CHAPTER 3
ART IN *THE CRISIS*

And so this Christian mob did turn
From pray to rob, to lynch and burn.
A victim helplessly he fell
To tortures truly kin to hell;
They bound him fast and strung him high,
They cut him down lest he should die
Before their energy was spent
In torturing to their heart's content.

They cut his quivering flesh away
And danced and sang as Christians may;
Then from his side they tore his heart
And watched its quivering fibres dart.

And they raised a Sabbath song,
The echo sounded wild and strong,
A benediction to the skies
That crowned the human sacrifice.

Walter Everette Hawkins: "A Festival of Christendom"

As noted in Chapter 2, W.E.B. Du Bois in his capacity as editor of *The Crisis* was determined to keep the issue of lynching in the forefront of his readers' concerns. His commitment to social justice for African Americans, which he called his search for the truth, was reinforced by the graphic art that appeared in *The Crisis*. He was a propagandist who believed that all art should be used for the betterment of the race (Johnson and Johnson 26). Writing in the January 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois opined, "We want especially to stress the fact that while we believe in Negro art we do not believe in any art simply for art's sake" (qtd. in Johnson and Johnson 46). The policy of *The Crisis* was to use art that depicted African Americans in a non-stereotypical way. In doing so, such art had to fight prior stereotypical images. My objective in this chapter is to analyze the art of two artists, Lorenzo W. Harris and Albert Alexander Smith, whose art was featured in *The Crisis*, and how that art supported the message of the journal. This art provided a new artistic theme and redefined the way the issue of lynching and, in fact, the broader issue of racial justice was represented and in doing so, humanized the victims.

Before focusing on African American artists, it is necessary to review quickly the predominant images contributed by white racist artists. In the years between 1710 and 1940, white artists produced works that represented four general types of blacks: "grotesque buffoons, servile menials, comic

entertainers, and threatening subhumans" (McElroy xi). There were "'Uncle Toms,' 'Aunt Chloes,' 'Rastuses,' and other overdrawn 'darky' or villainous types" (Porter 72). This art was very popular and there was a great demand for it. But the one particular image of African Americans that rose to the forefront with white Americans was "Sambo" caricatures (see Fig. 1) that were printed on cartoons, postcards, dining items and on "virtually every conceivable form of consumer goods advertised and mass marketed for the American lower and middle classes. The Sambo image was not only a highly visible symbol; it was also a highly marketable commodity" (Gates 52). These were "restrictive stereotypes of black identity. … The repeated use of these pictorial images gave them the powerful immediacy of symbols. … Visual images have the persuasive power to define place and personality" (McElroy xi).

But African American artists were producing other art. In the mid nineteenth century they were creating landscapes and portraits. By the end of the century, they were becoming more race conscious, and while their style was still academic, or Western, they began to portray black life. Henry Ossawa Tanner's The Banjo Lesson, 1893, (see Fig. 2) is a sensitive depiction of a black man teaching a youngster how to play the banjo, and was exceptional at the time. This work is still considered a masterpiece today.

But there were other issues at hand for African Americans. Black artists, as artists have since the beginning of time, represented issues that were relevant to them, and the issue of lynching was in the forefront of black life. *The Crisis* with its thought-provoking graphic images dealing with lynching provided serious discussion and guidance contributing to its success.

Among the visual images used by black artists to confront the stereotypes of African Americans were political cartoons. A cartoon is a drawing or series of drawings whose focus is the subject matter rather than the style of execution. The purpose of a political or social cartoon is to provide commentary. Political cartoons played a large role in the French Revolution and were particularly popular in the mid nineteenth century. One of the most well-known is a lithograph by the French Realist illustrator Honoré-Victorin Daumier, Rue Transnonian, le 15 Avril 1834 (see Fig. 3). Daumier's work represented a nighttime massacre of 12 ordinary working people by the troops of King Louis Philippe's Army during the Bourbon restoration in the aftermath of the Great Revolution, and was published August 1834 in *Association*

Mensuelle, a book on censorship. The title of the work is used to document the event: the name of the street, on which this happened, Rue Transnonian, and the date, April 15, 1834.

"By 1900, every newspaper, even small-town papers, had a cartoonist" (Hess and Northrop qtd. in Kirschke 29), therefore, when *The Crisis* used cartoons to support the issues they addressed, people were familiar with them. But they were not familiar with seeing the subject matter of lynching treated in this fashion. These cartoons represented an authentic African American experience. The traditional focal point of lynching photography and drawings reproduced in newspapers, on postcards and other media, was on the mob, grinning madly into the camera; proud of the deed they had accomplished (see Fig. 4). Although the images of lynchings are viewed now to indict the lynchers, they had a very different connotation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to historian Amy Wood, "lynching photographs constructed and perpetuated white supremacist ideology by creating permanent images of a controlled white citizenry juxtaposed to images of helpless and powerless black men," … (offering) "visual proof of the casual and celebratory nature with which white southerners attended and accepted public spectacles of torture and death" (373, 375). The lynched body/bodies hanging or lying nearby was inhuman debris left over like trash at a picnic. If considered human, it was in a conquered, spoils-of-war type of way.

