



Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943. Tempera mural, 11 ft. 10 in. x 16 ft. 9 in. x 2 ft. Collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Va. © 1943 The Charles White Archives



Pan-Americanism, Patriotism, and Race Pride in Charles White's Hampton Mural

Breanne Robertson

On June 25, 1943, Charles White unveiled his mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia (frontispiece). Measuring roughly twelve feet by seventeen feet, the mural is a complex mosaic of prominent African American men and women, past and present, whose military, intellectual, and artistic achievements had gone largely unnoticed in mainstream accounts of the history of the United States. The Revolutionary War heroes Crispus Attucks, the first American casualty in the transatlantic conflict, and Peter Salem, a soldier in the Continental Army, appear in the lower left and mark the beginning of a chronological arc tracing African American history from the colonial era to the twentieth century. White depicts Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, both of whom led armed revolts against slavery; the abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass; the Underground Railroad guides Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth; and the runaway slave Peter Still, who waves a flag bearing the famous declaration, "I will die before I submit to the yoke."¹ The lower right foreground records the recent accomplishments of Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute; the scientist George Washington Carver; the labor leader Ferdinand Smith; and the performers Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Lead Belly. Hampton Institute lauded the work at the time of its unveiling as "an important documentary addition to the much-neglected role of the Negro in the common man's struggle for full democracy."²

Since its presentation to the historically black college more than seventy years ago, White's mural continues to be recognized primarily for promoting public knowledge and pride in African American achievement. Art critics, educators, and scholars generally have focused on the various portrait figures in the composition and interpreted the painting as a didactic corrective to the predominantly white historical narratives taught to schoolchildren.³ While these figures would have been recognizable to White's contemporaries, the meaning and function of the colossal being that dominates the central axis of the picture and looms over this densely populated image remain enigmatic. The figure's oversize hands, with taut bronze skin and whitened knuckles, are curled tightly into fists; the bulging joints of the knuckles exaggerate the underlying skeleton. The middle finger of its right fist is wrapped with chains of slavery. Clapsed

- 1 Charles White, Study for *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943. Graphite on illustration board, 20 x 29 in. Collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Va. Reproduced from Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Shifra M. Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (American Federation of Arts, 1996), 148 © 1943 The Charles White Archives



around the necks of three black men, these shackles disturbingly recall the strings of a marionette with the monumental being acting as puppet master. The figure's left hand embraces industrial equipment and a second link of chains, the awkward kinks and open manacle of which no longer hinder African American progress. The ordered appearance and gleaming metallic surface of the machine held in the left fist contrast with the overlapping figures, dynamic gestures, and warm color palette in the rest of the composition, and its vertical thrust pulls the eye toward the giant's oddly cropped visage. Yet the artist has rendered this being in a dramatic chiaroscuro that obscures as much as it reveals. The fragmented view and tilted perspective foreground the figure's nostrils, rounded ears, and bared teeth, rendering the facial expression at once unreadable and eerily unhuman.

A preliminary sketch for the mural (fig. 1) reveals that White conceived this unusual figure as part of his composition from the start. Because of the chains in its hands, most commentators have interpreted it as representing "anti-democratic forces," although a few have noted its similarity to pre-Columbian deities.⁴ These divergent interpretations point to the imprecise nature of White's figuration. The partial countenance, masked by the massive machinery and cut off by the mural's upper edge, make it difficult to parse exactly what the figure is doing and why. Is the giant actively restraining African Americans or is he/she shielding them in a protective embrace?

Deeper consideration of White's colossal figure brings to light cultural and political intersections uniting the African American struggle for civil rights, Mexican muralism, and pan-Americanism during World War II. This essay situates White's mural project within the political and artistic contexts of wartime America, especially with respect to multiracial understandings of the nation operating as a consequence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, an initiative directed at improving relations between Latin America and the United States that promoted art and democratic ideology as evidence of a shared hemispheric culture. In the pages that follow, I argue that White borrowed thematic and iconographic elements from modern Mexican and

pre-Columbian art to construct an allegory of the United States that aligned African Americans' call for equal rights with wartime efforts to build international racial accord. The fact that the central figure in *The Contribution of the Negro* is obscured points to the representational challenges the artist faced in attempting to reconcile the conflicting trajectories of domestic discrimination and cultural progress. Ultimately, however, White's mural served as a potent reminder that black populations in the United States had the right—by birth and by culture—to identify as “American” and to receive equal recognition and treatment under the law.

The Artist as Cultural Worker

Charles White's early experiences shaped his political allegiances, commitment to racial equality, and choice of subject matter for the Hampton mural. Born in Chicago in 1918, White was an avid reader who spent much of his childhood in the public library and at the Art Institute of Chicago. He became interested in African American history at the age of fourteen after reading *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology compiled by the Harlem Renaissance leader Alain Locke. The book was a revelation to him. White explained, “I had never realized that Negro people had done so much in the world of culture, that they had contributed so much to the development of America, that they had even been among the discoverers of the continent.”⁵ Stimulated by this early introduction to African American culture and history, he grew frustrated with the conspicuous absence of black Americans in his high school curriculum and began to search for additional books on the subject. This formative experience had a tremendous impact on White, leading him to consistently choose African American themes for his public murals and graphic works. In an interview for the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine in 1940, White articulated a hope that his murals would redress the historic neglect of black history in American society and, in the process, prove to be a way to potentially improve race relations: “I feel a definite tie-up between all that has happened to the Negro in the past and the whole thinking and acting of the Negro now. Because the white man does not know the history of the Negro, he misunderstands him.”⁶

White was too young to participate in the Harlem Renaissance; however, a subsequent florescence of African American creativity in literature, art, music, social science, and journalism emerged on the South Side of Chicago as he reached adulthood. Unlike the New Negro Movement, the so-called Chicago Renaissance grew from the social and economic conditions of the Great Depression and the Great Migration of Southern blacks to Chicago. An integral member of the circle of artists and community activists who founded the South Side Community Arts Center in 1941, White socialized and discussed art and politics with such prominent black cultural figures as the choreographer Katherine Dunham, the novelist Richard Wright, the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and the visual artists Margaret Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, and Charles Sebree.⁷

A pronounced leftist consciousness distinguished Chicago's black cultural milieu of the late 1930s and 1940s from the earlier movement in Harlem. These artists and intellectuals professed the desire to create a more just society and embraced the Communist Party's Popular Front politics as a means to do so.⁸ As the art historian Patricia Hills has observed, the desire to forge a “united front”—a broad alliance of the Communist Party with other democratic groups—in the fight against racism and fascism produced a conciliatory rhetoric and a reformist agenda that permitted the Popular Front movement to collaborate with and integrate into various progressive platforms.⁹



Although his membership in the Communist Party is not documented, White certainly sympathized with the group's aims. As he later recalled, "It was the most natural thing in the world, or should I put it the other way, it was most unnatural not to be involved politically."¹⁰ In 1938 he participated in *An Exhibition in Defense of Peace and Democracy*, an interracial exhibition held in Chicago to generate funds and moral support for victims of fascism in Spain and China. He was also involved in a local chapter of the League against War and Fascism, and he produced numerous illustrations for leftist publications throughout his career. White even served as contributing editor for one such publication, *The New Masses*, starting in 1946.¹¹

