

# Introduction

## Lucy Caplan and Kristen M. Turner

In [Panel 34](#) of Jacob Lawrence’s iconic *Migration Series* (1940–41), a man stands with his back to the viewer and his head cast down, immersed completely in what is before him. He is reading the newspaper. A woman sits near him, motionless and attentive: is he reading aloud to her? Is she waiting for her own chance to rifle through the pages? With characteristic understatement, Lawrence captions the panel simply: “The Negro press was also influential in urging the people to leave the South.” This influence is a theme he returns to elsewhere in the series: Panel 20, for example, features groups of readers, each clustered together around a single copy of a newspaper, accompanied by the heading, “In many of the communities the Negro press was read continually because of its attitude and its encouragement of the movement.” In Lawrence’s visual imaginary, the newspaper is made into a material sign of its historical moment, a locus of communal activity, and a forum for creativity.

In their emphasis on the role of the Black press in catalyzing the Great Migration, Lawrence’s images convey the centrality of the press to African American life during the first half of the twentieth century. His caption emphasizes that the press was itself a historical actor: not simply a record of what was happening in Black America, but also an institution that itself shaped historical change. Further, as works of art, Lawrence’s images also speak to—and embody—the multifaceted nexus and mutually constitutive relationship between the press and the world of the arts during this era. As such, they invite a number of questions that are fundamental to this special issue. How did artists and the Black press interact with one another during the age of Jim Crow? How did the press function

as an agent of social and cultural change? How did artistic content in the Black press relate to the Black public sphere more broadly? The authors whose work is featured in this issue of *American Studies* answer these questions alongside other, even more expansive ones: in what ways did arts coverage in the Black press figure into transnational networks of intellectual exchange? How did this content interact with other types of African American and American print culture? How did it function as a site of racial formation, especially in conjunction with questions of class, gender, and sexuality?

Significantly, the page that Lawrence's central figure ponders in Panel 34 appears blank; Lawrence lets the viewer imagine what words, images, and ideas it might include. Perhaps it was a straightforward call to southerners to migrate north. Or perhaps it was something else entirely—a review of a concert, an illustration of an eminent person, or a work of speculative fiction. To peruse the pages of a Black magazine or newspaper was—and is—to encounter an astonishing variety of content related to the arts. Usually considered to have originated with the 1827 founding of *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first Black-owned and -published newspaper, the Black press became a key site for political discourse in the post-emancipation era, from the landmark anti-lynching exposés of Ida Wells-Barnett to the mobilization of Black communities in opposition to racial segregation.<sup>1</sup> Many of the earliest Black newspapers also featured fiction and poetry within their pages and facilitated vigorous debates about Black cultural production.<sup>2</sup> As the press expanded, so did its coverage of and engagement with the arts. By the early twentieth century, specialty publications like the *Negro Music Journal* (est. 1902) and generalist literary magazines like the *Colored American Magazine* (est. 1900) offered extensive coverage of arts-related topics. For their part, newspapers featured cartoons, illustrations, fiction, poetry, arts criticism, and advertisements for upcoming cultural events.

When the African American weekly newspaper emerged as a transformative cultural force around the turn of the twentieth century, Black journalists gained an unprecedented opportunity to reach a broad public. In 1890, there were between fifty and 150 Black newspapers in the country; most were small-scale, reaching fewer than 10,000 subscribers across limited geographic areas. By 1911, there were over 300 newspapers, many of which were distributed nationally. Their combined circulation exceeded half a million subscribers, and they reached untold other readers as copies were passed from family member to family member or neighbor to neighbor, sparking conversations in living rooms and churches, schoolyards and street corners. At the same time, African American literacy rates rose precipitously, from 5% of the population in 1865 to 70% in 1910. As the Great Migration propelled huge numbers of rural Black southerners to the urban North, newspapers, dispersed nationally by Pullman porters, both documented and shaped the transformation of Black communities. In Chicago, for instance, where the *Chicago Defender* embarked on a "Great Migration Drive" that celebrated the promise of urban life, the city's Black population jumped from 44,000 in 1910 to 110,000 in 1920.<sup>3</sup> In turn, the urbanization of African Americans led to

the expansion of the northern city press: by 1910, papers published in the North accounted for nearly 30% of all Black newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

Our decision to co-edit a special issue grew out of a conference we co-organized on the topic of “The Arts in the Black Press During the Age of Jim Crow.” Held at Yale University in March 2017, the conference brought together scholars from film studies, art history, musicology, American studies, African American studies, literary criticism, and other disciplines. For two days, the participants enjoyed rich and meaningful conversations about Black life and culture, both in the United States and throughout the diaspora, as seen through the lens of the arts and its coverage in the Black press.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the intellectual energy that the conference generated, we see this special issue as a continuation and expansion of that endeavor.

