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**ROOTED IN THE COMMUNITY:
BLACK MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITY PERFORMANCE
IN THE EARLY WORKS OF ALLAN ROHAN CRITE, 1935-1948**

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By

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2008

Dedicated to the memory of
Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and institutions. First and foremost, I express my gratitude to Allan and Jackie Crite for their willing participation in this project. From the moment I arrived on their doorstep in the summer of 1996, they welcomed me into their lives and generously shared their time, thoughts, artworks, books and other documents. The many hours Mr. Crite and I spent talking and looking at art together greatly enriched this study. I am indebted to Jackie Crite for her behind the scenes work of locating and providing unlimited access to materials.

I am extremely fortunate to have worked closely with the chair of my dissertation committee, Cherise Smith. Although a late arrival to the project, she was instrumental in helping me shape my central argument about Crite's black middle class performance, and I am grateful for her sage advice and for her continuing faith in me. I am also indebted to Linda D. Henderson, my first advisor, for guiding me during the initial stages of this project and for being a wonderful mentor throughout my graduate school career. I extend my deep appreciation to the other members of my committee, John R. Clarke, Ann Reynolds, Edmund T. Gordon, and Richard J. Powell, for their careful reading of my manuscript and for their encouragement and insights. Special thanks also goes to Richard Powell for first introducing me to Crite's work and for his continuous support of my scholarship since I was his undergraduate student at Duke University. Edythe Ann Quinn, although not an official member of my

committee, provided insightful feedback to my ideas and my drafts. Her imprint is visible throughout this dissertation.

This project benefitted from the financial support of the Department of Art and Art History and the College of Fine Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, and the following fellowships: a Mary Catherine Mooney Fellowship from the Boston Athenaeum in 2000, a Patricia and Phillip Frost Fellowship from the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2001, and a Dissertation Fellowship in American Art from the Henry Luce Foundation/ American Council of Learned Societies in 2002-2002.

Throughout my work on this project I have met many wonderful artists, curators, librarians and scholars who encouraged and furthered my thinking in countless ways. I am especially indebted to Edmund Barry Gaither, director of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, for providing me with access to his wonderful collection of Crite's work and for sharing his insights into Crite's life and art. Massachusetts State Representative Byron Rushing was another invaluable resource of information about Crite and Boston's black community in the early twentieth century. Among the countless others who lent their support and expertise, I would like to acknowledge Adrienne Baxter Bell, David Brown, Robert Brown, Adelaide Cromwell, Erika Doss, Gwen Everett, Reverend Nelson Foxx, Jacqueline Francis, Reverend Peter J. Gomes, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Robert Hayden, Patricia Hills, Erica Hirshler, Sinclair Hitchings, Jean Lacy, Virginia Mecklenburg, Kymberly Pinder, Sally Pierce, Sally

Promey, Karen Shafts, Catherina Slaughterback, Susan Thompson, Alvia Wardlaw, Michael Wentworth, John Wilson, and Kathleen Wolcott.

Finally, I extend my most heartfelt appreciation to my family. I am grateful to my brother Nathaniel for always encouraging me and to my parents, Bernice and Daniel Levin, for always believing in me and for providing me with an unending supply of moral and emotional support. My husband Richard has sustained me throughout this long journey with his love, creativity, intellect and sense of humor. And, in these last few years, our son Elijah has provided me with an endless source of joy.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Supervisor: Cherise Smith

This dissertation considers the early career of Boston-based, African American artist Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007) and situates his central artistic goal—to present uplifting images of middle class black Bostonians—within the ideological framework of the New Negro Movement of the 1920s-1940s. In each of the chapters, I consider one of the four bodies of work Crite produced simultaneously during his early career—painted portraits, neighborhood street scenes and church interiors and brush and ink illustrations of African American spirituals. I focus on these subjects in order to explore Crite’s desire to portray the middle class status of his family and community and to redefine the spirituals in terms of his own middle-class sensibility. I describe Crite’s visualization of his black middle class Episcopal and Bostonian identity in these works as performances or enactments created through a series of repeated gestures of “respectable” appearance and behavior. My analysis also considers the artist’s motivations to preserve, in the physical form of his artworks, the

black middle class values and way of life in Boston that he feared was in danger of being lost and forgotten.

Rooted in the Community is also a revisionist account, for it seeks to revise the notion of an African American artistic “rootedness” to mean an artist rooted in his own immediate community rather than in a search for his cultural roots in the African past or within the rural folk culture of the American south. This study challenges a bias within the discourse on racial identity in art that privileges a notion of racial authenticity, or an essentialized conception of black identity centered upon the “folk,” or working and lower class African Americans. I also challenge the negative assessment of the black middle class as a group devoid of interest in the black community and propose that early twentieth century definitions of black middle class identity embodied in the notions of the “talented tenth” and the “race” man or woman best define Crite’s sense of himself as a black artist, for he felt a responsibility towards the black community and was not alienated from it.

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INTRODUCTION

Black Middle Class Identity and the Politics of Racial Representation

I have set myself to painting the truth and [to] depicting the ordinary colored person in ordinary circumstances. For almost without exception I have painfully observed my people as represented by both white and colored artists . . . in terms of the jazz Negro or as the typical backwoods Southerner There must be a school of thought and a school of Negro artists with a conviction similar to my own.

Allan Rohan Crite¹

With this statement, recorded in his diary in May of 1936, the African American artist Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007) outlined an artistic goal that would guide his presentation of black subject matter throughout his long career. As a person of color who strongly identified with a middle class and Bostonian outlook, Crite regarded the image of the “jazz Negro” and the “backwoods Southerner” as two versions of an exoticized stereotype that not only disparaged African Americans but also obscured the “ordinary” black life that was his own experience living in the urban north. Although he was working independently in Boston, Crite’s statement suggests that he was aware of the period’s debate over racial representation in art. Crite shared the opinion of contemporary black intellectuals, writers, and artists who felt that an art focused on African American progress could raise black consciousness and increase understanding between the races. Underlying Crite’s artistic goals was an understanding of the

¹ Allan Rohan Crite, diary entry, February 22, 1936. Crite recorded this passage from his diary into his self-published autobiography. Allan Rohan Crite, “Appendix I: The Works Progress Administration,” *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston, MA; copy in Boston Public Library.

capacity of visual images to both raise and lower group consciousness. As Michael Harris points out: “[I]mages are laden with political and psychological potential and potency. They help ideological constructions like race take form in the physical world. They construct, confirm and affirm identity.”²

Crite’s artistic career extended from the 1930s to the late 1990s, and his production was diverse, encompassing a range of subjects and media. My study focuses on a small number of works dating from 1935 to 1948 and to four bodies of images the artist produced during his early career: painted portraits, neighborhood street scenes, church interiors, and brush and ink illustrations of African American spirituals. I focus on these subjects in order to explore Crite’s desire to portray the middle class status of his family and community and to redefine black folk productions, such as the spirituals, in terms of his own middle-class sensibility. My analysis also considers the artist’s motivations to preserve, in the physical form of his artworks, the black middle class values and way of life in Boston that he feared was in danger of being lost and forgotten.

