P. Davis. Davis was an African American lawyer and journalist who worked frequently with the NAACP. He based this article on investigations he conducted into the Tennessee Valley Authority with Charles Hamilton Houston, who led the NAACP's legal challenge to segregation and civil rights abuse of African Americans during the New Deal Era. The Tennessee Valley Authority was a federal project that began in 1933 as part of President Roosevelt's economic recovery plan. Primarily through constructing dams on the Tennessee River, it sought to provide employment and create affordable electricity for the Southern region.

More than a quarter of a million Negro citizens live in that section of our nation drained by the Tennessee River. It is in this area that for more than two years a vast social experiment, the Tennessee Valley Authority, has been carried on by the federal government. A year ago Mr. Charles Houston and I gave.. our reactions to this experiment following an extensive visit through the Valley. At that time many aspects of the project were still in an experimental phase. We could only hazard an opinion as to the possible future outcome of the experiment as it affected Negroes. Today it is possible to restate those conclusions upon a basis of many additional facts.

… Policies of TVA governing the employment and treatment of Negro workers on the job are of immediate concern to Negro citizens. In March 1935 Dr. F.W. Reeves, director of personal, felt it necessary to stress publicly the intention of TVA to employ Negro workers in proportion to their population percentages in the Valley area.

… A contrast of performance with promise shows that Negroes have never been given their proportionate share of jobs on TVA projects. In addition when payrolls of Negro and white workers are contrasted even greater inequities appear. Thus for the payroll period May 1 to May 16, 1935 the 2,069 Negro employees then employed received only $86,032.80 of the $901,839 total payroll of TVA for the period.

… For the most part skilled work is denied Negro workers. Employment of labor is done through the TVA with division. … Only by currying favor with white bosses, may a Negro worker once on the job hope to rise to a higher level of pay or skilled employment.

… Another evidence that TVA officials deliberately erected a color bar... can be seen in the refusal to admit Negros into the training and vocational schools established in the area by the TVA.

Source: John P. Davis, "The Plight of the Negro," *The Crisis*, October 1935 https://books.google.com/books?id=CFgEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA293&dq=John+P.+Davis,+%E2%80%9CThe+Plight+of+the+Negro,%E2%80%9D+The+Crisis,+October+1935&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj_zrvTi8PnAhVLlXIEHeIHBWAQ6AEwAXoECAAQAg#v=onepage&q=John%20P.%20Davis%2C%20%E2%80%9CThe%20Plight%20of%20the%20Negro%2C%E2%80%9D%20The%20Crisis%2C%20October%201935&f=false .

The following is a letter from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP. Eleanor Roosevelt supported White's campaign to pressure President Roosevelt to support a federal anti-lynching bill. Anti-lynching bills had failed to pass Congress in 1934 and in 1935. The Van Nuys resolution refers to a Senate Committee set up to investigate lynchings. Senator Byrnes from South Carolina was a leader of the Southern Democrats who blocked anti-lynching bills. FDR relied on support from Southern members of Congress like Byrnes to help pass his New Deal legislation.

March 19, 1936

My dear Mr. White:

Before I received your letter today I had been in to the President, talking to him about your letter enclosing that of the Attorney General. I told him that it seemed rather terrible that one could get nothing done and that I did not blame you in the least for feeling there was no interest in this very serious question. I asked him if there were any possibility of getting even one step taken, and he said the difficulty is that it is unconstitutional apparently for the Federal Government to step in in the lynching situation. The Government has only been allowed to do anything about kidnapping because of its interstate aspect, and even that has not as yet been appealed so they are not sure that it will be declared constitutional.

The President feels that lynching is a question of education in the states, rallying good citizens, and creating public opinion so that the localities themselves will wipe it out. However, if it were done by a Northerner, it will have an antagonistic effect. I will talk to him again about the Van Nuys resolution and will try to talk also to Senator Byrnes and get his point of view. I am deeply troubled about the whole situation as it seems to be a terrible thing to stand by and let it continue and feel that one cannot speak out as to his feeling. I think your next step would be to talk to the more prominent members of the Senate.