White's call for interracial cooperation to fight social injustice in the United States aligned him with other like-minded modernists, particularly the progressive artists and writers with whom he associated at the South Side Community Art Center and later during his formal studies at the Art Students League in New York City. In 1941 White met and married his first wife, the sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, whom he accompanied to Dillard University in New Orleans for one semester before the couple relocated to New York. White attended the Art Students League between August and December 1942, during which time Catlett recalled that the poet Langston Hughes visited their Manhattan apartment to share activist songs about the war effort, "about the new black and white together, unite and fight."¹² White also frequented Charles Alston's Harlem studio, where his social circle grew to include a diverse and interracial group of leftist cultural workers. Harry Sternberg, White's primary teacher at the Art Students League, exerted a significant influence on the artist's political development during this period.¹³ An example of Sternberg's activism was his collaboration with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, George Grosz, and Jon Corbino on large-scale caricatures for the Art Students League ball in the spring of 1942. Representing leaders of the Axis nations of Japan, Germany, and Italy, respectively, the monumental cartoons garnered national media attention as a patriotic demonstration of immigrant artists denouncing their birth nations to side with the Allied forces.¹⁴ Through these and other wartime associates, White would have been acutely aware

- 2 Office of the War Manpower Commission, *United We Win*, 1943. Poster. Still Picture Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md., NWDNS-44-PA-370
- 3 Charles White, *Jim Crow in the Armed Forces*. From *Congress View*, November 1943, 5. Reproduced from Erin P. Cohn, "Art Fronts: Visual Culture and Race Politics in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2010), 314
- 4 John Biggers, *Dying Soldier*, 1942. Egg tempera on muslin (now lost). Shown: Pencil drawing, 22 x 28 in. Art © Estate of John Biggers/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y., www.vagarights.com. Reproduced from Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930–1953* (Univ. of Georgia Press, 2004), 99

of the political suspicion and social injustice suffered by American citizens of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Executed at the height of World War II, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* is best understood as a response to a conservative social climate characterized by a fundamental contradiction between the United States' efforts in support of freedom and democracy abroad and continued discrimination at home. In fighting Nazi Germany, the Allied forces opposed an openly racist enemy. The U.S. government frequently emphasized this point in its declarations in defense of the "four freedoms."¹⁵ This justification for involvement in the war only strengthened black Americans' resolve to demand social change on the home front. Despite conscripting African Americans into military service, the federal government restricted black soldiers to segregated units. The Roosevelt administration showed greater interest in forwarding the perception of interracial equality and cooperation through propaganda disseminated by the Office of War Information and the Office of the War Manpower Commission (fig. 2) than in instituting actual social reform—a distinction that did not go unnoticed among civil rights activists. The African American poet Waring Cuney highlighted hypocrisies of the U.S. war effort in "Headline Blues" (1942). Recounting instances of domestic discrimination and racial violence culled from newspaper reports, Cuney remarks, "Turn to the Negro

papers see what they have to say / You'd think they were talking about Hitler's Germany not the U.S.A."¹⁶ A 1943 cartoon that White created for *Congress View*, the official publication of the National Negro Congress, openly equated domestic racism in the United States with European fascism (fig. 3). Rendered in black and white, the stark graphic depicts the German dictator Adolf Hitler whispering in the ear of a southern white supremacist. White calls attention to the parallel ideologies undergirding these individuals' prejudice through their apparent intimacy and their swastika-emblazoned attire.

John Biggers, an art student and White's assistant during his work on *The Contribution of the Negro*, captured the ambivalence that he and many of his peers felt about joining a segregated army in his 1942 mural *Dying Soldier* (fig. 4).¹⁷ The central image of a black soldier's mutilated body, tangled in barbed wire on the front lines of World War II, is surrounded by vignettes depicting his final memories and thoughts of loved ones back home. While some vignettes show happy moments of collegiate sports or young love, others reveal painful encounters with domestic racism such as lynching. Which "freedom" is the soldier dying to protect? Biggers explained, "Pearl Harbor affected us all to such an extent that many dropped out of school that Sunday morning to join the service. The soldier



in that [preparatory mural] drawing is me. I was thinking about all I would lose, and I just began to draw my thoughts.”¹⁸

Like many black Americans, White patently rejected the accommodationist philosophy black leaders had espoused during World War I.¹⁹ In February 1942 the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched the “Double V” campaign, which advanced a dual agenda of defeating fascism abroad and racism in the United States. The first “V” referred to the wartime axiom “V for Victory,” affirming African American support of the war effort, while the second announced a domestic platform calling for equal rights and an end to racial violence. To appeal to readers’ sense of nationalism and to underscore the projected rewards of a double victory, the newspaper proclaimed, “WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT . . . WE ARE AMERICANS, TOO!”²⁰

White intended his mural for the Hampton Institute to counteract the “plague of distortions, stereotyped and superficial caricatures of ‘uncles,’ ‘mammies,’ and ‘pickaninnies’” that represented black subjects in popular culture, images that “dissociate[d] the Negro’s real position from the total life of America, disparage[d] his contributions to the life, and place[d] him in an inferior category.”²¹ The artist conceived *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* as a representation of the “united front of all races of people” that was necessary to combat fascism.²²

Allegory and Hybridity: Mexican Art as Inspiration

In devising his mural project, White eschewed the dominant pictorial strategy of Harlem Renaissance artists—who had looked to indigenous African precedents as expressions of a racialized aesthetic—in favor of a visual program informed in large part by modern Mexican muralism. The artist’s 1942 proposal to the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a private grant program that supported black artists and writers between 1928 and 1948, outlined his plan. First, he would tour the American South, sketching and painting the daily lives of black farmers and laborers. He would then refine the skills he had gained in Chicago’s Works Progress Administration mural division through formal instruction in Mexico, at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura y Escultura (National Academy of Painting and Sculpture) in Mexico City, where celebrated faculty and an egalitarian workshop environment would allow him to “take advantage of the best mural techniques available to an artist.” When he returned to the United States, he would complete a large fresco illustrating the theme of “the role of the Negro in the development of a democratic America” at a southern university.²³

White’s professed interest in traveling to Mexico corresponded with the government-sanctioned doctrine of pan-Americanism. Between 1933 and 1945 the Roosevelt administration embraced a policy of hemispheric unity to combat the threat of European fascism. Cultural programs under the Good Neighbor Policy had as their goals celebrating indigenous achievements, underscoring the injustices of Spanish colonialism, and highlighting Latin Americans’ revolutionary actions and modern republican spirit. In their overlap with existing conceptions of U.S. history and thought, these feted cultural traits revised the ideological schema of American-ness to include citizens throughout the hemisphere, regardless of nationality or race.