Crite’s imagery and writings offer an interesting case study of how racial, class, religious, and regional identity not only shapes an artist’s oeuvre, but also affects the critical assessment of an artist’s career. A central argument of this dissertation is that black middle class experience is a legitimate subject position and subject matter for the African American artist. My account of Crite’s black middle class artistic vision challenges a bias within the discourse on racial

² Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14.

identity in art that privileges a notion of racial authenticity, or what literary historian J. Martin Favor has termed “authentic” blackness, an essentialized conception of black identity centered upon the “folk,” or working and lower class African Americans.³

Underlying the notion of “authentic” blackness is a formulation of race, class, culture, and creativity in which the folk and the middle class embody the opposite ends of the spectrum of black experience. Functioning together as a coupling of opposites, definitions of black middle class and black folk identity exemplify what cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains as the structuring of identifications according to a “binary system of representation [that] constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness.”⁴ Belonging to either the black middle class or the black folk depends upon the distance that members can assert and maintain from their perceived “other.” As Favor explains, “black identity, as formulated on the class basis, requires a certain quotient of oppression; second class status is essential to racial identity.”⁵ Thus, the black middle class is deemed racially inauthentic because of its perceived relationship to, or at least identification with, a measure

³ My use of the term “discourse” is drawn from Foucault’s definition of the term as “a description that questions the already said.” In my own interrogation of the discourse of racial identity in art, I draw from period sources from the 1920s-1940s, as well as more recent scholarship written since the 1970s. Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Knowledge*, trans., A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 131.

⁴ Stewart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Black British Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 167-170.

⁵ J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999): 13.

of economic and social privilege. Likewise, Favor and others have argued that, while the discourse of “authentic” blackness views black folk identity as representative of all that is unique about African American culture, black middle class identity has been positioned as embodying the opposite proposition—a desire to assimilate into mainstream white society resulting in a loss of connection to black culture.⁶

There are several ironies embedded in the conception of a black identity based on the binary of the folk and middle class. First, many of the writers who embraced a folk sensibility as the foundation of an African American art or critical theory were themselves from a middle class background.⁷ As Favor and others have argued, members of the black middle class often strategically align themselves with a narrative of the folk as a means of legitimizing their “racial” voice.⁸ In contrast, Crite maintained his position as a participant observer within his community sharing in the values and experiences of the people he portrayed in his artwork. Yet, Crite’s position represents another kind of ironic stance, for

⁶ Favor, *Authentic Blackness*, 2-10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-15.

⁸ For example, as Favor explains with regard to W.E.B. Du Bois’s seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*: “[DuBois] willingly submerges aspects of his status as a ‘brilliant Yankee Negro from Harvard and Europe’ in an effort to draw on—indeed, to make central to his arguments about culture—the African American folk tradition. In a series of conscious moves, Du Bois writes himself into a folk positionality that lends authority to his explication of blackness in America. Yet ‘race’ must be, at least in some respects, performative rather than essential to make such a transformation possible.” Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, 12. E. Patrick Johnson also discusses the complexities embodied in identifying with a middle class or folk version of a black identity in his analysis of Marlon Riggs’s film, *Black Is Black Ain’t* (1995). See Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 22-31.

his black middle class imagery draws from the values of the white majority culture while at the same time remaining rooted in black experience.

Crite's black middle class identity, and the ways in which it motivated his early artistic production, engage with the theory of the "double consciousness" of the African American as defined by the sociologist, political activist, and writer, W.E.B. Du Bois:

One feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.⁹

According to Du Bois, the gift of the American Negro is his ability to maintain within himself and express artistically both of these seemingly contradictory characteristics, the sense of being separate from and belonging to America. Crite's art reflects this tension and an ambivalence within the African American psyche in the ways that he represents black identity as part of a larger American identity and, in the case of the spirituals, as a unique cultural contribution to the nation.

In an attempt to right the omission of black artists from the art historical canon and to combat negative portrayals of African Americans in art, scholars often accord a privileged status to black artists whose art appears to display a sense of "rootedness," or the conscious development of an independent black aesthetic described variously in terms of an African "ancestral legacy" or an

⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; repr., New York: Penguin Signet Classic, 1995), 45.

“internalized primitivism.”¹⁰ This study revises the term “rootedness” to mean an artist rooted in his own immediate community rather than in a search for his cultural roots in the African past or within the rural folk culture of the American south. Like artists who employed African and folk aesthetics, Crite performed a narrative of self-affirmation in his artworks, but rather than look elsewhere to authenticate his ancestry and identity, his display of “rootedness” emphasized his connection to an established community of successful middle class black Bostonians.¹¹ Tied to my notion of “rootedness” is a sense of place and continuity as understood by Crite and his community of black middle class Bostonians, who saw themselves as part of the social and cultural establishment and as connected to the ideals of the majority culture. As I will show, Crite’s black middle class “rootedness” is an important variation on the ideology of racial pride in twentieth century American art.

¹⁰ Different from standard definitions of European, modernist primitivism, in which artists like Picasso looked to African art solely for its formal lessons, historians of African American art describe an “internalized primitivism” as the impulse behind black artists’ appropriation of African forms and a neo-primitivist style as an expression of their “ancestral legacy,” a term first used during the Harlem Renaissance by Alain Locke. See Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts, in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1992), 254-270. Michael Harris’ description of an African American “rootedness” in the Africanized and folk-inspired works of Alison Saar, Richard Powell’s description of an “internalized primitivism” with regard to the William Johnson’s painting *Jesus and the Three Marys*, and Caroline Goesser’s description of a “new primitivist aesthetic” in the work of African American graphic artists working in the interwar period have been particularly useful for my understanding of the discipline’s current conceptualization of an African American primitivism. See Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 237-250; Richard Powell, “‘In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition:’ William H. Johnson’s *Jesus and the Three Marys*,” *American Art* 5 (Fall 1991): 20-33; and Caroline Goesser, “‘Not White Art Painted Black:’ African American Artists and the New Primitivist Aesthetic, c. 1920-35” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2000).

¹¹ As I will describe further in Chapter One, Crite viewed himself in relation to the history and culture of Boston as well as to a larger community of middle class African Americans.

I situate Crite's artistic goal—to present uplifting images of middle class black Bostonians—within the ideological framework of the New Negro Movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance, of the 1920s-1940s.¹² Although initially viewed as a literary movement, recent assessments of the New Negro Renaissance acknowledge that it was a broad-based cultural movement encompassing the visual and performing arts and that its participation and influence extended well beyond the borders of Harlem, New York.¹³ During the period in which Crite began his artistic career in the 1930s and 1940s, the concept of the “New Negro” was at the heart of discussions of African American identity and racial representation in art. First coined at the end of the nineteenth century to mean an educated and enlightened African American, by the 1920s, the term had blossomed into a full-fledged ideology that embodied two divergent ideas about the relationship of African Americans to American society.¹⁴ The first,

¹² As Richard Powell has explained, scholars initially regarded the New Negro Renaissance as primarily a literary movement confined to the 1920s. Powell offers a broader definition encompassing a range of cultural production including the visual arts, music, dance and film, and he extends the end date of the Renaissance to the late 1930s. See Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 50-52.

¹³ While the standard term for this movement is the Harlem Renaissance, throughout this dissertation I use the term New Negro Renaissance to reflect my focus on artists who identified with the goals of the movement but who lived and worked in cities besides New York. A number of recent studies have acknowledged the international and inter-racial participation of New Negro Renaissance artists. See Richard Powell, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (London and Berkeley: Hayward Gallery and the University of California Press, 1997) and Theresa A. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers an insightful description of the evolution of the term “New Negro” in his essay “The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129-155, and with co-author Gene Andrew Jarrett he traces the significance of the term within twentieth century African American thought in the

which Crite's art embodies, was based on middle class values of respectability and focused on portraying African American assimilation, while the second was based on a notion of racial distinctiveness that focused on developing an independent black aesthetic drawn from African art and black folk expressions. Following from the work of scholars such as Jeffrey Stewart, George Hutchinson and Mary Ann Calo, I contend that the term "New Negro," was understood during the Renaissance period as a synthetic figure that embodied both assimilationist and cultural nationalist points of view.¹⁵ As I will discuss in greater detail below, the duality of the New Negro identity contrasts with the picture presented in the scholarship of the past forty years, which has downplayed or ignored the role of the assimilationist goals of a black middle class sensibility in the formation of black aesthetic and instead favored a cultural nationalist agenda that affirms the independent and unique aspects of black art. This reformulation of the black identity behind a black aesthetic has had unfortunate consequences for artists like Crite, whose black middle class identity has relegated their art to a place outside the discourse and canon of African American art.