The title of this issue—“The Arts in the Black Press During the Age of Jim Crow”—defines the scope of the articles in three ways: the type of media, the subject of coverage, and the time period. Despite this triple delineation, the subject is still quite broad because it includes hundreds of press outlets, covers a fundamental component of Black culture, and spans a century of time. For this issue, we define the Black press as including all media outlets whose primary audiences and writers were African American. As recent studies of Black print culture have noted, Jim Crow-era periodicals were “often the best and sometimes the *only* possible publication venue for many African American writers.”<sup>6</sup> The Black press was not immune from surveillance by white readers which sometimes resulted in “outward-facing” coverage designed to reassure or confront white people or governmental institutions. An overarching goal of the Black press was to counteract the propensity of the white press to portray Black life through the selective lenses of racist caricature and violence. But it was so much more than this; as media historian Anna Everett has observed, the press was also “the only dedicated forum for the mass cultivation, appreciation, and dissemination of African American ideas, culture, values, talent, literature, thought, and analysis.”<sup>7</sup>

We focus on the extensive arts coverage that flourished within Black newspapers because it shows how the African American artist living and working under Jim Crow was, to borrow a phrase from Ralph Ellison, “no mere product of his socio-political predicament.”<sup>8</sup> In recent years, other special issues have analyzed the Black press and Black print culture; notable examples include “African American Print Cultures,” edited by Joycelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy in *MELUS* (2015), and “Black Periodical Studies,” edited by Joycelyn Moody and Eric Gardner in *American Periodicals* (2015).<sup>9</sup> To our knowledge, this is the first special issue to focus on the arts. This lens allows for a multifaceted perspective on Black life, which subverts the tendency to mythologize a monolithic “Black culture,” “Black arts,” or “Black press.” As Kim Gallon writes, the Black press is better understood not as an egalitarian or uniform space, but rather as “a historical and ideological construction which often obscures a set of heterogeneous newspapers with common objectives but different methods and ideologies for accomplishing the social, political advancement and entertainment of African

Americans.”<sup>10</sup> Within the realm of the arts, African American journalists—unlike voyeuristic white writers, who tended to emphasize spectacle and novelty above all else—strove for breadth and quantity, less interested in filtering out impressive “firsts” than in portraying the full sweep of Black artistic culture. In many instances, these journalists provided what is now the only extant record of particular facets of Black artistic life and works. At the same time, however, their work showed how narrow the spaces between art, politics, and ideas could be. The arts in the Black press bolstered and amplified the messages that press outlets sought to convey via more straightforward political reporting. This component of the press productively complicates our understanding of what made these newspapers and magazines such powerful forums for intraracial conversation and organizing.

The time period under consideration is the era of legalized segregation. Jim Crow is an especially apt description of segregation given this issue’s focus on the arts. A construct of racism that dates from the early nineteenth century, Jim Crow was a character created by a white man (Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice) who claimed to be mimicking a disabled enslaved man (or was it a stable boy—we’ll never know). The ubiquity and popularity of minstrelsy made the theatrical stereotype of the happy-go-lucky dancing slave a metaphor for segregation itself: a circumstance imposed by white people to control and degrade a group they saw as damaged and inferior, but who were still a source of labor and cultural inspiration. By the time the first laws that forced the races apart were passed in the late nineteenth century, many places had already observed *de facto* segregation. The laws merely confirmed and codified what had already come to pass. Indeed, in some areas, a few Black leaders even accepted segregation as a way to regularize a chaotic situation or to allow Black entrepreneurs the space to open businesses that could safely serve African American consumers.<sup>11</sup> Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, legalized separation of the races continued for some time.

Although the arts have always been an important part of Black culture, the context of Jim Crow segregation affected Black creativity in specific ways. Before Emancipation, a person’s status (enslaved or free) defined their access to literacy and the resources required for artistic production (time, equipment, capital, etc.). This is not to say that enslaved people did not make art—for they most certainly did—but rather that they worked under different conditions with respect to the way they made art, who was able to enjoy it, and how it was preserved. After the Civil War and throughout the Jim Crow era, Black people carved out new spaces for artistic creation and self-expression while also fighting against white supremacy. The circumstances of segregation forced the creation of what musicologist Naomi André calls a “shadow culture” where Black people established an array of institutions, hierarchies, and cultural artifacts that were only minimally visible to white people, but were also in plain sight if one wanted to look.<sup>12</sup> In the arts, this resulted in a vibrant and fertile Black cultural scene that was also vulnerable to wholesale appropriation by white people. Yet, as Gerald