The African American artists continued in this tradition by picturing a scene after the deed had been done, but they changed the focus of lynching by focusing on the victims, and gave a human dimension to the articles and editorials published in *The Crisis*. This attention highlighted the need for accountability for the perpetrators. These acts were not committed against nameless, faceless individuals, but human beings with families, well-known in their communities. The creation of the cartoons was taking control of the situation, and refocusing the emphasis to where they wanted it. The passive hanging or burned bodies were reborn as human beings—individuals that compassionate people could sympathize and connect with. The cartoons in *The Crisis* allowed people to understand the wickedness of lynching. Instead of the jovial celebration associated with lynching, these images evoked different emotions, from sadness to anger.

Onto the scene burst the cartoons of Harris and Smith with their challenging themes. They took symbols the masses could relate to, e.g., the crucified Christ, and dared to use them in a manner not

usually connected to African Americans, holding not just individuals accountable, but American institutions, like the white Christian church, as well. Harris' compositions are heavier and denser, while Smith's are more refined pen-and-ink drawings, but their intent is the same.

Lorenzo W. Harris, born in 1888, played a significant role in the anti-lynching movement. His cartoons dealt with other topics such as education and democracy, but the most powerful ones took on the subject of lynching. He was Du Bois' favorite artist on this subject (Kirschner 79). Because of the popularity of *The Crisis*, Harris' work was quite well known. Unfortunately, the biographical information on Harris is very limited. One can only wonder if his pioneering participation in *The Crisis* made him a pariah and restricted his career.

"The Funny Page," (see Fig.5) published in March 1918, depicts three large, brutish figures, two of which are Lynch Law and Discrimination, reading a large bound copy of the Constitution of the United States and having a good laugh. The amendments that are the subject of their humor are the Fourteenth, that mandates equal protection of the law for all citizens, and the Fifteenth, that guarantees all citizens the right to vote. The Constitution rests on a classical platform that is symbolic of its historical significance. Harris dresses the figures in barbaric attire, representing uncivilized mankind, another link to the past. He has thrown a rope across the body of Lynch Law, and his hands are still dripping with blood. His right hand rests on Discrimination's arm in a familiar manner, while they both are physically connected to the unnamed center figure, who could represent those who have benefited by all the vile acts they have committed—overt acts—in the face of the Constitution. This Constitution towers over the figures, yet they do not take it seriously at all. "The Funny Page" is a defiant assault on their patriotism. How can they love their country, while having no respect for its laws?

Albert Alexander Smith was born September 17, 1896, in New York City, where he attended public schools. In 1920 Smith traveled to Paris, France, as many American artists did, to further his artistic education and experience. It was there that the theme of Smith's art changed from rural scenes to the world of Negroes in the South. Even though he was middle class and had never visited the South, the plight of African Americans was common knowledge to all Americans, as well as to the world. I believe he, as did many others before and after him, went to Europe and saw blacks being respected by Europeans, … and realized how unjust the racial climate was at home in the US. The themes that were

significant to him were tourist sites, racial discrimination and racial uplift. Two of his most memorable cartoons were created in 1920: "The Reason" and "They Have Ears but They Hear Not" (Kirschke, Leininger-Miller, Reynolds and Wright).

Smith's "The Reason" (see Fig. 6) was published in the March 1920 issue of *The Crisis.* It is a small composition at 4 ¼" x 6 ¼", but makes a definitive declaration: the main reason blacks were leaving the South for the North was lynching. Smith's pen and ink drawings are more refined than Harris', but the messages are just as profound. We see a well-dressed black man, identified as "Southern Negro" on the suitcase in one hand, while holding his hat in the other hand. Smith has created movement with the clouds of dust and the clothes blowing in the wind, and with the blowing banner that states "To the North." This is not an image of a brute, but an educated, contributing member of society. Over his shoulder we see an almost scarecrow-like figure gesturing toward a lynched and burned body as if to say, "You're next." The fear on the face of the fleeing man exemplifies the African American experience in the South.