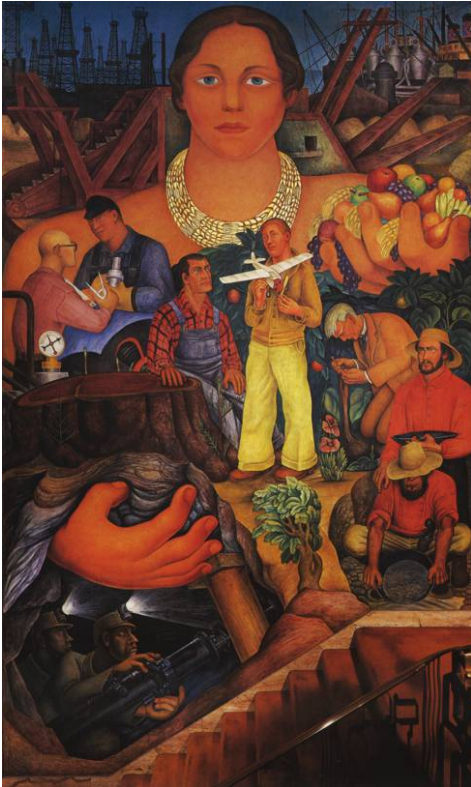
Although White was ultimately unable to leave the country because of complications with the draft board, Mexican muralism was still an important source of inspiration for the artist as his mural project developed.²⁴ Indeed, White’s keen interest in Mexican mural painting predated his work on *The Contribution of the*



5 Charles White, *Five Great American Negroes*, 1939–40. Oil on canvas, 60 x 155 in. Howard University Gallery of Art, Howard University, Washington, D.C. Reproduced from Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 173

Negro. In their examination of local traditions and celebration of national heroes, the Mexican muralists provided an important model for African American artists seeking to achieve in their art a racial expression of their heritage. White and others especially looked to the public art of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who spent much of the 1930s working in the United States, as a model of socially engaged realism.²⁵ By 1940 White had developed a visual language strongly reminiscent of the stylized, volumetric treatment of figures, bold colors, shallow space, and dynamic composition typical of these artists' works. In the 1939–40 mural *Five Great American Negroes* (fig. 5), for example, the painter employed a vigorous, swirling composition that leads the eye from one historical personage to the next in an unending cycle. He rendered the bodies in bulging, rounded forms accentuated by dramatic shading and clinging fabric. While the receding trail of runaway slaves behind Sojourner Truth suggests spatial depth, the tilted tabletop before George Washington Carver collapses space and creates a shallow, stage-like setting for the tableau. The simplified palette of red, green, yellow, blue, and brown emphasizes the boldly outlined contours of the mural's design.

When developing his conception of the Hampton mural two years later, White again turned to Mexican art for inspiration. The celebrity as well as the political views of Rivera, in particular, captured his attention. As White noted later in life, "I discovered that I had much in common with his artistic ideas and with what they were supposed to represent."²⁶ He found the Mexican artist's radicalism enthralling and appreciated his sympathetic portrayal of African Americans in such works as *Portrait of America* (1933, New Workers' School, New York City), Rivera's twenty-one panel, Marxist-inflected history of the United States featuring an interracial cast of protagonists. White, who in 1942 was in the process of selecting African American worthies for the Hampton mural, surely appreciated Rivera's inclusion in his "portrait" of Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and an anonymous participant in Shay's rebellion.²⁷

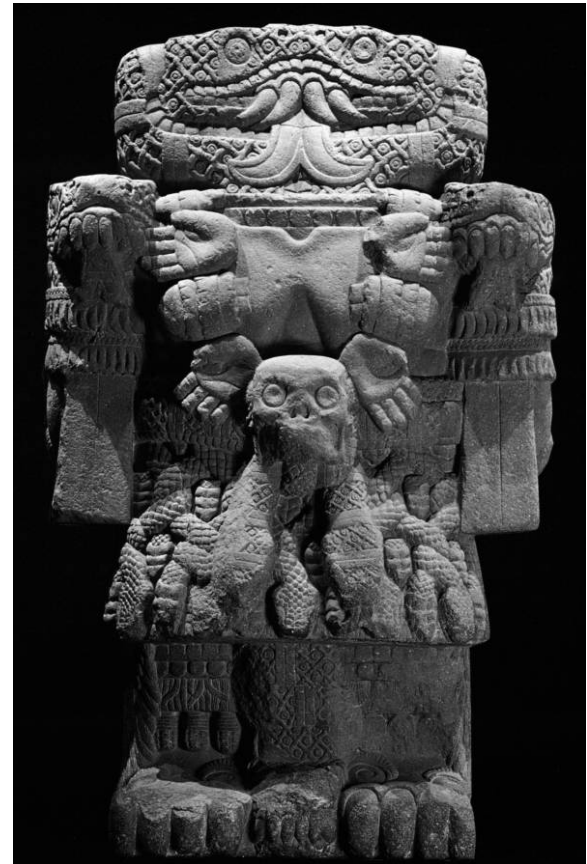
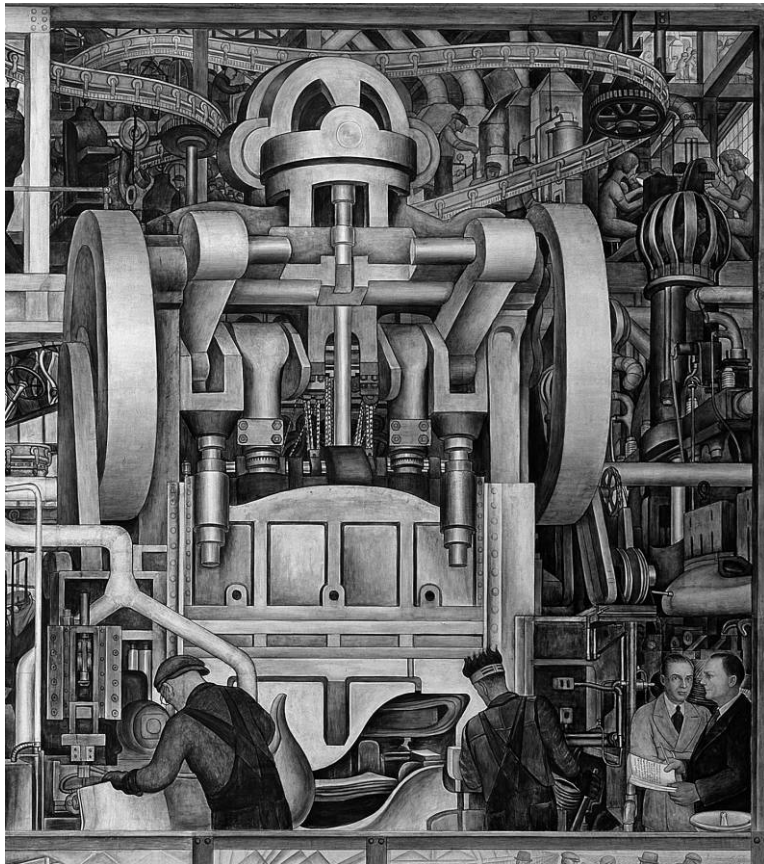


- 6 Diego Rivera, *Allegoria de California* (*Allegory of California*), 1931. Fresco. The City Club of San Francisco, San Francisco, Calif. © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Image courtesy Stock Exchange Tower Associates/The Empire Group

- 7 Diego Rivera, *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent* (*Pan American Unity*) (detail), 1940. Fresco, 22 x 74 ft. City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, Calif. © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Image courtesy City College of San Francisco

Two of Rivera's murals seem to have been particularly influential for White in conceiving the structure and iconography of *The Contribution of the Negro: Allegory of California* (fig. 6), the Mexican artist's first project in the United States, completed in 1931 for the Luncheon Club of the San Francisco Pacific Stock Exchange; and *Pan American Unity* (fig. 7), his final mural in this country, commissioned for the Golden Gate International Exposition, also in San Francisco, in 1940. In both paintings, Rivera assembled a compact, overlapping array of artists, scientists, and other notable individuals around a central colossal figure. *Allegory of California* provided White with a compelling visual precedent for how to figure an allegory of place.²⁸ In his search for African American cultural roots in the United States, White may have interpreted the mural's central figure as a whitewashed embodiment of Calafia, the legendary black Amazon queen for whom the state of California is named.²⁹ Rivera represents the California landscape as a feminine allegory, whose nude form conjures traditional earth-mother associations of fecundity. Her left hand offers ripe fruits, while her right embraces important figures from California history, including the pioneer James Marshall and the horticulturist Luther Burbank. In a manner similar to the giant figure in the Hampton mural, her presence serves the transparent purpose of uniting the foreground and background of the congested scene.³⁰ But whereas the woman in *Allegory of California* supplies thematic clarity, the fragmented and racially ambiguous central figure in White's mural conveys a more complex visual genealogy and political message.