Horne has noted, institutions born of segregation were subject to the “Jim Crow paradox,” meaning that as they “became more successful in eroding Jim Crow, they became their own gravediggers, preparing the ground for their burial.”<sup>13</sup>

This special issue engages with and adds to a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship on Black print culture. Scholars of the African American past have long recognized the multivalent value of the Black press as a vital social institution, a rich repository of information about Black history, and a historical actor in its own right. While earlier historiography focused primarily upon U.S. racial politics and the social efficacy of the Black press, the field’s focus has broadened significantly in recent years in three ways: namely, in terms of the types of content studied; the geographical scope of inquiries into the press; and a turn toward digital, public, and collaborative academic work. Scholars have explored a variety of understudied components of the Jim Crow-era press. Some highlight subjects that previously have been dismissed as mere sensationalism. For example, Kim Gallon’s *Pleasure in the News* foregrounds gender and sexuality, arguing that the Black press created “Black sexual publics” via its coverage of gender and sexual diversity, and Carrie Teresa’s *Looking at the Stars* resituates celebrity journalism in the Black press as a crucial site of discourse around the value of entertainment as a political tool.<sup>14</sup> Other scholars have taken a biographical approach, delving into the lives of notable figures including radical editor William Monroe Trotter, “First Lady of the Black Press” Ethel Payne, and White House correspondent Alice Dunnigan.<sup>15</sup> A transnational and diasporic lens has proved fruitful in many recent studies of the Black press: for instance, Gerald Horne’s examination of Claude Barnett’s Pan-Africanist Associated Negro Press (ANP) highlights the way that the ANP linked anti-Jim Crow activism to the global anti-colonialist fight.<sup>16</sup>

New digital and public-facing formats have revolutionized the study of the Black press in recent years. Predicted upon collaboration and accessibility, such projects offer a new model for scholarship on the press, itself an inherently cooperative and multivocal format. Since 2013, the Black Press Research Collective, founded by Kim Gallon, has offered a space for archiving, curating, and producing knowledge about the press.<sup>17</sup> Matthew F. Delmont offers a different approach in the public and digital project *Black Quotidian: Everyday History in African-American Newspapers*, which draws upon an immense archive of digitized Black newspapers and foregrounds primary sources. It features brief analyses, written by a variety of contributors, on individual newspaper stories from an array of publications, showing how even seemingly mundane content holds rich interpretive potential.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of the segregated United States, aesthetic and intellectual considerations are inextricable from political concerns. Questions of how to get free and how to be treated as a citizen were a sometimes silent, but still ever-present drumbeat that underlined so much of the rhetoric and content of the Black press during the age of Jim Crow.<sup>19</sup> The articles in this special issue illuminate the varied and complex relationship between the arts, citizenship, and freedom.

Examining materials as disparate as cartoons and theatrical advice columns, the authors in this issue showcase a variety of methodological and disciplinary approaches to the study of the arts in the Black press. Susan Bragg's article, for example, on the photography published in *The Crisis* (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's official magazine) in the 1910s and 1920s, reveals that the images of beautiful and modern *Crisis* Maids helped to establish, perpetuate, and complicate the respectability politics that permeated the NAACP, as well as the organization's reputation as a central institution of the Black bourgeoisie.

Still, the politics of segregation is not always the primary concern of artists, critics, and commentators. Art is a source of joy, of fun, a moment away from vigilance and surveillance, a space of connection and empathy, a reminder of humanity in an inhumane world. To ignore these realities about art is to run the risk of dehumanizing its creators—subjecting them to an overly politicized reading that renders the art and its makers as reflections only of political necessity and not as fully realized human beings with all the messiness and nuance that entails. By turning to the arts in the Black press, we can acknowledge both the political and the humane while affirming the ways that the arts were a source of empowerment and pride for African Americans. Erica Richardson engages with nonfiction and fiction writing in her article to demonstrate how the production of aesthetic theory, informed by the burgeoning field of sociology, created a space for Black women not only to assert their political aspirations, but also to take joy and pride in their existence as women.

Many scholars of Black cultural history rely on the press simply as a repository of data, e.g., to determine when and where a concert occurred, or when new terms entered the critical conversation. Our focus here is different. The articles in this issue emphasize the Black press as a space for interpretation, analysis, and creative production. Engagement with the arts in the press extended beyond creative content (such as illustrations or fiction writing), or criticism and reporting about cultural events. Artists also used the press as an arena for discourse about their craft. Michelle R. Scott, for example, reads vaudevillian Vivienne Russell's theatrical column as an example of nonfiction writing by a New Negro woman committed to "uplifting the race" by framing popular entertainers as role models for respectability, capable of demonstrating Black achievement and worthiness for full civic participation.