Introduction to the anthology, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), Jeffrey C. Stewart, "Black Modernism and White Patronage," *The International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3 (1994): 43-46, and Mary Ann Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars," *American Art Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1999): 580-621.

Through my analysis of Crite's artistic goals and imagery, I show the tenuousness of a theory of racial and cultural authenticity based on a black folk or lower class experience. My study of Crite's early career has three additional revisionist goals. First, I challenge the negative assessment of the black middle class as a group devoid of interest in, or the ability to connect with, the black community as a whole. I suggest that early twentieth century definitions of black middle class identity embodied in the notions of the "talented tenth" and the "race" man or woman best define Crite's sense of himself and his role as a black artist, for he felt a responsibility towards the black community and not alienated from it. Second, by proposing that Crite's black middle class identity and artworks were performatively produced and enacted through a series of repeated gestures of "respectable" appearance and behavior, I challenge the notion that racial identity, or works of art by black artists, are based in a singular black experience of the folk, the middle class or any other identification. Third, I recover the original importance of black middle class values in the formation of a black aesthetic during the New Negro Renaissance period and its aftermath in the New Deal and Social Realist art era of the 1930s and 1940s as a means of re-inserting a black middle class perspective into the discourse of racial identity in art.

Review of the Literature

Until recently, most histories of American art have treated the careers of African American artists as separate from those of white artists resulting in the

impression that black artists do not contribute or belong to the history of American art.¹⁶ Much of the scholarship written on African American artists has been concerned with canon expansion and documenting black artists' contributions both in terms of African American art movements, such as the New Negro Renaissance, and mainstream art movements, such as the American Scene. One strategy for canon expansion has been to redefine the terms around which African American artists and their works are judged by introducing a critical theory based on an independent black aesthetic.¹⁷

Based on these criteria, Crite's contribution to American art is both present and absent within the literature on African American art. In the earliest histories written by Alain Locke (*Negro Art Past and Present*, 1939) and James Porter (*Modern Negro Art*, 1945), Crite is present as an example of a group of academically trained black artists who have achieved some professional recognition.¹⁸ At the same time, Crite's relationship to the history of art is absent in these texts because neither Locke nor Porter analyzed his artistic choices or compared his artworks to those of his contemporaries. Other survey texts of African American art from mid-century through the 1980s handled Crite's work

¹⁶ See Jacqueline Francis, "Writing African American Art History," *American Art* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 4-5, Kymberly N. Pinder, "Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks," *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 533-38, and James Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance: Invisibility and Elision in African American Art Historical Practice," *Art Documentation* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 3-8. In his essay, Smalls provides an extensive bibliography of African American art history texts.

¹⁷ For example, see Alvia Wardlaw, *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art* (Dallas and New York: The Dallas Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1989).

¹⁸ Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art* (1940; New York: Hacker, 1979) and James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992).

in the same limited terms, and the most recent texts by Sharon F. Patton (*African American Art*, 1998) and Richard J. Powell (*Black Art: A Cultural History*, 1999) ignore the artist's work altogether.¹⁹ One important exception is the scholarship of Edmund Barry Gaither which, over the past thirty years, has included three insightful essays on Crite's artwork as well as several exhibitions that featured the artist, including one retrospective, mounted in 1989, at the Museum of National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston.²⁰ However, the impact of Gaither's work on Crite has been impeded by the limited availability of these essays to the general public, which for the most part are out of print. A recent catalogue, which accompanied the exhibition, *Allan Rohan Crite: Artist Reporter of the African American Community*, held at the Seattle Art Museum in 2001, is

¹⁹ Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1960), David Driskell, *Two Centuries of Back American Art* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976), Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists, From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Richard Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*.

²⁰ Edmund Barry Gaither, "Seeing Ourselves," in Kim Sichel et. al., *Black Boston: Documentary Photography and the African American Experience* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1994), Edmund Barry Gaither, "Revelation," *Reunion: The New England Connection* 3, no. 9 (July 1995): 4-5; 11, and Edmund Barry Gaither, "Allan Rohan Crite: An American Original" in Julie Levin Caro, et. al., *Allan Rohan Crite: Artist Reporter of the African American Community* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and the Frye Art Museum, 2001). As the director of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston and an adjunct curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gaither introduced local and national audiences to Crite's work by including him in numerous exhibitions including, *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston* (1970), *Our Elders: Crite and Dames: An Exhibition of Works by Allan R. Crite and Chester A. Dames* (1971), *Jubilee: Afro-American Artists on Afro-America* (1975), and *Allan Rohan Crite: A Retrospective 1924-1989* (1989). In addition, under Gaither's direction, the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists has amassed the largest collection of the artist's works on paper. Two other Boston-based curators, Sinclair Hitchings, former Keeper of Prints at the Boston Public Library and Sally Pierce, curator of prints at the Boston Athenaeum, worked diligently throughout the 1970s-1990s to preserve Crite's artwork in their collections and to situate the artist in the local and national histories of art by including his work in their exhibitions.

another important contribution to Crite scholarship, due in particular to the many color reproductions of his artworks included in the text.²¹

While Crite's work has received a greater amount of attention within exhibition catalogues focused on the history of early twentieth century American art movements and the history of art in Boston, these texts also distort the artist's place within that history. On one hand, studies that focus on aspects of the New Negro Renaissance consistently characterize the artist's work as driven by an interest in documenting the black experience in his Boston community. In this context, Crite's work is understood as idiosyncratic rather than expressive of a more commonly experienced black identity based on an interest in connecting with African and black folk roots.²² On the other hand, when broad studies of American Regionalism, Social Realism and New Deal art include Crite, the authors focus exclusively on Crite's images of the black urban scene and describe his work as representative of a singular African American experience.²³

²¹ Caro, et. al., *Allan Rohan Crite: Artist Reporter of the African American Community*.

²² For example, see Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum, 1989), 166-171 and Regina Perry, *Free Within Ourselves: African American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1992), 51-54. These texts as well as other exhibition catalogues and reference books that include entries on Crite contain factual errors, which have led to further misunderstandings about the artist and his early career.

²³ For example, see Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University Art Center, 1983) and William H. Truettner and Rodger B Stein et. al, *Picturing Old New England* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1999). Both Hills and Truettner include examples from Crite's neighborhood series in their exhibitions citing the artist's work as characteristic of a generalized African American approach to representing both the positive and negative qualities of black urban life.

Likewise, studies of the early art scene in Boston characterize the artist as a spokesperson for the city's African American community and situate him and his art outside the local artistic and cultural establishment.²⁴

This study relies extensively on a large body of primary documents related to the artist's life and career. In particular, I draw from Crite's numerous autobiographical writings, including his self-published memoir *An Autobiographical Sketch* (1977), his diaries from the period 1930-1950, as well as other essays and transcripts of lectures collected in *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers (1930-1979)*.²⁵ I also rely on a series of interviews from 1979-1980 with Robert Brown of the Archives of American Art as well as an interview with the artist and his mother, Annamae Palmer Crite, published by Edward Clark in 1979.²⁶ My research on Crite's involvement in Boston's art scene in the 1930s and 1940s uncovered a number of reviews of his local art exhibitions.²⁷ These writings were

²⁴ Edith A. Tonelli, "The Avant-Garde in Boston: The Experiment of the WPA Federal Art Project," *Archives of American Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (1990): 41-47.

²⁵ Crite, *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston, MA; copy in Boston Public Library. Crite's diaries are housed in the Allan Rohan Crite Institute, Boston. *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers (1930-1979)* are archived at the African American History Museum in Philadelphia, and a microfilm copy is in the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.