The striking resemblance between White's colossal figure and the half-human, half-mechanical figure at the center of Rivera's *Pan American Unity* suggests that this painting was an even more compelling model for the younger artist's work. Through popular publications like *Time* and *Life*, White would have been familiar with Rivera's



- 8 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, *South Wall* (detail), 1932–33. Fresco, 43 x 67 ft. Detroit Institute of Arts, U.S.A., Gift of Edsel B. Ford © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Courtesy Bridgeman Images
- 9 *Coatlicue* (Aztec), ca. 1487–1520. Stone, 11 ft. 6 in. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Reproduced from Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 29. Photo, J. J. Foxx/N.Y.C.

latest mural project and read descriptions of its “serpent-fanged machine god.”³¹ The right half of the figure’s body, which resembles the Ford Motor Company stamping machine featured on the south wall of Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* murals (fig. 8), celebrates modern industrial advancement, while the anthropomorphic face, snake skirt, and stony appearance of the figure’s left side invoke the colossal statue of the earth goddess Coatlicue at Tenochtitlan, the ancient capital of the Aztec empire (fig. 9). Rivera explained that the composite allegorical form at the center of his composition, not yet fully realized, “symboliz[ed] this union [between North and South]. . . . She would be to the American civilization of my vision what Quetzalcóatl, the great mother [*sic*] of Mexico, was to the Aztec People.”³² Underscoring the theme of hemispheric solidarity, the monumental figure is flanked by “artists of the North and South, Mexican and North American” who work together to complete its construction.³³

The hybrid figuration and inclusive wartime message of Rivera’s *Pan American Unity* paralleled White’s own aims. Specifically, Rivera rejected the Anglo-American claim to continental leadership by picturing hemispheric solidarity as a composite being. According to the artist, the figure was a harmonious fusing of the best arts of Mexico and the United States: “From the South comes the plumed serpent, from the North the conveyor belt.”³⁴ In combining a racialized Mexican emblem with modern American industry, Rivera invoked the affirmative discourse of *indigenismo*, a postrevolutionary Mexican cultural movement that reversed the moral hierarchy previously assigned to race in its celebration of native peoples and history. *Indigenismo* not only provided a foreign perspective to the question

of race relations in this country but also called for immediate racial and cultural integration for the sake of hemispheric defense. For White, this theorization of cultural *mestizaje*, or Native-European miscegenation, which advocated a proper balance between the desirable traits of different racial and social groups, would have echoed Locke's argument for a "culturally mulatto" definition of African American identity and art.³⁵ (An ardent supporter of the artists at Chicago's South Side Community Center, Locke notably provided a favorable reference to accompany White's funding proposal to the Rosenwald Foundation for the Hampton mural project.)³⁶

While the notion of pan-American heritage circulated primarily in the context of inter-American foreign relations and so referred principally to citizens of European and Native American descent in the United States and Latin America, the symbolic rather than hereditary nature of cultural lineage as promoted under the Good Neighbor Policy invited peoples of other ethnicities and national backgrounds to lay claim to pre-Columbian and Latin American materials as part of their patrimony as well.³⁷ White would have been familiar with Mesoamerican antiquity through journal and newspaper reports on recent archaeological activities and discoveries; major art exhibitions such as *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940), a collaborative effort between the Museum of Modern Art, the U.S. Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, and the Mexican government; and painted and textual descriptions of ancient artifacts in the works of such modern Mexican artists as Rivera.³⁸ Black Americans took a special interest in archaeology during the interwar period, since the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 had provided evidence of an esteemed African past and became a source of race pride.³⁹ In addition, during the 1920s and 1930s the Smithsonian ethnologist Matthew Stirling and the Tulane University archaeological team of Frans Blum and Oliver La Farge discovered several colossal Olmec heads. These finds again drew African American attention to the Afrocentrist reading of those objects first posited by the Mexican scholar José Melgar. If Olmec origins were indeed African, as Melgar contended, pre-Columbian art and culture provided black Americans with an indigenous heritage and visual vocabulary that were both African and American.⁴⁰

Although there is no direct connection between White's colossal figure and a specific pre-Columbian deity, compositional similarities suggest that the Teotihuacan water goddess, Chalchiuhtlicue, may have been an important source for the artist (fig. 10). Representations of the water goddess typically show the deity frontally, dressed in full ritual regalia and surrounded by emblems of agricultural fertility.⁴¹ She holds her arms stretched out in front of her, while streams of water issue from her hands. The frontal orientation of White's monumental figure, its extended arms, and the fruitful talents of African Americans throughout history who surround it bring to mind the Teotihuacan water goddess. Likewise, the chains in the Hampton figure's hands echo the stylized streams of water falling from the pre-Columbian deity's outstretched hands, and two ribbons of blue winding through the Hampton mural on either side of the central figure seem to complete White's quotation. In the summer of 1942, archaeologists from Tulane University uncovered representations of the goddess in the vibrant murals at Tepantitla, an apartment compound at Teotihuacan.⁴² White also could have seen illustrations of Teotihuacan art unearthed during previous excavations in travel guidebooks, popular magazines like *National Geographic*, and in specialized archaeological journals and books. For example, the 1903 yearbook of the Records of the Past Exploration Society reproduced multiple photographs of the National Museum of Mexico's Monolith Room, in which a colossal

- 10 *Chalchiuhtlicue* (Teotihuacan), 200–650 CE. Stone, 10 ft. 5 in. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Reproduced from Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec* (Thames and Hudson, 2012), 90



statue depicting the Teotihuacan water goddess is shown opposite the imposing Aztec sculpture of Coatlicue.⁴³

Even if White did not have this specific deity in mind when he conceived his mural program, and even if his knowledge of Teotihuacan culture came by way of Rivera's translations of this ancient iconography, the artist appears to have embraced pre-Columbian imagery as an alternative classicizing language to the allegorical figures in the Western art tradition. White's synthesis of ancient and modern Mexican art and African American history in the Hampton mural was a pictorial strategy that aligned black Americans' claims for equal recognition and rights with wartime efforts to build national and inter-American consensus. Against the backdrop of the Good Neighbor Policy and World War II, a pre-Columbian goddess further permitted White to address themes of social injustice and bigotry in the United States. Just

as Rivera's selection of a hybridized Aztec deity to represent an inclusive American culture in *Pan American Unity* ensured that the figure would be read as an expression of cultural rather than biological *mestizaje*, so did White's evocation of a mythic deity perform a deliberate distancing function that softened the critical edge of his timely political message.