Two of the articles focus on cartoons as a space of both artistic and political meaning. Rachel Rubin and James Smethurst collaborated on an essay about Ollie Harrington that takes his cartoons seriously both as art and as trenchant political commentary from a radical Leftist perspective. The authors remind readers that Leftist and Communist ideologies were a powerful influence on Black leaders and some outlets of the Black press. H. Zahra Caldwell examines the cartoons drawn by Jackie Ormes, whose work was often paired on the pages of Black newspapers with that of Ollie Harrington. Ormes's cartoons may not have been as overtly political as Harrington's, but, as Caldwell demonstrates, Ormes's brand

of Black feminist politics permeates her panels, and her cartoons were part of the Leftist political discourse in mid-century America.

The heartbreak for all those who study Black cultural production is how much has been lost through racialized violence, oppression, and systemic racism that affects the collection practices of archives. There are press outlets that have all but disappeared—issues discarded from libraries or never collected, short-lived companies that could not find the investment capital to continue publishing, communities (and their presses) destroyed by violence, official neglect, or disruptive civic planning that preserved white neighborhoods at the expense of Black areas. Janet Kong-Chow’s article is unique in the issue, because she has no physical documents to examine. No issues of the *Demonstrator* from Mound Bayou, Mississippi have survived. Kong-Chow’s meditation is not so much on the history she can reconstruct (which she does with the diligence of a determined historian) but on what it means to lose a space of cultural production. All historians contend with gaps in the archive, as there is no subject that has a complete textual record, but those who study oppressed communities lead the way in theorizing this absence.<sup>20</sup> To analyze what we have, we must also consider what we have lost.

As a primary site of the struggles over representation that are so fundamental to African American history, the arts are interwoven with other categories of analysis: gender, class, respectability, radicalism, and citizenship. Just as importantly, arts coverage raises fundamental questions about the interaction of aesthetics, medium, form, and content: *how* journalists, illustrators, and writers addressed these issues is as relevant as *what* they chose to say. Yet even as artistic content in the Black press dealt with the full scope of Black lived experience, it also had another, more imaginative, and perhaps even more utopian function. The press crafted a record of Black aspirations and imaginations that extended far beyond the limitations of Jim Crow. Refusing simply to record the world as it was, authors and artists created a vision of the world as it could be.

## Notes

1. Accordingly, scholarship on the political history of the Black press is extensive. See, for example, Yanela G. McLeod, *The Miami Times and the Fight for Equality: Race, Sport, and the Black Press, 1948–1958* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); and Jane Rhodes, “The Black Press and Radical Print Culture,” in *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 5, *The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, eds. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 286–303.

2. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 85–137.

3. See Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

4. Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 48–49.

5. Of particular note was Dr. Kim Gallon’s keynote, “No Tears for Alden: The Black Press as an Archive of Black Performance and Performativity,” which introduced some of the themes she explores in her 2020 monograph, *Pleasure in the News: African American Readership and Sexuality in the Black Press*.

6. Eric Gardner and Jocelyn Moody, “Introduction: Black Periodical Studies,” *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (2015): 107.

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7. Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 2.

8. Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 160.

9. Joycelyn Moody and Howard Ramsby II, eds., “African American Print Cultures,” Special Issue, *MELUS* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 1–11; Gardner and Moody, eds., “Black Periodical Studies.”

10. Kim Gallon, *Pleasure in the News: African American Readership and Sexuality in the Black Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 12.

11. David E. Goldberg, *The Retreats of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, and the Politics of Segregation at the New Jersey Shore, 1865–1920* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 57–63.

12. See Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

13. Gerald Horne, *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press: Claude Barnett’s Pan-African News and the Jim Crow Paradox* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 7.

14. Gallon, *Pleasure in the News*; Carrie Teresa, *Looking at the Stars: Black Celebrity Journalism in Jim Crow America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019). Another important recent text on the Black press that takes gender as its interpretive lens is D’Weston Haywood, *Let Us Make Men: The Twentieth-Century Black Press and a Manly Vision for Racial Advancement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

15. Kerri K. Greenidge, *Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Liveright, 2019); James McGrath Morris, *Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press* (New York: Amistad, 2015); Alice Allison Dunnigan, *Alone Atop the Hill: The Autobiography of Alice Dunnigan, Pioneer of the National Black Press*, ed. Carol McCabe Booker (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

16. Horne, *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press*. Christopher M. Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) also centers transnationalism.

17. Black Press Research Collective, <http://Blackpressresearchcollective.org>.

18. Matthew F. Delmont, “Black Quotidian: Everyday History in African-American Newspapers,” Stanford University Press, <http://blackquotidian.org/>.

19. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper*, 8.

20. For recent work on archival absence see Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).