²⁶ Robert Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite and Susan Thompson, January 16, 1979 – October 22, 1980," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. A transcript of this extensive interview with Crite and Thompson, a fabric artist who Crite mentored and shared studio space with in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is available online (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/crite79.htm>). Edward Clark, "Annamae Palmer Crite and Allan Rohan Crite: Mother and Artist Son: An Interview," *MELUS* 6, no. 4 (Winter, 1979): 67-78. See also, "Reminisces of Allan Rohan Crite," Interview with Linda Chisholm for the Columbia University Oral History Project, 1977.

²⁷ In addition to art reviews collected by artist and archived at the Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, I found reviews of Crite's early exhibitions in his artist file and in the scrapbooks of the

essential for my understanding of the contemporary critical reception of Crite's work and have aided my goal to establish his place in the history of art in Boston.

In addition, my understanding of Crite's black middle class identity benefited greatly from my interviews with the artist between 1996 and 2001 and from my visits to the Allan Rohan Crite House Museum located in his four-storey brownstone in Boston's South End district (fig. 1).²⁸ In addition to providing the setting for our meetings, the Crite House Museum was an important visual document, for the artist created it by transforming his living space and studio into a three-dimensional collage of his art and life. During our visits, Crite used the diverse objects on display, from oil portraits and altarpieces to family photographs and his Harvard diploma, to illustrate a monologue about his Boston background, his artistic contributions as well as his thoughts about the state of his neighborhood, religion and world politics. In fact, Crite's self-assured narrative about his career proved challenging for my project, and throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have struggled to separate the artist's historical perspective from my own. In the Conclusion, I reflect further on my interactions with the artist at the Crite House Museum, and I discuss how

Boston Society of Independent Artists both located in the Boston Art Archives/New England Art Information File, Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library. Additional reviews are located in the Dorothy Adlow Archives, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. Adlow, who was the art critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*, a national newspaper based in Boston, wrote the majority of the reviews of Crite's exhibitions in the 1930s and 1940s.

²⁸ The Allan Rohan Crite House Museum was the name designated by the artist when he began to offer the public tours of his home and studio at 410 Columbus Avenue in the 1970s. When I met Crite in 1996, he was still using this name, however, in the late 1990s the artist and his wife, Jacqueline Cox-Crite, changed the name to the Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute.

it functioned as an alternate performative space where he constituted and maintained his black middle class Episcopal Bostonian identity.

*Terminology: [Re]affirming the Importance of Racial Identity
in Early Definitions of the Black Middle Class*

Although Crite's early career coincided with a period in American history in which race was understood as a biological fact, my analysis of Crite's identity and art considers race to be an historically, socially, and culturally determined construct.²⁹ Like race, class is an elusive signifier and one that relies heavily on individual and societal perceptions that are also shaped by time, place and culture. Countless studies dating from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century described black urban communities, like Crite's Boston, as stratified societies in which there was a range of class types--from the poor and uneducated working and lower classes to an emerging middle class and a small but highly- influential group of educated and cultured black elites.³⁰

²⁹ My understanding of the constructed nature of race has been informed by the work of several scholars, including Richard Dyer, Barbara Fields, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Kobena Mercer. See Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History" in *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of Vann Woodward*, eds. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143-145, and Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³⁰ Willard B. Gatewood and Adelaide Cromwell argue in their studies of the black upper class that the very idea of class stratification challenged sentimental perception of black solidarity and Jim Crow notion that African American society lacked a class structure because their minority status deprived them of any real power. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), ix and Adelaide Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 16-17. Class stratification among African Americans also

Two descriptions of the black middle class written immediately before and after the period of Crite's early career in the 1930s and 1940s were influential in establishing a set of precepts upon which the black middle class was deemed an inauthentic source for black experience and a black aesthetic. In his treatise "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), the African American writer Langston Hughes argued that the middle class artist adopts the sensibilities of white mainstream culture and is therefore incapable of experiencing or representing a genuine black culture.³¹ In contrast, Hughes positions the lower or folk class of African Americans as a source of black artistic expression:

[T]hen there are the low down folks, the so-called common element, . . . they are not too important to themselves or to the community, or to well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round . . . They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their individuality in the face of American standardizations.³²

While Hughes' desire to elevate black folk subject matter is an attempt to release it from the realm of demeaning stereotypes, his argument simultaneously

challenges a notion of a unified black community devoid of differences in background and aspiration.

³¹ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122 (June 23, 1926): 662-664, reprinted in David Levering Lewis, ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 91-95. The original context for Hughes's essay was as a response to an essay by the writer and satirist George Schuyler, in which he stated, "Negro art 'made in America' is non-existent. . . to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness." Schuyler's argument that identity stemmed from an individual's nationality not race was for him a means of combating the claim that African Americans were inherently inferior to whites. George Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum," *The Nation* 122 (June 1926): 662-663, reprinted in Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 96.

³² Hughes, "The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain," reprinted in Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 92.

negates black middle class experience as a legitimate basis for an original art. African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) proved to be even more damaging to the reputation of the black middle class.³³ Long considered to be the definitive study of this social group, its comprehensive scope enabled its biased and negative assertions to go unchallenged for decades. According to Frazier, by acquiring a measure of economic status, middle-class African Americans forgot their true second-class position in American society, as well as their sense of responsibility to provide leadership to the black masses.³⁴

Crite's expression of a black middle class identity contradicts the assertions of Hughes and Frazier in two important ways. First, the precarious economic situation Crite and his community found themselves in the 1930s distinguishes his experience from Hughes' and Frazier's characterization of the black middle class as a group that had lost contact with the black masses due to their feeling of comfort or materialism. As we will see, an important motivation for Crite's artworks was his class anxiety, which resulted in a desire to fix an idealized vision of Boston's black middle class created from his memory of an earlier more stable time in his community as well as his creative invention. Second, the assertions of Hughes and Frazier that the black middle class mimics white social mores and aesthetic values as the result of their desire to reject their

³³ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (1957; repr., New York: Macmillan Co., 1962).

³⁴ Significantly, Frazier's conclusions in *Black Bourgeoisie* reversed those in an essay from 1925, in which he argued that the black middle class were a source of economic and social potential. See E. Franklin Frazier, "Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class," in Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 333-340.

racial identity does not account for the strong element of race pride that many sociologists, writing in the early twentieth century, described as hallmarks of a black middle class identity. It is these definitions of black middle class identity that I wish to apply to my analysis of Crite's artistic goals and imagery.

Crite's understanding of his racial, class and regional identity as a black middle class Bostonian drew from two related concepts prevalent during Crite's formative years in the 1910s and 1920s, the "talented tenth" and the "race" man or woman. First defined in 1903 by W.E.B. Du Bois, the "talented tenth" was an educated professional class of elite blacks in the top ten percent of black society, who bore the responsibility of racial leadership.³⁵ Similarly, the "race" man or woman felt a strong sense of responsibility to themselves, their family and their community to be a model of excellence, both personally and professionally, in order to demonstrate the potential of "the Race" to both African Americans and whites.³⁶ Underlying the concepts of the "talented tenth" and the "race" man is the notion of racial uplift, the obligation felt by the black middle and upper classes to elevate the black lower class by modeling their achievements and respectable behavior and at the same time demonstrating to whites the potential

³⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, "The Talented Tenth" in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-Day* (1903; repr., Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, Inc., 1969), 33-75.

³⁶ For a description of the term "race man" as part of the black middle class psychology see, Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 394-395. The fact that the term "race woman" was never used did not mean that African American women did not subscribe to this idea or to the fact that many black women performed this role within their communities and their artistic and literary productions. For a discussion of this issue, see Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

of all African Americans for full citizenship rights.³⁷ Crite's artistic project reflects the outlook of the "talented tenth" and the "race" man in the way that it reveals the dual allegiances felt by the black middle class to display white standards of respectability while also affirming a sense of pride in their African American identity.

