Rethinking social realism: African American art and literature, 1930-1953.

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Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953 (review)

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Stacy Morgan's *Rethinking Social Realism* is an ambitious and important study of left-wing African American expressive culture from the beginning of the Great Depression to the depths of the McCarthy Era. Its largely successful efforts to think across boundaries of genre, medium, and intellectual discipline make it among the most impressive studies of African American art and the Communist Left to date.

Like Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* and Bill Mullen's *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–46*, Morgan's study reads across boundaries of genre and media, placing African American art within the institutional and ideological context that produced it. However, *Rethinking Social Realism* is more narrowly concerned with what some scholars of the Left have called the "Black Cultural Front" than is Denning's book and more broadly focused in terms of chronology and geography than Mullen's *Popular Fronts*. Among its many virtues is the way in which *Rethinking Social Realism* shows the cross-pollination between artists working in different media. For example, Morgan convincingly demonstrates the formal and thematic impact that Richard Wright's *Native Son* had on the graphic art of John Wilson.

After an introductory chapter examining the institutional and ideological matrices out of which African American social realist art of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s emerged, Morgan treats four categories of black social realism (murals, graphic art, poetry, and novels) in separate chapters that, again, attempt to bring these art forms in dialogue with each other even as he does close readings of visual and verbal texts. The individual chapters are further subdivided into a couple of sections that take up more general concerns along with a sort of case study of an important, but critically underconsidered artist: Charles White, John Wilson, Frank Marshall Davis, and Willard Motley. Of course, with a comparatively recent surge of interest in the Left and African American culture, all of these artists have attained a higher profile in academia over the last ten years. Still, Morgan's close examination of particular works by those artists, particularly the visual artists, while linking those works to the larger institutional, ideological, and aesthetic framework of the Left, is a valuable addition to this new wave of scholarship.

Morgan's chapters on African American muralists and graphic artists are especially groundbreaking. In general, the study of visual art and the Left in the United States has lagged behind the examination of literature and the Left, Andrew Hemingway's wonderful *Art-
ists on the Left notwithstanding. Scholarship on black visual artists and the Left has been even more scant though the influence of the Communist Left on those artists was no less than it was on African American writers. Morgan contextualizes the work of relatively well-known figures, such as Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, John Biggers, and Hale Woodruff; less famous, but generally well-regarded artists, such as Hughie Lee-Smith, Charles Alston, and John Wilson; and far less considered painters and printmakers, such as James Lesesne Wells and Raymond Steth, within their longstanding (and in some cases life-long) engagement with the ideology, aesthetics, and institutions of the Communist Left, both domestically and internationally. Other critics have made the connection between African American artists, especially the black muralists of the 1930s and 1940s, and the Mexican mural movement, most famously represented by the work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. However, Morgan lays out how Left Mexican artists and cultural institutions, such as the Taller de Gráfica Popular, provided inspiration, training, and refuge from Cold War political persecution to muralists and graphic artists in an unusually clear and detailed manner. Morgan also details the role that historically black colleges and universities, such as Talladega College, Atlanta University (and the other black schools of Atlanta’s University Center), Dillard University, and the Hampton Institute, played in support of black social realist art in the South, significantly expanding our notion of the landscape and institutional base of what might be thought of as the extended Popular Front, from the mid-1930s until, at least, the Henry Wallace presidential campaign of 1948.

Morgan’s chapters on poetry and novels seem less pioneering, largely because a much larger body of scholarship exists on black literature and the Left than is the case for African American visual art and the Left. Still, this body of work is not so great that Morgan’s close readings of the work of such still undervalued writers as Frank Marshall Davis, Willard Motley, and Lloyd Brown are not welcome. Certainly, Morgan’s treatments of Motley’s Knock on Any Door and Brown’s Iron City are both among the best discussions of those novels in print and powerful arguments for the persistence of a significant Left strain in black letters through the late 1940s and into, at least, the early 1950s. In general, these sorts of arguments that posit continuities between black literature and visual art of the late 1940s and early 1950s and later radical African American artistic production, particularly that of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s are valuable in helping us reconsider received notions of period and cultural influence. In fact, one sometimes wishes that Morgan made more clear the practical connection between the artists he discusses
(or could have discussed), such as John Wilson, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, John O. Killens, and the young black radicals of the 1960s.

Finding fault with such an ambitious book is both easy and hard. It is easy in the sense that Morgan has taken on such a large project that one can always say, but what about this or that form or medium. And, it is hard for the same reason, because it is not possible to cover everything, but nonetheless essential to undertake such interdisciplinary, if necessarily partial projects. As Morgan modestly points out, his hope is that this will help open up further conversations in which other scholars could bring theater, music, dance, and so on into the mix. Still, it is difficult not to wish that Morgan had added another chapter on drama, a major vehicle for black Left social realist art that often combined (as Morgan notes about Langston Hughes's 1937 *Don't You Want To Be Free*, a "poetry-play" mixing music, poetry, historical narrative, drama, and dance) genres and media that Morgan discusses at length as well as others that he does not. In this regard, it would have been good if Morgan had devoted more space to the way in which African American Left artists (and Left artists in general) blurred or completely erased lines between genre and media, particular with the rise of the Popular Front in the mid-1930s. More attention to this characteristic of Popular Front art (and even "Third Period" art to some extent) might have helped better situate Morgan's observation about the way that Frank Marshall Davis's poems were often written as recitations (complete with stage directions) even though it is unclear whether these poems were ever performed in this way. Also, it would have strengthened Morgan's valid claims about a link between the radical black art of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s and the similarly multi-media, multi-generic art of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, such relatively small problems should not get the last word. *Rethinking Social Realism* is a major step forward in producing the sort of interdisciplinary, comparative scholarship that is necessary if one is really going to come to grips with the trajectory and legacy of Left African American art from the onset of the Great Depression to well after the beginning of the Cold War. Again, while Morgan's examination of the visual arts is in and of itself a big contribution to existing scholarship, the way in which he places that art in conversation with the more studied body of Left African American literature is extremely useful in the understanding and periodization of three decades of African American expressive culture.

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