Very sincerely yours,

Eleanor Roosevelt

Source: Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, NAACP records, Library of Congress https://www.loc.gov/item/mcc.015/.

The NAACP organized an art exhibition at a Manhattan gallery in 1935 to draw attention to the problem of lynching faced by African Americans particularly in the South. The exhibition was part of a campaign led by the NAACP to rally public support for an anti-lynching bill which was being debated in Congress. Reginald Marsh submitted this drawing to the exhibition. It had appeared as a cartoon in The NewYorker in 1934.

"This is her first lynching."

Source: "This is her first Lynching" by Reginald Marsh https://newyorkhistoryblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Marsh.1934.jpg.

The following are excerpts from a speech Franklin Delano Roosevelt August 11th 1938 in Barnesville Georgia. The speech is often referred to as the Barnesville Address. In his tour of the South before the elections of 1938 FDR sought to "purge" conservative Southern Senators from the Democratic party by campaigning against their reelection. These Senators were among the powerful Southern Democrats who would not support the liberal side of the Democratic party which sought to expand the New Deal's economic program and pass civil rights legislation. In this speech FDR targets Senator Walter George of Georgia.

… In 1932 and again in 1936 I was chosen Chief Executive with the mandate to seek by definite action to correct many evils of the past and of the present; to work for a wider distribution of national income, to improve the conditions of life, especially among those who need it most and, above all, to use every honest effort to keep America in the van of social and economic progress.

...The majority of the Senate and House have agreed with those objectives, and have worked with me; and I have worked with them to translate those objectives into action. Some have given "lip service" to some of the objectives but have not raised their little fingers actively to attain the objectives themselves. Too often these few have listened to the dictatorship of a small minority-of individuals and corporations who oppose the objectives themselves. That is a real dictatorship and one which we have been getting away from slowly but surely during the past five years. As long as I live, you will find me fighting against any kind of dictatorship—especially the kind of dictatorship which has enslaved many of our fellow citizens for more than half a century...

...To carry out my responsibility as President, it is clear that if there is to be_ success in our Government there ought to be cooperation between members of my own party and myself—cooperation, in other words, within the majority party, between one branch of Government, the Legislative branch, and the head of the other branch, the Executive. That is one of the essentials of a party form of government. It has been going on in this country for nearly a century and a half. The test is not measured, in the case of an individual, by his every vote on every bill—of course not. The test lies rather in the answer to two questions: first, has the record of the candidate shown, while differing perhaps in details, a constant active fighting attitude in favor of the broad objectives of the party and of the Government as they are constituted today; and, secondly, does the candidate really, in his heart, deep down in his heart, believe in those objectives? I regret that in the case of my friend, Senator George, I cannot honestly answer either of these questions in the affirmative...

Source: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Address at Barnesville" (1938), https://library.menloschool.org/chicago/speech.

Marian Anderson performed on the steps of the Lincoln memorial on Easter Sunday 1939. The concert halls in Washington D.C. that were large enough for a singer of Anderson's stature would not allow her to perform for an integrated audience. Howard University and Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, with President Roosevelt's blessing arranged for her to perform a free outdoor concert. An interracial crowd of 75,000 filled the National Mall. The concert was broadcasted nationwide. Marian Anderson began her first number, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty...'

Source: https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/marian-anderson-concert/

The following is excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by, educator and civil rights activists, Sue Thrasher, with Ella Baker in 1977. Ella Baker was an African American community leader and civil rights activist who worked with the WPA in New York City in the 1930s and the NAACP in the 1940. She was a leader in the post- WWII Civil Rights Movement, acting as executive director of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and helping to found the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. In this part of the interview Baker reflects on her experience as a woman working as a field secretary for the NAACP between 1941 and 1946, traveling through the South to establish new branches and build membership. What Baker focuses on most is her community building skills which she used to help grow the NAACP into a mass organization that was responsive to the needs of African Americans of all social classes.

SUE THRASHER:
Did you have any difficulty in that job because you were a woman?

ELLA BAKER:
Like what?