Within studies of class stratification in the United States among all ethnic groups, sociologists describe membership in the middle class as not simply a matter of how much wealth a person or family possesses, but it has more to do with the values, aesthetics, and beliefs they share with other members of the same social group. Walter Muraskin's observations are typical of many sociologists who write about a middle class mentality:

to the middle class 'respectability' is the highest value, and respectability is obtained by carrying out in *public* behavior standard American bourgeois morality. Those who act correctly are middle class, while those who violate the moral code in public situations are relegated to the lower-class status.³⁸

³⁷ As Adelaide Cromwell has explained: "For the researcher . . . the upper class functions as the potential of the group, reflecting the opportunities available to it. For the classes beneath it, the function varies—now as the liaison with the white world, then as the group symbols of similarity to the white world, and always as the vehicle capable of defeating the negative racial stereotype." Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 16-17.

³⁸ William A. Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 13. In his study *An American Dilemma*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 675, Gunnar Myrdal emphasized that a sense of belonging to a particular class depends most on a shared values and beliefs and that the flexibility of class distinctions varied from place to place based on local criteria. As Cromwell points out, respectability is a broad identification that can encompass people on various rungs of the social ladder from servants to professionals to "Blue Vein types." Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 16.

The value that Crite's family, especially his mother, and his community placed on maintaining, displaying, and encouraging a "respectable" appearance and code of behavior underlies the goals he set for his life and artworks. In his early painted portraits and genre scenes and his illustrations of the spirituals, Crite used a set of visual conventions, including a realist style and the representation of qualities of formality, reserve, and gentility, to define his black figures, whether contemporary community members or biblical personages, in terms of a black middle class sensibility.

Throughout this study I apply the findings of sociologists Adelaide Cromwell and Willard Gatewood on the social attitudes and values of the black upper class to Crite and his black middle class community in Boston.³⁹ While I recognize that Crite did not possess the economic resources or familial lineage to claim membership in the black aristocracy, I believe his outlook on the importance of respectability for maintaining one's social position in the community was a quality shared by upper and middle class blacks. I also recognize that Crite's black middle class identification, and that of his subjects, related more closely to the notion of "striver," African Americans, especially urban-based New Negroes, who aspired to elevate their economic and social status, rather than to the black elites who were already established at the top of the social register.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* and Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*.

⁴⁰ As Drake and Cayton explain, "[T]he 'strainers' and 'strivers' are well-recognized social types, people whose whole lives are dominated by the drive to get ahead . . ." Drake and Cayton, *Black*

In my analysis of Crite's early artworks, I explore the ways in which his representation of a black middle class Bostonian identity displays notions of "the front" and "the genteel performance." Both terms describe the ways that members of the black middle class constitute and maintain their status by practicing respectability in their public appearance and behavior. In their in-depth study of the black community in Chicago during the interwar period, black sociologists Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton define black middle class identity in terms of "the front," or the maintenance of decorous appearance and behavior in public.⁴¹ As Drake and Cayton explain, "[T]he 'respectable,' 'educated,' and 'refined' believe in 'front,' partly because it is their accustomed way of life, and partly in order to impress the white world. *The decisive measure of the man is how he acts in public.*"⁴² "Front" is also the attribute the black upper and middle classes use to distinguish themselves from the working and lower class black folk, who view decorous behavior as unimportant. In *Aristocrats of Color*, Willard Gatewood uses the term "genteel performance" to describe in a more

Metropolis, 521. The striver was also a well known figure in Harlem, as Wallace Thurman described, "Between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, is 139th Street, known among Harlemites as 'strivers' row.' It is the most aristocratic street in Harlem. Stanford White designed the houses for a wealthy white clientele. Moneyed Negroes now own and inhabit them. When one lives on 'strivers' row' one has supposedly arrived." Wallace Thurman, *Negro Life in New York's Harlem*, (Girard, KS: Halderman-Julius Publications, 1928). My conversations with Edmund Barry Gaither, Crite scholar and long-time resident of Boston has aided my understanding of Crite's identification with and representation of "striving" in his life and artworks. It is important to note that "striving" was not only a desire for upward mobility among middle class African Americans, but the term also applies to people from a range of ethnic and economic backgrounds, including whites and lower class blacks, who aspired to better themselves.

⁴¹ Sinclair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 495-525; 658-754.

⁴² Emphasis in original. *Ibid.*, 519.

comprehensive way the self perceptions, values and strategies that socially-conscious African Americans used to facilitate their achievement and maintenance of an elevated position in society.⁴³ According to Gatewood:

A high social status implied more education and culture, which were closely linked to proper conduct. . . . Aristocrats of color viewed themselves as exemplary practitioners of the genteel performance within the black community."⁴⁴

As we will see, in his portraits, genre scenes and illustrations of the spirituals, Crite uses the elements of the "front" and the "genteel performance," formal clothing, reserved demeanor and rarified settings, to define the exceptional quality of a black middle class Bostonian sensibility.

Although the terms "front" and the "genteel performance" are also applicable to the public behavior of whites, the practice of gentility to achieve a certain class status has an important racial dimension and engendered a degree of ambivalence among the black middle and upper classes. As Gatewood argues, given the general expectations from white society at large to view African Americans as less than civilized, many blacks felt it was necessary to practice gentility in public to dispel negative assumptions about African Americans and further race progress.⁴⁵ Du Bois expressed this sentiment at the turn of the twentieth century when he advised blacks on the importance of maintaining social distinctions: "A rising race must be aristocratic; the good

⁴³ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 182-209.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 186-190.

cannot consort with the bad—nor even the best with the less good.”⁴⁶ While middle and upper class blacks used respectable behavior to place distance between themselves and lower class blacks, they also defined their elevated class status in terms of their service to the black community, which included a responsibility to uplift the masses through their example. As Gatewood argues:

Few aristocrats of color were able to resolve satisfactorily the conflict between their notions of the genteel performance and the need for uplift of the masses. Gentility required an aloofness from the “baser classes,” while conventional wisdom held that the black upper class would achieve recognition and rights at the hand of the white majority only to the degree that they succeeded in improving the condition and behavior of the black masses.⁴⁷

Thus, the practice of gentility also engendered a sense of ambivalence that was akin to Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, or the tension between feeling a sense of belonging to the majority culture and feeling separate from it.

*Methodology: Defining Black Middle Class Identity
in Terms of Performativity*

In the parlance of today’s post-structuralist and post-colonial writings on identity politics, scholars would describe the black middle class preoccupation with maintaining “front” and practicing the “genteel performance” in terms of a

⁴⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Black North in 1901: A Social Study* (1901; repr., New York: Arno Press 1969), 46.

⁴⁷ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 190. Gatewood traces the evolution of the black upper and middle class attitude of performing “service to the race” to the years following Reconstruction when “the primary argument was that the “respectables” of the race, those who possessed moral character and virtue, should draw a dividing line between themselves and those black lacking such attributes. . . . The failure of respectable blacks to draw such a line would allow whites to continue their practice of considering all blacks as an undifferentiated mass and of judging the entire race by its worst elements.” *Ibid.*, 23.

theory of performativity of identity, and they would link it to the work of Judith Butler.⁴⁸ In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender identity is not an essentialized state of being but rather it is constituted as a result of “a doing,” which she describes as a performance or an enactment that inaugurates the self.⁴⁹ In other words, as Butler writes, “there is no being without doing.”⁵⁰

The concept of performativity has aided my thinking about the ways in which Crite constituted and maintained various aspects of his identity as a black male, middle-class Episcopal Bostonian artist through his art works and writings. Thus, when describing Crite’s visual approach, I substitute the word “performance” for “portrayal” to acknowledge the ways in which his imagery enacts a black middle class identity through the performative gestures of appearance, demeanor and setting. I describe Crite’s imagery as performative of his identity to suggest that the artworks were extensions of the middle class perceptions and aspirations he held for himself, his family and his community, and to emphasize the kinship the artist felt with his subject matter. I also understand the serial nature of much of Crite’s early works, including his portraits, neighborhood street scenes, and the illustrated spirituals, as a means of instantiating a black middle class identity through Butler’s idea that an

⁴⁸ In this regard my dissertation follows in a line of recent studies that draw upon the methodologies of performance studies and regard performance as a way of understanding human interactions and cultural productions.