Double V(ision): Anti/Fascism on the Home Front

The ambiguity of White's allegory of America—its relationship to the other figures, its disfigurement through cropping, and its unreadable expression—suggests the difficulties in organizing a united multiracial home front amid Japanese internment, Mexican repatriation and social injustice, U.S. military segregation, and nationwide labor discrimination and race riots. In the context of World War II, the emphasis on “democracy” in the title of White's work would have conjured the government's rationale for entering the international conflict. And yet the status of democracy “in America,” per the artist's title, remains an open question, and overt signs of the current conflict are nowhere to be seen in White's mural. Instead, antidemocratic forces appear in the form of a colonial Tory, who destroys a proposed bill that would have forbidden the importation and sale of slaves in British America as early as 1775 (fig. 11), and in the colossal figure at center restraining three male slaves with chains. White thus

asserts that the global struggle against fascism must be fought not only in the Pacific Theater and in Nazi Germany but also on the home front.

The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America signals White's pictorial confrontation with the complexity and contradiction of democracy in the United States. As the historian Justin Hart has noted, the multiracial configuration of American identity under the Good Neighbor Policy carried profound implications for domestic race relations during World War II. Because the government justified its participation in the global conflict as a fight for freedom and cast German Nazism as the antithesis of American democracy, domestic racial prejudice threatened to damage U.S. relations with other nations, especially in Latin America. Secretary of State Sumner Welles acknowledged this foreign relations quandary when he observed that the unequal treatment of Latin Americans in the United States "is in a very definite sense a negation of the Good Neighbor Policy and is frequently cited as such in the other American republics."⁴⁴ Worse still, in his opinion, was the prospect of enemy propaganda utilizing American racism to expose the contradiction between President Roosevelt's "four freedoms" and domestic policies on race.

Germany and Japan, in fact, did make use of racial discrimination in their campaigns to discredit the United States in world affairs. In 1943 the German-language magazine *Lustige Blätter* printed a propaganda cartoon titled *Our Proposal*, which highlighted the fact of racial lynching in the United States (fig. 12). The cartoon depicts a white U.S. Army officer hoisting a noosed black man to hang from the limb

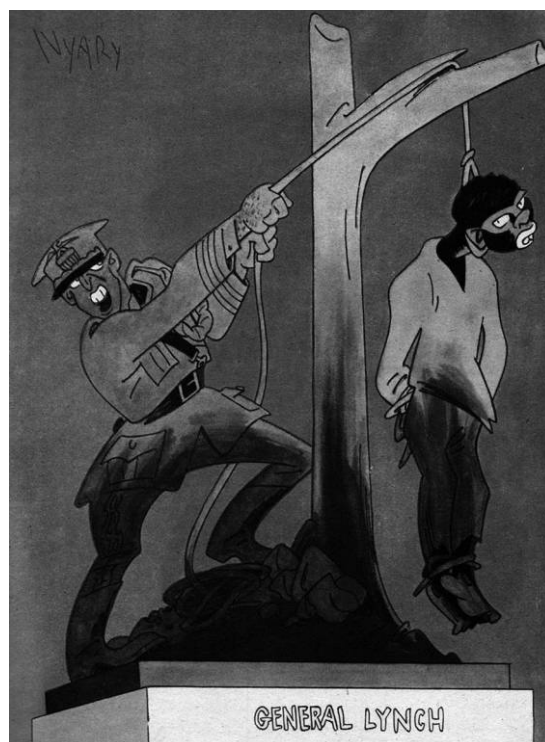
of a tree. A crumpled white hood and robe symbolizing the Ku Klux Klan rest at the officer's feet. Yellow and orange tones predominate, suggesting that the lynching tree and figures are cast in bronze, while the inscription "General Lynch" on the square base honors the actions of the white "hero." The caption underscores this point, explaining that the United States plans to erect a monument to American blacks. Although Nazis considered black people an inferior race—the heavily stereotyped physiognomy of the lynched man stands as evidence of this fact—the Third Reich depicted American racial violence to underscore the hypocrisy in U.S. condemnation of the Jewish Holocaust.

Personal experience fueled White's political activism and informed his distinctive portrayal of American democracy and race relations during the war. White, the only child of a Creek Indian father from Georgia and a mulatto mother from Mississippi, had strong roots in the American South. Although his parents moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, the artist spent many summers during his youth at the Mississippi home of his maternal grandparents. He and his extended family endured several tragedies due to racial violence, including the lynching of two uncles and three cousins.⁴⁵ During World War II, White again gained firsthand experience of racial bigotry in the American South. In the spring of 1942, a group of men severely beat him for entering a white-only restaurant in New Orleans. The following year, while White was teaching and painting at Hampton Institute, a white streetcar conductor pulled a gun on him and ordered him to the rear of the car.⁴⁶

11 Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (detail), 1943



- 12 Josef Nyary, *Unser Vorschlag* (*Our Proposal*). From *Lustige Blätter*, no. 45 (1943): 3. Courtesy Randall Bytwerk/German Propaganda Archive, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/>



Yet unlike John Biggers, whose confrontational wartime mural *Dying Soldier* (see fig. 4) was derided by critics as “screaming propaganda,” White did not want his critique of American democracy to be read too concretely in the context of war.⁴⁷ By omitting any reference to the current world conflict, *The Contribution of the Negro* accommodated competing political beliefs about black Americans’ place in society and the war effort. On the one hand, the mural heralds black exceptionalism and the ideology of Negro advancement. The title of White’s work reinforces this interpretation by proclaiming the patriotism of the historical figures in the painting. Certainly it was in the interest of White’s white patrons at the Rosenwald Fund to view the mural as a pronouncement of black loyalty that left

white hegemony intact. On the other hand, while White seems to promote national conciliation by asserting that black Americans had always been loyal to democracy, his painting also contains a strong undercurrent of defiance. His imagery deviates from contemporary depictions of wartime consensus and racial harmony by exposing historical instances of black oppression and resistance. In giving visual form to an inclusive conception of American democracy, the artist painted an image of the nation that could be said to be for and about the minority populations who were directly engaged in the war effort.