SUE THRASHER:
When you would go into Birmingham, Alabama, for instance, to work with the local chapter.

ELLA BAKER:
Difficulty in terms of relating to them?

SUE THRASHER:
Were the men in the community the leaders, and would they accept you?

ELLA BAKER:
No, I didn't have any difficulty. I think maybe a couple of things were positive assets for me. One is, as I told you, I had grown up playing baseball, and my man-woman relationships were on the basis of just being a human being, not a sex object. As far as my sense of security, it had been established. And also, I guess, my ego; I had been able to compete on levels such as scholarship, without attempting to. And I could stand my own in debate. And things of that nature. I wasn't delicate, to put it . And I was very much interested in people, which was an asset that could serve me well because it could also break through whatever class lines had been either established or that were tenously there, which frequently surfaced. There were certain people in the community that didn't think too much of certain other people. For instance, there were times when an incident like, I'll call it, the town drunk might be arrested and beaten up. Well, that didn't matter. But part of the message that we were carrying was that it did matter, because to the extent that he was demeaned, your rights were therefore decreased, or something to that effect. It was a period in which there was kind of a new surge of identity among some of the people who were not class people, but who recognized that there were inevitable links between those who had and those who had not, because any black could be subject to the same treatment.

Source: Sue Thrasher, Oral History Interview with Ella Baker, April 19, 1977. Interview G-0008. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

While the United States had not yet declared war on the Axis Powers, FDR's administration was spending heavily on military defense to prepare for the possibility of war and to give support to Great Britain through the Lend-Lease program. The following is excerpted from open letter published in the Black Worker by African American organized labor leader, A. Phillip Randolph.

Call to March
July 1, 1941

We call upon you to fight for jobs in National Defense.

We call upon you to struggle for the integration of Negros in the armed forces, such as the Air Corps, Navy, Army, and Marine Corps of the Nation.

We call upon you to demonstrate for the abolition of Jim Crowism in all Government departments and defense employment.

…To American Negros, it is the denial of jobs in Government defense projects. It is racial discrimination in Government departments. It is widespread Jim-Crowism in the armed forces of the Nation.

While billions of the taxpayer's money are being spent for war weapons, Negro workers are being turned away from the gates of factories, mines, and mills – being flatly told, "NOTHING DOING."

… With faith and confidence of the Negro people in their own power for self-liberation, Negroes can break down the barriers of discrimination against employment in National Defense. …and smash through and blast the Government, business, and labor-union red tape to win the right to equal opportunity in vocational training and re-training in defense employment.

Most important of and vital to all, Negroes, by the mobilization and coordination of their mass power, can cause PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT TO ISSUE AN EXECUTIVE ORDER ABOLISHING DISCRIMINATION IN ALL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, ARMY, NAVY, AIR CORPS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE JOBS.

…Dear fellow Negro Americans, be not dismayed in these terrible times. You possess power, great power. Our problem is to harness and hitch it up for action on the broadest, daring and most gigantic scale.

In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, more pressure, and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action… To this end we propose that ten thousand NEGROES MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS IN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND EQUAL INTEGRATION IN THE FIGHTING FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES.

Source: "A. Phillip Randolph Calls for a March on Washington," in *Black protest thought in the twentieth century*, eds. August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 221-224.

Joe Louis was an American heavyweight boxing champion, nicknamed the Brown Bomber. He famously defeated the German boxer, Max Schmeling, in a 1938 match which symbolically pitted 'the ideal of racially inclusive American democracy' against Nazism. When he joined the Army, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, he toured with a boxing troop providing entertainment to soldiers. The military capitalized on his celebrity status and used his image in recruitment and propaganda posters. He did not challenge publicly the segregation that pervaded the army. The words on this poster were spoken by Louis at a fundraiser for the Navy Relief Society.