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

individual creates and maintains identity through a “stylized repetition of acts.”⁵¹

Butler’s conclusions also have contributed to the conceptualization of my revisionist project to challenge the narrow construction of racial identities in art. By explaining gender as something that is performatively produced, Butler dislodges the concept of gender identity as biologically essential and undermines its ability to signify difference between individuals or groups of people.⁵² The notion that identity is neither fixed nor essential also reveals the tenuousness of a theory of racial or cultural identity that privileges black folk identity over other definitions of blackness, including middle class blackness. The work of cultural theorist Paul Gilroy has aided my thinking about the importance of a theory of performativity for the construction of an inclusive theory of black identity. According to Gilroy, “whatever the racial constructionists may say [black identity] is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires.”⁵³ Gilroy’s performative notion of blackness eschews the idea of common racial or cultural

⁵¹ According to Butler, “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” refers to “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Feminist Theory and Phenomenology,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519.

⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

⁵³ Paul Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a Changing Same,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 105.

essences and origins and instead describes blackness as the conscious creation and on-going transformation of personal and group identity over a period time and in relation to specific political and economic circumstances.⁵⁴

Performing Multiple Identities

By acknowledging the performative nature of Crite's identity, I also allow for the possibility that the artist performed multiple identities in his life and art. Stuart Hall's analysis of the multifaceted nature of identity has helped me to account for Crite's varied and overlapping subjectivities based on his gender, race, class, religious affiliation, geographic location, and artistic temperament.⁵⁵ Thus, when I discuss the artist's performance of his middle class identity, I am aware that there are other categories with which he may identify, including his religious identity as a black Episcopal, his regional identity as a black Bostonian, and his artistic identity as an academically-trained artist. Yet, I have come to conclude that Crite's identity as middle class is the largest identity-category and that his other identity positions fall under that umbrella.

The reader should note that I am conscious that I describe Crite's artistic project as the performance of a black middle class *identity* not a black middle class *subjectivity*. For me, the difference between the representation of subjectivity and identity lies within the agency the artist gives to his subjects.

⁵⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 99-103.

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," 165-167.

While my analysis of the artist's *Self-Portrait* in Chapter One describes his self-image as a portrayal of his black middle class Bostonian subjectivity, I argue that in his portraits of family and community members as well as his illustrations of the spirituals Crite does not allow his subjects to speak directly for themselves but rather his visualizations of their identity are mediated through his own black middle class subjectivity.

In addition to his middle class identity, Crite's affiliations with Boston, the Episcopal Church and the academic art establishment do not fit within standard art historical descriptions of black artistic identity and "black" art. Crite's New England regional identity separates him from the conventional narratives, which locate the sources of black creativity either in Harlem, the definitive context for black experience in the urban north, or the rural American south, the locus of black folk identity.⁵⁶ By explaining Crite's work as a product of Boston, I make the case that there were other locales of black artistic identity and creativity in the interwar period and that these places need to be understood with a different conceptual model than the ones that have been posited for Harlem.⁵⁷ Crite's early

⁵⁶ Although many scholars now acknowledge Harlem as a "cultural metaphor" for a national and international black arts movement, the identification of Harlem with the New Negro Renaissance persists, and as recently as 2003, Lowery Stokes Simms described Harlem as the geographic center of black modernity. Lowery Stokes Simms, *Challenge of the Modern: African American Artists 1925-1945* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2003).

⁵⁷ Geographic context is of particular importance when assessing the careers of black artists in the early twentieth century. In attempting to build a broader geographic context for black artists working during the interwar period, the present study follows the goals of recent studies of black artists working outside of Harlem such as Sargent Johnson in San Francisco and Archibald J. Motley Jr. in Chicago. See Lizetta LeFalle-Collins and Judith Wilson, *Sargent Johnson: African American Modernist* (San Francisco: CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998) and

artistic experiences in Boston were different from those of African American artist contemporaries working in larger, more independent black communities of Harlem or Paris, which offered a supportive network of black artists and intellectuals.⁵⁸ In contrast, Boston's African American community in the interwar period was extremely small in size, and for the most part, Crite worked independently. When he did connect with other local artists or art institutions, he often did so across racial and class lines. My analysis of the regional context in which Crite developed his artistic identity draws from Adelaide Cromwell's assertion that black Bostonians had ties to a larger African American middle class identity based on values of respectability, as well as a more specific New England outlook that she describes as a Yankee sensibility.⁵⁹

Another important facet of Crite's black middle class identity is his religious identity as an Episcopal. Although Frazier and Hughes describe black middle class membership in the Episcopal Church as evidence of the group's aspirations to assimilate into the white mainstream culture and their lack of an "authentic" black spirituality, my study of Crite's early career shows that the

Amy M. Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, vol. 4 of *The David C. Driskell Series of African American Art* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate, 2004).

⁵⁸ For example Jacob Lawrence's formative artistic experiences in Harlem included connections with many older black artists and scholars at Gallery 391, the Schomburg Library, and the Harlem Community Art Center. See Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence: Paintings, Drawings, and Murals (1935-1999), A Catalogue Raisonné* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000). Also see Deirdre L. Bibby and Juanita M. Holland, *Augusta Savage and the Art Schools of Harlem* (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1988).

⁵⁹ Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 65-162.

situation around black religious identity is more complex. For example, Hughes's description of black folk religiosity in terms of an evangelical and emotional fervor discounts Crite's portrayal of black religiosity in terms of the middle class sensibilities of formality, decorum and restraint that are the hallmarks of Episcopal faith and service.⁶⁰

Crite's identification with the art academy and with its traditional aesthetics was another feature of his black middle class identity that placed value on establishment culture. By focusing on Crite's particular art approach I wish to highlight and recover a broad tendency among early twentieth century black artists who employed a traditional style to portray black subject matter.⁶¹ My study of Crite's art in relation to the representations of his contemporaries has convinced me that the problem of omission of a middle class subjectivity from the art historical canon is also a matter of aesthetics. Style carries cultural meanings, especially in American art, and the issue of style has been important

⁶⁰ For example, as Hughes wrote in his 1926, "many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect." Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," reprinted in Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 93.

⁶¹ As Mary Ann Calo points out, the Harmon foundation exhibitions were full of artists who worked in academic style, some of whom received awards. However, most of the Harmon Foundation works discussed in the recent scholarship falls under the categories of modernist and culturally distinctive art. Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars," *American Art Quarterly*, 587-88. See also Reynolds and Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation*.

to artists, as well as art historians and critics, for defining a black aesthetic.⁶² An oft-quoted passage from a letter written by the New Negro Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas to writer Langston Hughes is instructive for understanding the way many scholars of African American art have narrated the period's supposed singular goal of developing a unique black aesthetic:

[Our] problem is to conceive, develop, and establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . . Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep deep . . . into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let's . . . create something transcendently material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.⁶³

Douglas's imperative "not white art painted black" and his directive to black artists to focus on "material crude, rough, neglected" and to create art that is "spiritually earthy" suggest the imperative that black artists perform a primitivist aesthetic linked with the folk in order to create "black" art. It was also an implicit criticism of artists, like Crite, who depicted black subject matter in a traditional artistic style. In contrast, my analysis of Crite's early works locates his stylistic development within the context of Boston's conservative art

⁶² For example, in American art circles of the interwar period modernism signaled European culture and realism American culture. For African American intellectuals and artists, modernism and folk inspired aesthetics signaled an independent black culture, while realism and European aesthetics signals a middle class desire to assimilate. For evidence of this perspective see Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and Jeffrey Stewart's analysis Harlem Renaissance ideology in his essay "White Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance," *The International Review of African American Art*.