White made explicit the conceptual link between his mural and the dilemma facing African Americans during World War II in his report and renewal application to the Rosenwald Fund. In a statement analogous to the “Double V” campaign, White clarified that the fight had two fronts. He noted that the “forces in America that would oppress the Negro” were not unique to the United States but, rather, constituted “the same element we are fighting in Europe and the far east.” “War is of every country and every race that wants to see democracy continued and extended,” he declared. Aligning his labors with those of the Office of War Information and other consensus-building organizations, the artist explained that his composition worked to raise a “united front of all races of people” against fascism.⁴⁸

The fragmented being at the center of *The Contribution of the Negro* might be interpreted as a pictorial solution to the challenge of picturing a nonexclusive, multiracial allegory of the United States against the backdrop of World War II, a global conflict with strong racial underpinnings. Whereas such Progressive Era and American Scene artists as Edwin Blashfield and Rockwell Kent typically relied on transparent legibility and idealized human forms to ensure the didactic clarity of allegorical figures, White deliberately destabilized the central form, leaving open the question of what a multiracial democracy in the United States might look like. The complicated, conflicted

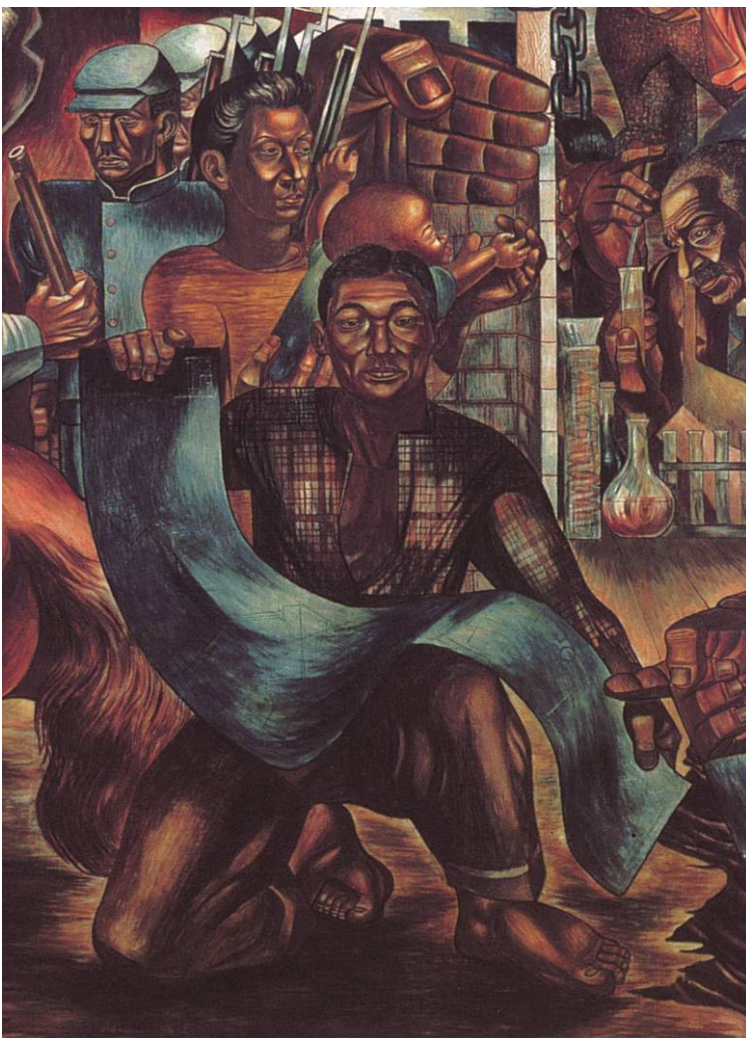
imagery of the colossal figure thus serves as a visual analog for black experience during the war and sheds light on questions of ethnic belonging on the home front. Acknowledging a social reality that is entangled and in conflict, the unusual cropping and ambivalent countenance of the figure elaborate the tension between interracial harmony as projected in wartime visual imagery and the concept of patriotism as defined by white society. At the same time, the formal ambiguity of the colossal being conveys a hopeful vision for racial cooperation and unification toward a better future. By obscuring and cropping the face of his figure, White eliminated identifiable racial physiognomy in an effort to universalize the allegorical figure and proclaim American society and democracy as belonging to a broadly based and diverse body politic. In this way the painting provides a space in which Popular Front ideals of ethnic Americanism and interracial cooperation are staged in visual form.

Like the Teotihuacan water goddess, who controlled both fertility and floods, White's personification of the United States carried multiple meanings. Capable of both oppression and generosity, the figure holds in its right hand the chains of slavery. Scenes of war, rebellion, and violence on the left side of the composition tell the history of African American struggle. An avenging angel soars overhead, her sword poised to slay the central figure. Yet America's left hand presents an open manacle signifying emancipation.

The right side of the artist's mural features notable personages of recent history holding books, test tubes, and musical instruments. White contrasts the difficult, often violent past of slavery on the left with modern intellectual and creative achievements on the right. In juxtaposing past and present, oppression and opportunity, violence and creativity, White suggests the potential for social change.⁴⁹ Even the artist's strident contemporaneous cartoon critiquing the persistence of discrimination and racial violence in the United States (see fig. 3) conveys a sense of hope that African American participation in the war effort will ultimately lead to an expansion of democracy at home. Visualizing the defeat of fascism in all its forms, White included a diminutive group of men, labeled "negro and white united," in the lower right corner of his composition. The interracial coalition strides forward and shreds Hitler's plan for "Jim Crow in the Armed Forces" with bayonets.⁵⁰

Bridging the two sides of the mural is a central vignette of the ideal African American family (fig. 13). The stability associated with the family is significant, since slavery frequently divided loved ones. In 1939 the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier observed that the patriarchal, nuclear family unit still was not the current status of African American families in the United States but, rather, a projected ideal for a better society.⁵¹ The father in the mural kneels, presenting a scroll of blueprints that mimics the winding streams of

13 Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (detail), 1943



water below. He is the architect of the future, working to build for his infant son a utopian society free from social injustice.⁵² While the landscape around him remains a barren wasteland, signifying African Americans' enduring struggle for equality, the flowing rivers promise geological transformation and social change to come. As part of this narrative of future progress, White daringly imagines a multiracial democracy through the allegorized embodiment of a racialized body politic. The colossal being can be interpreted as an anticipatory image of a new American society, as yet incomplete, that will emerge through the integration and cooperation of a racially diverse home front.

Notes

I am especially grateful to Renée Ater and Sally Promey for supporting this project from the beginning and for their insightful comments on earlier drafts. I also wish to thank Lacey Baradel, Margaret Conrads, Emily D. Shapiro, Marie Ladino, and the anonymous reviewers of *American Art* for their helpful suggestions and editorial guidance. My thanks are due to the staffs at the Hampton University Museum, the Archives of American Art, the Louise and Claude Rosenberg Jr. Library at City College of San Francisco and the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library at Fisk University for their generosity and research assistance, as well as to numerous friends and colleagues at the University of Maryland and Wesleyan University for their collegiality and encouragement. Finally, I could not have completed this project without support from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center, and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