Source: United States Office of Facts and Figures. Pvt. Joe Louis says-- "We're going to do our part, and we'll win because we're on God's side.", poster, 1942; [Washington D.C.]. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu

Textbook Critique

&

Original Textbook Offering

Text Book Critique

For this section I will use the U.S. History textbook published by Pearson – Prentice Hall, *America: Pathways to the Present Modern American History.*[44] This book was published in 2005, but was still the textbook for use in the 11th grade U.S. History and Government regents and honors classes during my student teaching in the spring of 2020. I will primarily examine how the textbook conveys the African American experience during the New Deal and Great Depression within its chapter titled "The New Deal (1933 – 1941)." The prior chapter, "The Crash and Depression (1929-1933)," will also be considered in regard to the immediate effect of the Great Depression on African Americans in the context of ongoing discrimination and racism. Both chapters are situated in a broader unit titled "Boom Times to Hard Times, 1920 – 1941" (pages 448 – 560).

The chapter on "The Crash and Depression" describes the economic crash of 1929, its underlining economic causes, and the ripple effect it had through economic and social life. This chapter contains a section called, "The Social Effects of the Depression" in which the stage is set for students to understand that the Depression was not just a passing downturn, but a long term problem causing widespread poverty which strained and changed society. Within this section there are larger headers in red which include, "Poverty Spreads" and then "Poverty Strains Society." After "Poverty Strains Society," there are sub-headers in blue which include: "Impact on Health," "Stresses on Families," and "Discrimination Increases." A five paragraph entry under the heading discrimination increases contains an exposition of how during hard economic times competition for jobs pitted Americans against each other. The first paragraph claims that this economic competition "produced a general rise in suspicions and hostilities against minorities." It continues to say that, "African Americans, Hispanics, and in the West, Asian Americans all suffered as white laborers began to

44 Andrew Cayton, Elisabeth Israels Perry, Linda Reed, and Allan M. Winkler, *America: Pathways to the Present Modern American History* (Needham, MA: Pearson – Prentice Hall, 2005).

demand the low-paying jobs typically filled by these minorities."[45]

The first paragraph ends with mentioning that Hispanics and Asian Americans not only lost their jobs but their country as well, as "thousands were deported – event those born in the United States."[46] The following four paragraphs discuss the discrimination, hostilities, and violence that African Americans experienced. It is odd that the experiences of Hispanics and Asian Americans are noted so briefly, and not elaborated on in the section or in the whole unit. While at the same time the page of content that is then dedicated to how African Americans were effected and suffered during the early years of the Great Depression does not have a heading that clearly designates the African American experience.

The authors begin this discussion by noting that "black unemployment soared" to 56% in 1932. This is very important to note but the disproportional effect on African Americans would be better understand by a comparison with white unemployment or the overall rate of unemployment. Six pages prior, on page 511, the text does mention the overall unemployment rate in 1932. But, it is worded as 12 million people unemployed "which accounted for about a quarter of the labor force." Students would not only need to understand that to be an unemployment rate of 25%, but then also connect that information to the 56% African American unemployment rate on page 517.[47]

This section continues to describe the racism which both created and compounded the disproportional effect of the Depression on African Americans, but it does not use the term racism. What is described appears as details which follow from 'economic hard times pitting Americans against each other' and 'rising suspicions and hostilities against minorities.' The authors state that "some whites declared openly that blacks had no right to jobs if whites were out of work." This is followed by a quote from which gives emotional resonance to the economic plight of African Americans. It is from photographer Gordon Parks who who reflected on riding the rails to Harlem: "To most blacks who had

45 Cayton, et al., *America*, 517.
46 Cayton, et al., *America*, 517.
47 Cayton, et al., 517, 511.

flocked in from all over the land, the struggle to survive was savage. Poverty coiled around them and me with merciless fingers." This is an important point to emphasize which many of the monographs I discussed in the synthesis essay make, using similar quotes which bring the statistics, measurements of economic suffering, to life.