⁶³ Letter dated December 21, 1925 in Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

scene, which was comprised of artists whose styles were a mixture of academicism and emergent modernism.

Political and Artistic Context: Recovering the Black Middle Class Perspective in the Formation of a Black Aesthetic Then and Now

Crite's statements, such as the one that opened this chapter, as well the visual record of his early art works, reflect an important but often forgotten aspect of the political and artistic ideology of the New Negro Renaissance era. Both artists and intellectuals favored the production of idealized images of African Americans that would challenge negative stereotypes and advocate for the inclusion of black artists in mainstream American culture. Representative of this position was the sociologist, political activist, and social leader, W.E.B. Du Bois, who wanted artists to emphasize the universal human values of dignity and respectability as a model behavior for African Americans by focusing on the achievements of the "Talented Tenth."⁶⁴ In "The Criteria of Negro Art" (1926)

⁶⁴ An early example of Du Bois's effort to construct a positive public image for African Americans is the compilation and display of more than 300 photographs for the "American Negro" exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition that were meant to provide concrete evidence against popular racist caricatures aimed at diminishing the social and economic progress of African Americans. See Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at Oneself Through the Eyes of Others': W.E.B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (2000): 581-599. Later in the context of the New Negro Renaissance in his role as editor of *The Crisis*, the literary magazine of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Du Bois put the question of racial representation before a national audience when he published "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" (1926). Presented as a roundtable discussion, Du Bois invited leading African American and white writers to answer questions such as, "[W]hen the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will play? . . . What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted? . . . Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists

Du Bois argued “whatever art I have for writing has been used for propaganda, for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy, I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”⁶⁵ With his statement, “all art is propaganda,” Du Bois demonstrated how an aesthetic of the talented tenth could also serve an oppositional function to combat prejudice within mainstream American culture.⁶⁶ Du Bois’s sentiments echoed that of African American writer and statesmen, James Weldon Johnson, who argued in the introduction to his *Book of Negro Poetry* (1927): “A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged . . . No people that has ever produced great literature and art has ever been looked on by the world as distinctly inferior.”⁶⁷ However, what constituted great art was a topic of intense debate.

In contrast to the views of Du Bois, some black artists and race leaders felt equally sure that the best means for African Americans to achieve greatness was

from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?” Du Bois, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” A Symposium. *The Crisis* 31, no. 4 (February 1926): 165, reprinted in Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 190.

⁶⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Criteria Of Negro Art” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290-97, reprinted in Gates and Jarrett, *The New Negro*, 257-59. For Du Bois, the basis of a black aesthetic was the struggle for racial equality and social justice and he felt to ignore these political aims would invalidate the art and destroy its beauty.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey C. Stewart, “Black Modernism and White Patronage,” *African American Review*, 43-44.

⁶⁷ James Weldon Johnson, “Preface,” *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), reprinted in Nathan Irving Huggins, ed., *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 281.

to produce works of art and literature on their own terms. An alternate conception of an African American aesthetic program developed during the mid-1920s and embraced a notion of racial and cultural distinctiveness. In contrast to an art of the “Talented Tenth,” African American cultural critic and New Negro Renaissance leader Alain Locke argued, in his essay “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” that black artists should take pride in their cultural heritage by drawing inspiration from the technical principles and themes of African art as well as from African American folk music and other cultural forms.⁶⁸ Inherent in Locke’s call for a “racially expressive art” and for the establishment of a “racial school of art” was a critique of black middle class standards of art and excellence, which he believed were too tied to the mainstream to produce an original art.⁶⁹

However, the prevalence of a black middle class perspective during the period of the 1920s to 1940s is evidenced by the many voices within the Renaissance movement who openly challenged Locke’s notion of an independent black aesthetic based on qualities of racial distinctiveness.⁷⁰ In addition to Du

⁶⁸ Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 254-267. As discussed above, in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” Langston Hughes also rejected the American middle class values and standards of beauty behind Du Bois’s concept of an art of the “Talented Tenth” and argued for a notion of black identity that valorized and romanticized the folk privileging it as a sole source for the production of “authentic” black art.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 256; 267.

⁷⁰ Likewise, African American artists active in 1920s and 1930s voiced their opinion about their right to express themselves freely based on formal and technical principles of art. For example, as Malvin Gray Johnson wrote in 1934, “We are taught to use lines, forms and color, never being told to look at these things from a racial viewpoint. . . . We Americans of both races know and live the same life, except that the Negro encounters racial restrictions.” Malvin Gray Johnson quoted in James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; repr., Washington, D.C.: Howard University

Bois, the views of James Porter, voiced in his survey text *Modern Negro Art* (1945), are the most well known. Porter strongly critiqued Locke's views, arguing that black artists who drew from African art and black folk themes furthered primitivist notions about African American culture and contributed to the segregation of African American art from the mainstream.⁷¹ Porter's criticism adhered to a European-centered aesthetic tradition as a means of proving that African American artists could master them and work within the mainstream of American art.

Mary Ann Calo's study of the critical reception of African American artists in the interwar period has been instructive for my understanding the types of expectations that have been placed upon Crite both internally and externally.⁷² On the one hand, Crite's middle class identity influenced his personal expectations for his artworks to portray African American assimilation into American society. On the other hand, Crite may have faced external pressures to produce a racially distinctive art. The problem that Calo describes within the critical record of the interwar period has been exacerbated in the scholarship written since the 1970s.⁷³ As African American art historians, critics and curators

Press, 1992), 94. George Schuyler's arguments against defining black art in terms of racial or cultural difference in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Art Hokum" (see n. 32 above) represent another early voice of dissent from Locke's views.

⁷¹ Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 88-92.

⁷² Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars," *American Art Quarterly*.

⁷³ The 1970s writings of numerous African American art historians challenged the assimilationist desires of earlier writers. For example, as Samella Lewis explained in *Art: African American*

began to challenge and revise how works of black artists were evaluated, they emphasized Alain Locke's notion of tapping into an "ancestral legacy" of African art and black American vernacular culture as a means of creating an independent critical language with which to analyze and validate works by African American artists.⁷⁴ Crite's work remains absent from the canon of twentieth century African American art because art historians continue to ignore the black middle class version of an idealized, black aesthetic. They view it as analogous to white middle class values of respectability and drawing from a belief that only a special category of art could combat a racist art world that refused to acknowledge the contributions of black artists.⁷⁵

(originally published in 1978), the vital role of African American art to enhance interracial understanding can only be achieved "only . . . when the arts reflect the true spirit of differences and make explicit the African roots that enrich and strengthen African Americans." Samella Lewis, *Art: African American* (Los Angeles: Hancraft, 1990), 59-60. In *The Afro-American Artist*, Elsa Honing Fine described the Harlem Renaissance in the context of the Marcus Garvey's movement for racial self determination: "For the Black artist and intellectual, the Renaissance was an affirmation of racial pride and a call to portray the Black with dignity. It also marked an era of accommodation that had prevailed for more than a generation." Fine, *The Afro-American Artist* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 81-85. David C. Driskell has maintained a similar position in his writings arguing that the art of the Harlem Renaissance constituted a separate black aesthetic that was not fully understood by mainstream "Euro-American" art historians. David Driskell, "The Flowering of the Harlem Renaissance" in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984) and David Driskell, et. al., *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Post Modern View* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin' Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁷⁵ The desire to forge a notion of a distinctive African American culture in terms of independent cultural origins in Africa and unique cultural forms produced by African Americans was aimed at dismantling the popular notion that African Americans did not have a culture or that their culture was derived from dominant white culture.

