



The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation (Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies)

Brian Dolinar

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The Black Cultural Front describes how the social and political movements that grew out of the Depression facilitated the left turn of several African American artists and writers. The Communist-led John Reed Clubs brought together black and white writers in writing collectives. The Congress of Industrial Organizations' effort to recruit black workers inspired growing interest in the labor movement. One of the most concerted efforts was made by the National Negro Congress (NNC), a coalition of civil rights and labor organizations, which held cultural panels at its national conferences, fought segregation in the culture industries, promoted cultural education, and involved writers and artists in staging mass rallies during World War II.

The formation of a black cultural front is examined by looking at the works of poet Langston Hughes, novelist Chester Himes, and cartoonist Ollie Harrington. While none of them were card-carrying members of the Communist Party, they all participated in the Left at one point in their careers. Interestingly, they all turned to creating popular culture in order to reach the black masses who were captivated by the movies, radio, newspapers, and detective novels. There are chapters on the Hughes' "Simple" stories, Himes' detective fiction, and Harrington's "Bootsie" cartoons.

Collectively, the experience of these three figures contributes to the story of a "long" movement for African American freedom that flourished during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Yet this book also stresses the impact that McCarthyism had on dismantling the Black Left and how it affected each individual involved. Each was radicalized at a different moment and for different reasons. Each suffered for their past allegiances, whether fleeing to the haven of the "Black Bank" in Paris, or staying home and facing the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Yet the lasting influence of the Depression in their work was evident for the rest of their lives.

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