The next paragraphs describe how because government relief programs often discriminated against African Americans, black organizations and charities often were the only source of help for African Americans. It then states how discrimination was worse in the South. Jim Crow laws and segregation are not mentioned. The authors say "African Americans were denied civil rights such as access to education, voting, and healthcare." They then add in a way that is perhaps intentionally disconcerting, but also frustratingly undeveloped, as a single sentence, "Lynchings increased." Like the disproportional suffering and discrimination, this topic is examined again (but still given short thrift) in the next chapter on the New Deal.[48]

The last two paragraphs of this section describe the Scottsboro Case as an example of minority rights being ignored by the justice system. Without outside context this appears as an example of minority rights being disregarded because of the hostility to African Americans and other minorities due to increased economic competition in the Depression. It is not presented as part of a system of injustice and oppression within the Jim Crow 'justice' system which was arguably only exacerbated by the Depression.

After stating the basics of what happened to the young men involved in the Scottsboro case, the authors describe the case a being "taken up, and sometimes exploited, by northern groups, most notably the Communist Party." This follows the generalization in historical narratives which views the Communist Party as largely using or exploiting African Americans and civil rights issue causes. Harvard Sitkoff in *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* and Robin D.G. Kelley in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*

48 Cayton, et al., 517.

demonstrate that this is certainly an overly simplistic characterization of the relationship between African Americans and the Communist Party. Both historians stress how the Communist Party and its legal wing, the International Labor Defense (ILD), helped turn the Scottsboro case into a rallying for civil rights. Particularly, Kelley makes the point that building on the success of organizing for the Scottsboro defendants the Communist Party in Alabama became a predominantly black led organization that was not simply controlled or exploited by northern communists.

The next chapter, dedicated to the New Deal, mentions positive developments for African Americans as well as continuing discrimination and the failure of the FDR's administration to tackle the Jim Crow system. After the accomplishments of FDR's first hundred days and early New Deal programs, there is a subsection on "Key Players in the New Deal." In this section, under the header "Ground Breaking Appointments," there is paragraph devoted to Francis Perkins and then two on Mary McLeod Bethune and the Black Cabinet. The authors state that the FDR administration "broke new ground by hiring African Americans in more than a hundred policymaking posts." But, Mary McLeod Bethune is the only appointee mentioned by name. The description of her role in the administration is covered well. This important point of representation and involvement in the FDR administration by African Americans would benefit greatly from an image. Currently it is just text, with the images on the page relating to the TVA mentioned on the previous page. This is a missed opportunity to show an African American women in a government leadership position. Another member influential member of the Black Cabinet could be mentioned as well, perhaps Robert C. Weaver. The Black Cabinet also is great opportunity that should have been taken to include an image, many exist, or the African American policymakers and officeholders posing together.[49]

The next 'Key Player' described is Eleanor Roosevelt. They describe how she had a much more influential role than prior first ladies. The authors describe an event which shows Eleanor Roosevelt organizing for her own causes which sometimes went against the aims of her husband. They describe

49 Cayton, et al., 541.

her symbolic protest against segregation at meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, AL in which she knowingly broke segregation laws by placing her chair on the line which divided white and black attendees. This example is a good illustration of Eleanor Roosevelt's actions on behalf of civil rights, but might have been stronger if it did not appear as an isolated incident. The prior paragraph on Bethune could have led to a description of Mrs. Roosevelt's and her friendship and work together against the segregation and discrimination which could then culminate in the Birmingham concrete example. The SCHW is also called simply an interracial group and in the same vein it would allow students to better understand the sustained nature of the groups struggle if they were described as fighting against the poll tax in the South (which was their primary aim).

In another section on "The New Deal's Critics" the text discusses the limitations of the New Deal in helping all Americans. The two groups discussed are women and African Americans. The section on African Americans is about a page and consists of five paragraphs. It is this section which suffers the most from lack of detail and analysis that could accurately depict how New Deal programs discriminated against African Americans and the failure of the FDR administration to take a stand against the Jim Crow South. The section begins by explaining that Federal relief programs in the South "reinforced racial segregation" because African Americans were "not offered jobs on a professional level," and were excluded from skilled jobs on dams and electricity projects. It is also added that they received less pay than whites for the same work. The original design of Social Security to not include African Americans is adequately mentioned.[50]