Lorenzo W. Harris and Albert Alexander Smith were both very significant to the anti-lynching movement. Their art, along with that of a number of contributors, visually supported the message of *The Crisis.* Their stimulating, provocative cartoons humanized horrific situations, allowing people to feel empathy and compassion for the victims. In the next chapter we will look at the art of some of the artists who exhibited in the 1935 exhibition *An Art Commentary on Lynching* and also contributed to the anti-lynching movement.
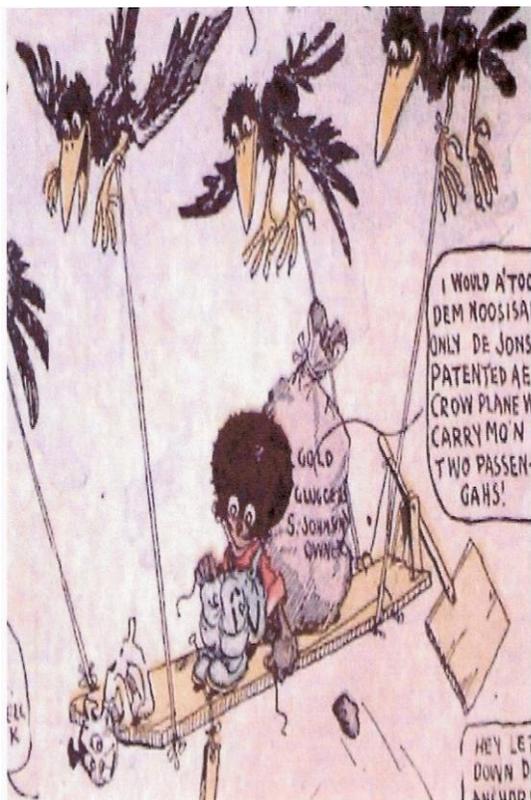
Fig. 1. Derogatory comic from 1911. "Visualizing Otherness III – Set 2" Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies." www.chgs.umn.edu/.../otherness/otherness3-2.html September 2, 2008

Fig. 2. Henry Ossawa Tanner. The Banjo Lesson. Oil on canvas, 49" x 35 ½". Hampton University Museum, VA.

Fig. 3. Honoré-Victorin Daumier. Rue Transnonain, 15 April 1834, L'Association mensuelle, plate 24, July 1834. Lithograph, 11" x 17.3". Association des amis de Honoré Daumier.
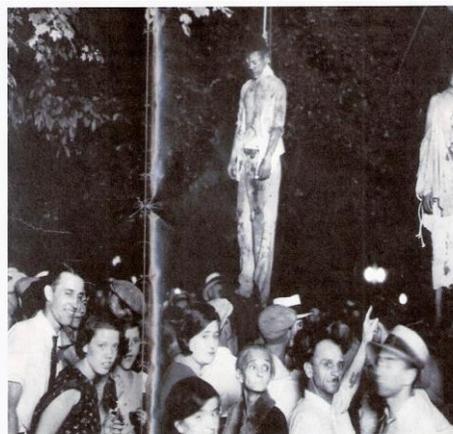

Fig. 4. The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers.
August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Gelatin silver print, 9 ½" x 7 ½". Etched in the negative: "Marion, Ind. Aug. 1930."
www.withoutsanctuary.org July 12, 2008
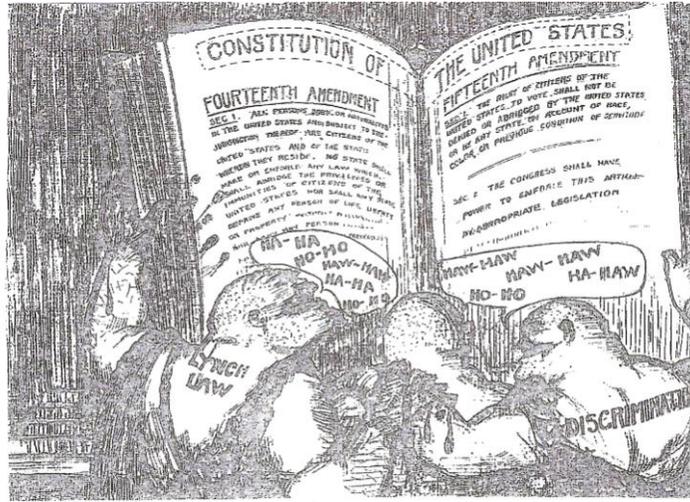
Fig. 5. Lorenzo Harris. The Funny Page.
Drawing. 4 ¾" x 7 ½", *The Crisis*, March 1916.
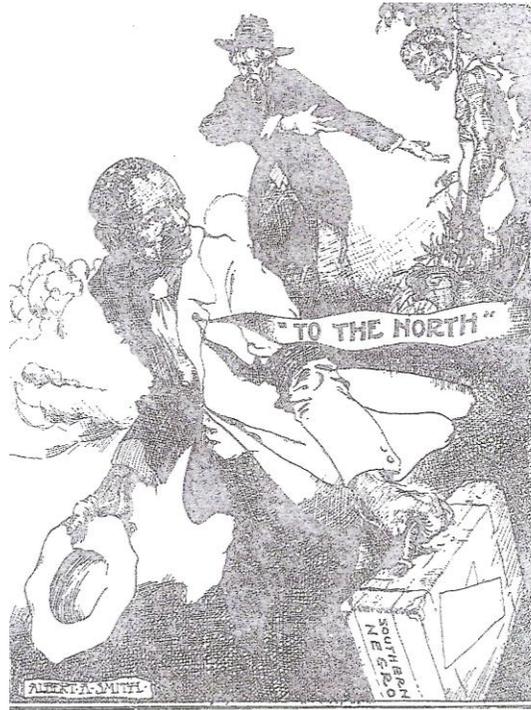
Fig. 6. Albert Alexander Smith. The Reason.
Pen and ink on paper. 4 ¾" x 6 ¼", *The Crisis*, March 1920.

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