- 1 This statement was actually the declaration of Peter's father, Levin, to his young master on the eastern shore of Maryland. William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c.* . . . (1872; repr., Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1970), 18.
- 2 "Hampton Mural Is Contribution to History," press release, July 25, [1943], Charles White Papers, Hampton University Archives, Hampton, Va. This announcement appeared in print in the *Raleigh Carolinian* on July 3, 1943.
- 3 Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930–1953* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2004), 65. White selected Hampton Institute as the installation site for his mural in the summer of 1942, following a suggestion made by William G. Haygood, director of fellowships at the Rosenwald Fund, that he consider the school as a possible venue. He appreciated Hampton Institute for its progressive educational program and for its policy of employing a diverse faculty in all departments.
- 4 Several contemporary critics described the mural as an "active protest against those anti-democratic forces which have sought to keep a stranglehold upon the common people through economic slavery and social and political frustration." See, for example, "Unveil Mural at Institute," *Newport News*, June 29, 1943. For focused art-historical analyses of the Hampton mural, see Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*; Lizetta LeFalle-Collins and Shifra M. Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996); Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, "Contribution of the American Negro to Democracy: A History Painting by Charles White," *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 4 (1995): 39–41; and Acacia Rachelle Warwick, "Charles White's *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* at Hampton University: Radical Politics and the Black University" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1999).
- 5 Charles White, "Path of a Negro Artist," *Masses and Mainstream* 8 (April 1955): 35. In addition to the sources in note 4 above, biographical information has been taken from Bettie Hoag, Oral History Interview with Charles W. White, 1965 March 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2002); Benjamin Horowitz, *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1967); and the collection of essays in a commemorative issue of *Freedomways*, published in the fall of 1980 in honor of Charles White.
- 6 Quoted in Willard F. Motley, "Negro Art in Chicago," *Opportunity* 18, no. 1 (January 1940): 22.
- 7 Eldzier Cortor, "He Was at Home Creatively in Any Locale," 149–50; Margaret G. Borroughs, "He Will Always Be a Chicago Artist to Me," 151–54; Sharon G. Fitzgerald, "Charles White in Person," 159, all in *Freedomways* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1980); and Margaret Goss Borroughs, "Chicago's South Side Community Art Center: A Personal Recollection," in *Art in Action: American Art Centers and*

- the New Deal*, ed. John Franklin White (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 132. See also Murry N. DePillars, "Chicago's African American Visual Arts Renaissance," in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey Jr. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012), 165–96.
- 8 The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) appealed to black Americans because, unlike other political organizations, it promised complete racial equality and actively spoke out against "Jim Crowism," segregation, discrimination, and lynching. Some artists and writers, like Richard Wright, became official members of the CPUSA. Others maintained a more informal allegiance through their involvement in an array of cultural organizations, particularly after the Communist Party shifted to an antifascist Popular Front policy in 1935. See Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*, 1–41; Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and American Cultural Politics, 1935–46* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999); and Craig Werner, "Leon Forrest, the AACM and the Legacy of the Chicago Renaissance," *Black Scholar* 23, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 1993): 10–23.
 - 9 Patricia Hills, "Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2006), 181–200. For more on the Popular Front movement in the United States, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).
 - 10 Charles White, interview with Peter Clothier, September 1979, Altadena, California; quoted in Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2000), 27.
 - 11 For more on White's art activities and their connection to the CPUSA, see Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*, 23–24, 42–72; Erik S. Gellman, "Chicago's Native Son: Charles White and the Laboring of the Black Renaissance," in Hine and McCluskey, *Black Chicago Renaissance*, 147–64; and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 260–63.
 - 12 Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 25–26, 30, 37, 70. White and Catlett were married between 1941 and 1947.
 - 13 In his renewal application to the Julius Rosenwald Fund, White characterized Harry Sternberg as being "by far the most stimulating and understanding instructor I have ever worked with." Charles White, "Report of a Year's Progress and Plan of Work for a Renewal of a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship," Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers, Box 456, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tenn.
 - 14 ShiPu Wang, "Japan against Japan: U.S. Propaganda and Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Identity Crisis," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (2008): 29–30.
 - 15 In his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt articulated the necessity of war in order to secure the American ideal of individual liberties for people throughout the world. He identified four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The illustrator Norman Rockwell's paintings celebrating these abstract ideals circulated widely in the *Saturday Evening Post* and later as promotional imagery for a U.S. war bond drive. For more on Rockwell's series of paintings, see Maureen Hart Hennessey, "The Four Freedoms," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 95–104.
 - 16 Waring Cuney, "Headline Blues," *Negro Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1942): 40.
 - 17 White included a portrait of Biggers in *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*; the younger artist appears in the upper right corner as a runaway slave.
 - 18 Quoted in Olive Jensen Theisen, *Walls That Speak: The Murals of John Thomas Biggers* (Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2010), 13. This quote refers to a group of drawings Biggers produced in the wake of Pearl Harbor. Under the guidance of Viktor Lowenfeld, he later organized the sketches into a composite design that served as the basis of the mural.
 - 19 Two decades earlier, African Americans had suspended what W. E. B. Du Bois called their "special grievances" for the sake of national unity. The humiliating treatment of black soldiers in military service during World War I and the ensuing racial violence on their return home proved that unconditional alignment with the national cause had failed to secure African Americans even minimal social improvements. With this bitter lesson still fresh in their collective memory, blacks in the 1940s resolved to continue their efforts for racial equality even in wartime. For more on Du Bois's political stance during World War I, see Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (June 1992): 96–124.

- 20 "The Courier's Double 'V' for a Double Victory Campaign Gets Country-Wide Support," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 14, 1942, 1. Paul Robeson's hit song "Ballad for Americans" (1939) carried a similar message.
- 21 Charles White, "Statement of Plan of Work," Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers, Box 456, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tenn.
- 22 Charles White, "Report of a Year's Progress," Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers.
- 23 White, "Statement of Plan of Work," Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers.
- 24 White obtained an entrance visa from the Mexican consulate and planned to depart for Mexico in early June; however, a last-minute decision by the draft board prevented him from leaving the country. According to the artist, the local draft board denied his request for an exit permit because his fellowship had "nothing to do with National Defense or the War Production program." Disappointed with this turn of events, the artist found a suitable alternative with the Art Students League in New York City. Charles White to William C. Haygood, June 8, 1942, Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers.
- 25 Charles Alston, for example, visited Diego Rivera frequently while the Mexican artist was painting *Man at the Crossroads* at Rockefeller Center. Alston's mural *Magic and Medicine* (1936) exemplifies the stacked composition and naturalistic, yet simplified rendering of figures typical of Rivera's early murals. Hale Woodruff, like Alston, was also directly influenced by Rivera. In 1936 Woodruff received a fellowship permitting him to travel to Mexico to serve as an apprentice to the Mexican muralist. He spent six weeks preparing the walls and grinding fresh color for Rivera's mural at the Hotel Reforma in Mexico City. Woodruff later adopted Rivera's shallow stage-like setting, monumental forms, bold areas of color, and decorative patterning in his *Amistad* murals, completed in 1939 for Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama.
- 26 Academy of the Arts, German Democratic Republic, "The Impact of His Art Crossed the Borders of North America," *Freedomways* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 184.
- 27 White also devoted several months to historical research at the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library, Library of Congress, and Hampton Institute to determine the various portrait subjects of his mural.
- 28 White could have read about and seen reproductions of *Allegory of California* in Bertram Wolfe's authorized publications about Diego Rivera, including *Portrait of America* (1934) and *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (1939). In addition, Viktor Lowenfeld, the head of the art department at Hampton Institute, organized a conference on Mexican muralism during White's residency.
- 29 Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 69.
- 30 Ibid., 64. Rivera modeled his allegorical figure after the tennis champion Helen Wills Moody, whose so-called Grecian features embodied the artist's understanding of California as a Mediterranean land or "a second Greece." Although Rivera made several modifications to the painting in an attempt to restore its allegorical meaning, the San Francisco public preferred to see a portrait of the famous tennis star. See Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (1960; New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 107; Diego Rivera, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.d., cited in Lawrence Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1989), 102; and Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 57–86.
- 31 The prestigious location of *Pan American Unity* at the Golden Gate International Exposition and the nature of the "Art in Action" program, in which visitors could witness firsthand the artist's progress, made the commission an attractive news story. See, for example, "Diego Rivera: His Amazing New Mural Depicts Pan-American Unity," *Life* 10, no. 9 (March 3, 1941): 52; and "Artists on Parade," *Time*, June 24, 1940, 69.
- 32 Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 151.
- 33 Dorothy Puccinelli, "Conversation with Diego Rivera," in *Diego Rivera: The Story of His Mural at the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition* (San Francisco, 1940), not paginated, Diego Rivera Special Collection, Rosenberg Library, City College of San Francisco.
- 34 Ibid. The bilateral symmetry of the larger composition likewise gives equal weight to both Latin American and Anglo American cultures, suggesting a one-to-one correlation in the historical achievements of each group. In addition to *Pan American Unity*, Rivera visualized the theme of hemispheric relations in the ballet *H.P. (Caballo de Vapor)* (1932) at the Metropolitan Opera of Philadelphia, for which he collaborated with the Mexican composer Carlos Chávez on the book and designed set decor and costumes. The title character is a composite being whose constituent parts derive from indigenous cultural and modern industrial source materials. On Rivera's conception