This information is correct but could be much more specific and concrete. A general point should be made that when Federal relief programs gave direct aid it was administered through state and local governments which definitely in the South (and possibly in the North) resulted in discrimination, as African Americans were given less than white or excluded from relief entirely. Then specific practices which discriminated and harmed African Americans should be described with regard to

50 Cayton, et al., 546.

specific New Deal programs. The AAA's affect on African Americans (and other sharecroppers and tenant farmers) is neglected from the original description the program. This section should mention how the AAA resulted in disproportionate harm to African Americans as large landowners did not pass on subsidies sharecroppers but kicked them off the land. The CCC's practice of segregation is not mentioned in the programs description and should be included here. This was the practice of the CCC as it was administered by the U.S. Army which practiced segregation and therefore should not just be explained as causes by Southern practices. The TVA should be included as an example of a public works job creation program which discriminated and segregated African American workers but giving them less skilled job and excluding them from education programs which could lead to skilled and better payed jobs.

This section also should include how African Americans exposed and protested against the discrimination in these programs. The investigations of John P. Davis and Charles Hamilton Houston into the discrimination practiced by TVA and their piece in the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis* exposing this systemic problem could be included. Robert C. Weaver an economist, political scientist, and member of Harold Icke's Department of the Interior also gathered data on racial discrimination in programs like the NRA (which should also be included for in many instances setting wages for African Americans lower than whites and not protecting African Americans from getting fired if wage controls sought to ensure fairness). The interracial organization of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) bases in the Arkansas delta could also be mentioned as a form of resistance to the planter classes manipulation of the AAA (the Alabama Sharecroppers Union detailed in *Hammer and Hoe* dissolved after the AAA displaced almost all the organizing sharecroppers).

This section also includes the famous image of a billboard in Louisville featuring a banner that reads 'World's Highest Standard of Living' and a white family in a car next to the phrase 'There's No Way like the American Way.' In front of this billboard and line of African Americans wait for a relief center. This image is a good one to include, but the details that I have mentioned would allow it be

more critically examined. The section also mentions that many businesses in the North also practiced discrimination and would not hire African Americans leading to 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' boycotts. This is a good example of discrimination in the North and of African American resistance and should be included but again would benefit from inclusion into a broader narrative of Federal government discrimination. There is also quote from an African American from an oral history project which speaks to the prosperity of the nation not being shared with African Americans because of discrimination. It is a fine quote but does not include a specific form of discrimination or of African American resistance.

The experience of violence and lynchings is also addressed. The authors say that the early Depression saw an "alarming rise in the number of lynchings." This is correct but it would be helpful to include a simple chart that showed the number of lynchings increasing from 1929 and peaking in 1933. The authors say that, "The federal government again offered no relief. A bill to make lynching a federal crime was abandoned in 1938." An explanation for this failure is given by referencing a 1948 recollection by NAACP leader Walter White. White is quoted recalling what FDR said to him:

> Southerners, by reason of seniority rule in Congress, are chairmen or occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House Committees. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill no, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep American from collapsing. I just can't take that risk.

This is a great quote which sheds light on FDR's mindset. But, this diffidence on the part of FDR to Southern Democrats in Congress could have been mentioned before in connection with a broader analysis of FDR not using the New Deal as away to dismantle the Jim Crow South. This is also an opportunity to illustrate that partnership between Walter White and Eleanor Roosevelt as they had been trying since at least 1935 to get an anti-lynching bill passed Congress. This section finishes with a rather unsubstantiated claim that FDR was nevertheless supported by African Americans because they suffered so much from the Great Depression and benefited from relief. This could use some number

showing how African Americans did not support FDR in the election of 1932 but by 1936 they largely switched to FDR and the Democratic Party.

This section also includes an sidebar with a 'Focus on Culture' header which includes a brief description of Marian Anderson and how the Daughters of the American Revolution did not allow her to sing in their hall. It describes the outdoor concert which she was able to give from the Lincoln Memorial. A picture of Marian Anderson is included but an image of the crowd of 75,000 on the National Mall would emotional resonance. This sidebar and image might also be better included within the section that deals with cultural programs in the New Deal. In this section Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison are mentioned but only Hurston is described as African American, and the racially conscious social protests with their writing are not mentioned. There is a disconnected mention of the WPA creating state guidebooks and collecting life stories of former slaves. But, this section could use a paragraph or two which makes the case for how New Deal gave opportunities for self definition and representation to African Americans which could be centered on the work of Sterling Brown at the Federal Writers Project.

Original Textbook Entry

How the Great Depression Effected African Americans

Economic Impact

The poverty and suffering caused by the Great Depression were hardest felt by African Americans and other minority groups. Through Jim Crow laws in the South, African Americans continued to be oppressed by **segregation**, **disenfranchisement** and **lynching** and other forms of violence. In the north they faced discrimination as many businesses would not hire African Americans. After World War I many African Americans moved from the South to the North to escape segregation, racial violence, and poverty. But, in the early 1930s the majority still lived in the South and were most likely to be employed in agriculture as **sharecroppers**. The Great Depression that began with the stock market crash in 1929 caused prices for agricultural commodities like cotton to drop dramatically. Many African Americans left sharecropping and farms to look for work in Southern cities and many who had recently migrated to the North were looking for work in Northern industrial cities.

This was a hard time for anyone to find work with the Great Depression causing businesses to close and factories to slow production. But racism and discrimination caused **unemployment** to be much worse for African Americans than for whites. In 1932 the unemployment rate for African Americans was approximately 50 percent, while for the white population it was around 25 percent. Throughout the United States, in the North and the South, African Americans suffered the heaviest economic effects of the depression. As many historians note, they were the last hired and the first fired.

Violence

Violence against African Americans by white men increased in the early years of the Great Depression. Perceived economic competition for jobs coupled with ongoing racism made African

Americans targets. Many white people declared openly that African Americans should not be hired for jobs while white men were out of work. In Atlanta, and other Southern cities, mobs of white men gathered in groups called 'black shirts,' threatening African Americans with violence and attempting to ensure that jobs would go to white workers. Lynchings of African Americans also increased as mob violence and murder sought to spread terror in African American communities. The following are statistics of recorded lynchings gathered by the University of Missouri Law School at Kansas City:

Year	Lynchings
1928	11
1929	10
1930	21
1931	13
1932	8
1933	26

Injustice and Fighting Back

A famous legal case highlighted the injustice against African Americans committed by the legal system in the Jim Crow south. In 1931 nine African American young men were riding in a box car of a train in northern Alabama. The young men were accused of rape by two white women. It was later discovered that the women had been riding in a different box car. In a mob atmosphere, the nine young men were put on trial without access to a lawyer and found guilty, without evidence, by an all white jury. They were all sentenced to death.

The case of these young men became known as the Scottsboro Case and the young men became known as the 'Scottsboro Boys.' The case was taken up by the Communist Party whose legal wing, the International Labor Defense, represented the Scottsboro Boys. They took the case to the Supreme Court where it was ruled that the young men were not given a fair trial. The Communist Party also

organized massive protests and brought international recognition to the injustice and civil rights violations in the south. The lawyers who represented the Scottsboro boys were white and it was white Communist organizers from the North who first decided to take the case. But, the protest against the injustice experienced by the Scottsboro Boys encouraged many African Americans to more confidently fight for civil rights. The Communist Party in Alabama became a black led organization in the 1930's which fought for social justice and racial equality.

Angelo Herndon, an African American man who became a member of Alabama's Communist Party, recalls the effects of legal defense and protest on behalf of the Scottsboro boys in his memoir, *You Can't Kill the Working Class*.