- of “Greater America” in *H.P.*, see Jeffrey Belnap, “Diego Rivera’s Greater America: Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P.,” *Cultural Critique* 63 (Spring 2006): 61–98.
- 35 Alain Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” *Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 3 (July 1939): 521–29. Observing that there were no differences of language or of basic cultural patterns to distinguish white and black Americans, Locke (“Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” 523) described African American artworks as “distinctive hybrids” that combine features of the dominant culture with the particularities of black experience in a segregated society.
 - 36 “Letters of References, Charles Wilbur White,” Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers, Box 456, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tenn.
 - 37 Rivera’s mural conveys a parallel cultural message for the purposes of wartime solidarity. In a 1942 speech entitled “The Necessity of Art and Its Importance in the Development of American Continental Unity” (*La necesidad del arte y su importancia en el desarrollo de la unidad continental Americana*), he articulated his utopian vision for the Americas, arguing that the only way to preserve democracy and independence in the Western Hemisphere from the national divisions and destruction of World War II was to mitigate technological modernity with the revitalized cultural forms of Mesoamerican antiquity. This lecture now appears as two essays in a collection of Rivera’s writings. Diego Rivera, “El arte, base del panamericanismo” and “El arte y el panamericanismo,” in *Diego Rivera: Arte y política*, ed. Raquel Tibol (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1979).
 - 38 *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* filled the new museum building with more than five thousand objects, including a full-size plaster cast of the very Aztec sculpture on which Rivera based his hybrid deity. On this and other exhibitions of pre-Columbian art in the United States, see Holly Barnett-Sánchez, “The Necessity of Pre-Columbian Art: U.S. Museums and the Role of Foreign Policy in the Appropriation and Transformation of Mexican Heritage, 1933–1945” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1993).
 - 39 Among the notable cultural leaders celebrating this event was Locke, who considered ancient Egyptian culture a viable alternative to classical civilization for African American artists. Locke, “Impressions of Luxor,” *Howard Alumnus* 2, no. 4 (May 1924): 74–78; and Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 145–47, 210.
 - 40 When Melgar unearthed the first colossal Olmec head at Tres Zapotes in 1862, he interpreted the thick lips and wide flat nose as African and concluded that “there had undoubtedly been Negroes in this country, and this had been in the first epoch of the world.” José María Melgar y Serrano, “Antigüedades Mexicanas, notable excultura antigua,” *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística* 1, no. 2 (1869): 292. This assertion offered a potential solution to Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, which held that black Americans struggled to reconcile their individual identity and the national body politic. Melgar’s theory ostensibly dismantled racist assumptions of blacks as “other” by allowing for a racialized version of American-ness. This and other Afrocentric readings of Olmec civilization have since been discredited. J. A. Rogers, “A Lesson in History: Did Negroes Pre-date Columbus in America?,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 6, 1945, 7; and Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, and Warren Barbour, “Robbing Native American Cultures: Van Sertima’s Afrocentricity and the Olmecs,” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (June 1997): 419–41.
 - 41 Esther Pasztory provides a historiographical summary and analysis of the frontal deity in her published dissertation *The Murals of Tepantitla, Teotihuacan* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976). See also Pasztory, *Teotihuacan: An Experiment in Living* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1997); and Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks; 8th and 9th October 1988* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 129–68.
 - 42 This discovery renewed archaeological interest in Teotihuacan mural art, which had flagged in the decades since Leopoldo Batres’s excavations at the Pyramid of the Sun between 1900 and 1912. New projects targeting other apartment compounds emerged in the 1940s. Excavations began at Tetitla and Zacuala in 1944 and at Atetelco in 1945. Arthur G. Miller, *The Mural Painting of Teotihuacan* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973), 13; and Berlo, *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan*, 16–18.
 - 43 I have found no documentation in the archival record that White consulted this volume. However, his knowledge of and interest in modern Mexican mural imagery suggest that he may have consulted this and other archaeological publications as part of the research he undertook at the New York Public Library, Library of Congress, and Hampton University Library during the fall of 1942.

- 44 Justin Hart, "Making Democracy Safe for the World: Race, Propaganda, and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy during World War II," *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 1 (February 2004): 50.
- 45 John Oliver Killens, "He Took His Art More Seriously Than He Did Himself," *Freedomways* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 194.
- 46 Horowitz, *Images of Dignity*, 16.
- 47 "The Passing Shows," *Art News* 42, no. 13 (November 15–30, 1943): 22.
- 48 White, "Report of a Year's Progress." For the artist, Allied victory represented a particularly poignant concern for black Americans, since "Hitler and fascism threaten us with renewed slavery and extermination of any opportunity for continued cultural advancement and social progress" in the United States.
- 49 White seems to intentionally evoke medieval conceptions of the Last Judgment with his contrasting halves depicting a "hellish," violent past and a peaceful, flourishing present. The avenging angel in the upper left highlights this compositional duality, but White reverses traditional left/right associations. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the blessed should be to God's right side, while the damned are to his left. The relationship of White's mural to Christian iconography merits further research.
- 50 In 1940 White told Robert A. Davis that the problem faced by black Americans was one of "degree or intensity rather than in kind." He explained that African Americans shared a "common interest" and a "common solution" to inequality with other oppressed Americans. Robert A. Davis, "The Art Notebook," *Chicago Sunday Bee*, October 6, 1940. If White believed that interracial coalition-building offered an antidote to bigotry in the United States, he also did not exempt any one race, even his own, from being complicit in its perpetuation. In *Technique to Serve the Struggle* (1940–41), a mural he completed for the George Cleveland Branch of the Chicago Public Library, White included a lynched man and a black middle-class overseer with a whip standing over another black man in chains.
- 51 E. Franklin Frazier, "The Present Status of the Negro Family in the United States," *Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 3 (July 1939): 382.
- 52 "Negro Mural," *ArtNews* 42, no. 9 (August–September 1943): 37; Art Council, "Art Today," *Daily Worker*, August 28, 1943. The symbol of the blueprint probably refers to Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," which appeared in *New Challenge* magazine in the fall of 1937. White met Wright at the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago. Fitzgerald, "Charles White in Person," 159.