> "...after the fight began for the Scottsboro boys, every [black] worker in mill or mine, every [black] cropper (sharecropper) on the Black Belt plantations, breathed a little easier and held his head a little higher." - Angelo Herndon, 1937

FDR, the New Deal, and Race

The New Deal was a bold move by FDR and his administration in terms of economic programs. It overturned the tradition which previous presidents had followed that said that the government should not interfere in the economic lives of its citizens. But, in terms of tackling the problems facing African Americans it was not so bold. It did not do anything about segregation and lynching in the South. FDR himself was well liked by many Southern politicians who wanted to keep the South segregated. Since 1924 he had been regularly visiting a second home he established in Warm Springs, Georgia. The springs helped him as he suffered from polio. When he ran for president in 1932, he was considered by many an adopted son of the South. But, most importantly he relied on Southern Democrats in Congress to get his New Deal economic reforms passed. He saw the economic recovery of the country

as his most important task. He was unwilling to risk Southern support by supporting civil rights for African Americans in the South. FDR had the opportunity to use the New Deal to fight segregation in the South because Southern states needed the economic help of the federal government. But, he did not do so.

The Anti-lynching Campaign

The first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, worked with the leader of the NAACP, Walter White, to try to convince FDR and members of congress to pass a federal anti-lynching bill. A federal anti-lynching bill would have made it a federal crime for state officials not to arrest those responsible for lynchings. Lynchings involved white mobs torturing, hanging, and burning African Americans. The people who committed these atrocities were usually not brought to justice by state governments. A federal anti-lynching would have changed this. Eleanor Roosevelt and Walter White and many other allies worked between 1934 and 1938 trying to get the bill passed. The federal anti-lynching bill, known as the Costigan –Wagner Act, came very close to passing through Congress. Only a Senate **filibuster** prevented the bill from being passed into law in 1938. FDR could have tried to use his influence to break the filibuster.

Discrimination in New Deal Programs

Particularly early New Deal programs were often either discriminatory or harmful to African Americans. Direct relief in the form of government money to those who were unemployed was given by the federal government to the individual states. In the South this meant that local governments discriminated against African Americans by giving them less relief compared to white people, and in some cases refusing to give relief to African Americans at all. But, many New Deal programs administered by the federal government directly discriminated or cause harm.

The CCC

The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) provided relief (direct help to the unemployed) by giving young men jobs working on nature conservation programs like planting trees or establishing State parks. The young men (and later young women) lived in camps, sleeping in tents or cabins near their projects. But, the project was administered by the U.S. Army. The army practiced segregation at this time, with different regiments for white and black soldiers. The camps it ran for the CCC were also segregated. This made segregation not just a Southern issue, but meant that the federal government was practicing segregation in its job creation program.

The NRA

The National Recovery Act (NRA) created a program that businesses could choose to participate in to be known as an 'NRA' business. This program attempted to help the economy recover by raising workers' wages. For many white workers this was popular because businesses who participated raised wages, while those that did not could be identified and boycotted (business put stickers in their windows with the NRA and its symbol of a blue bird). But, for almost all African Americans this program was a disaster. It reinforced racism as the wages it said workers should be payed was often lower for African Americans. It also did nothing to protect African Americans from being fired by a business that did not want to pay a black worker the appropriate wage. In the black press the NRA symbol of a blue bird was often called a bird of prey.

TVA

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was a program that created jobs by building dams on the Tennessee River that produced electricity. African American men were given jobs on the TVA but they were segregated into unskilled labor. They were discriminated against by being denied the education that could help them get skilled and better paid work. They were also given inferior housing. African Americans did not passively accept this discrimination and

mistreatment. John P. Davis and Charles Hamilton Houston, both black lawyers and writers, published a number of pieces in the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis,* which exposed this injustice and urged the federal government to practice equality in New Deal programs.

AAA

The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was designed to raise the prices that farmers got for crops by paying farmers not raise as many crops. In the South cotton farmers were payed money from the government to plant only half of their fields with cotton. In the Southern plantation style agriculture, it was often a large landowner who had many tenant farmers and sharecroppers who payed for their land by giving the landowner a share of the crops they raised. The AAA money was paid to the landowner. The idea was that the landowner would pass down part of it to the tenant farmers or sharecroppers who would normally be growing cotton. But, the landowners almost always kept the money for themselves. They did not need sharecroppers to harvest as much cotton, so many poor farmers were kicked of their farms. This happened to poor white farmers too, but it especially affected African Americans because so many of them were cotton sharecroppers.

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