My contention, following from recent scholarship on the multiple motivations behind the promotion of a black aesthetic during the New Negro Renaissance and New Deal art eras, is that both the “Talented Tenth” and “racial school of art” positions emerged from a strong feeling of race pride and a desire to demonstrate African Americans’ contribution to American culture, also known as American cultural nationalism. As art historian Jonathan Harris argues, administrators of the Federally sponsored art projects of the 1930s, in which Crite participated, promoted a notion of American cultural nationalism based on the premise that cultural and ethnic diversity was *the* common attribute of a unified American experience and aesthetic.⁷⁶ By privileging the African or folk dimensions of a New Negro aesthetic historians of African American art obscure the degree to which proponents of an independent black aesthetic and an aesthetic of middle class gentility shared a desire to use art to counter dehumanizing stereotypes, secure a place for African American artists within the mainstream of American art and claim full citizenship rights for all African Americans.⁷⁷ In recovering a black middle class perspective, as evidenced in Crite’s early oeuvre, I also point to an understanding of modernity prevalent in the early twentieth century when images of successful, urban and urbane middle

⁷⁶ As Jonathan Harris explained in his study, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Federal Art Project administrators encouraged racially distinctive artworks to serve as examples of an American identity defined in terms of cultural difference. In other words, administrators wanted Project artworks to demonstrate that the quality that made America unique was its composition as a country of many cultures. Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 6-13, 50-53.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Stewart, “The New Negro as Citizen,” in George Hutchinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13-27.

class African Americans stood as much for modern American identity as did images inspired by the aesthetics of African art and black folk culture.⁷⁸

That Crite and his art do not fit the models of black artistic identity and expression that I encountered in my art history courses on African American art has been a challenge. In the process of writing the present text, I have often felt the pull of the master narrative of African American art, specifically the inspirational trajectory that describes black artistic production as an act of cultural resistance and affirmation of an independent black aesthetic in opposition to a dominant white art establishment.⁷⁹ However, I have come to understand that these radical aspects of black art are also present, albeit more subtly, in the conservative nature of Crite's artistic vision. I contend that when Crite performs his middle class identity in his works of art he does so as an act of affirmation of his own life experiences and of the experiences of his fellow community and congregation members in Boston. Given the fact that many African Americans, even those who had achieved a measure of economic and

⁷⁸ Crite's position probably was influenced more directly by the writings of William Monroe Trotter, the Boston race leader and editor of the local black newspaper *The Guardian*. In his lectures and editorials, Trotter argued vehemently for African American integration into every aspect of American life and he advocated the idea of racial uplift through a display of black achievement. For more on Trotter, see Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York, Athenaeum, 1970).

⁷⁹ I began my work on Crite after having completed projects on two other living African American artists, both of whom have produced works of art invested in notions of a black identity grounded in African, folk and modernist aesthetics. Julie Levin, "Visions of Diaspora: The Video Art Work of Phillip Mallory Jones," *The 1992 Dallas Video Festival*. Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1992: 63 and Julie Levin, "Forging a Vision of African American History, Culture, and Identity: Jean Lacy's 1990 Stained Glass Window Designs for the St. Luke 'Community' United Methodist Church" (Master's Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1996).

professional success, continued to live under severe social and economic conditions, Crite's images of upwardly mobile black Bostonians pursuing the American dream were as much of a creative and innovative invention of a positive black self as the Africanized images of blackness were.⁸⁰ As this dissertation will show, by giving concrete form to these experiences in his artworks, Crite was carving out a space for a black middle class identity and aesthetic in the history of art, a visual model of blackness he did not see represented in the works of his contemporaries nor in the art of the past.

*

The chapters that follow are organized thematically around four categories of imagery Crite produced simultaneously during his early career: portraits, neighborhood street scenes, church interiors, and illustrated spirituals. I consider the artist's painted canvases and brush and ink drawings as stages upon which he performed his identity as a black middle class, Episcopal, Bostonian. While my account of Crite's early works relies on a close reading of his biography as the foundation of his artistic goals, my study resists the traditional monograph approach to narrating African American artists' careers. Instead, I aim to situate Crite and his artwork within a cultural and social context and pay close attention to matters of style, iconography, patronage and art criticism.

⁸⁰ For example, in period portrait photographs by James Van der Zee and other black photographers costumes, props and painted backdrops helped sitters project a black middle class identity. For more on the role of photography in shaping and revising the image of the "New Negro" see, Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000): 35-48.

Chapter One provides an account of Crite's biography and the formation of his middle class identity in Boston during his early years through his formal art training School of the Museum of Fine Arts. I analyze the performative aspects of Crite's self-portrait and several portraits of the artist's family and friends to explore the impact of his family background, and especially his mother's influence, on his choice and presentation of black subject matter in his art. I argue that Crite's portraits also reveal the anxiety and uncertainty that characterized the artist's professional and personal life during the late 1930s due to his family's inability to maintain their middle class status. Like his other early art works, Crite's portraits instantiate a stable and positive vision of a black middle class Bostonian identity as a means of preserving it for himself and his community.

In Chapter Two, I describe Crite's generalized portraits of his black middle class community in a series of Boston street scenes known as the "Neighborhood Paintings." I track the ways in which Crite redefined the theme of the black urban scene from his black middle class and New England sensibility by aligning his images with the narrative of African American citizenship. In particular, I relate Crite's social and artistic goals for his genre scenes to the ideologies of the American Scene, Regionalism and the New Deal art projects to establish a sense of place and a nostalgic view of the recent past as a means for dealing with an unstable present. I argue that Crite's desire to fix a positive vision of his community was a response to his community's loss of

cohesion due to the effects of the Depression and a sudden rise in the city's population of lower class blacks from the south.

Chapter Three explores the spiritual dimension of Crite's black middle class identity by considering his neighborhood paintings of black Episcopal worship services and choir practices. I examine these church scenes as autobiographical statements that also display a didacticism by modeling proper middle class and Episcopal appearance and behavior. I argue that Crite's images of black Episcopalians also offered an alternative to the popular image of the ecstatic black worshipper by demonstrating a form of black religiosity based in his middle class and Bostonian values of formality and emotional restraint.

In Chapter Four, I consider Crite's series of brush and ink illustrations of African American spirituals published by Harvard University Press in the 1940s as another instance of his artistic "rootedness" in the class and religious sensibilities of his community. I argue that the artist's black middle class Episcopal identity guided his desire to elevate the spirituals from a form of folk music to a part of the western canon of religious music and liturgical art. In particular, I analyze the ways in which Crite redefined the spirituals in terms of the qualities of formality, patience, decorum, and reserve through his use of a Renaissance-inspired artistic style and a visual vocabulary of ecclesiastical symbols and vestments. In addition, I explore the ways Crite translates the spirituals from a musical and textual format to a serialized and graphic one and from his original drawings to the published versions. I consider the various types of translations embodied in Crite's illustrated spirituals as a means of

describing the complex nature of these images as well as his motivations for producing and distributing them.

CHAPTER ONE

Performativity and Portraiture: Constructing a Black Middle Class Persona in Boston

There must be a school of thought and a school of Negro artists with a conviction similar to my own to depict and preach the doctrine of the "real" Negro For as long as the incomplete and picturesque ghost of the "Exotic Negro" is held up to our white friends, all efforts towards understanding between the white and Negro races will fail.

Allan Rohan Crite¹

Crite's early self-portraits and portraits of his family members and friends are an excellent starting point for understanding how he constructed the black middle class Bostonian persona that was the foundation of his artistic vision. Although he was working independently in Boston, Crite's statement of his artistic goals suggests that he was aware of the New Negro Renaissance and that he shared a widely held notion that an art focused on African American progress could increase understanding between the races. His statement also reveals that he was deeply troubled by what he felt was an overly and unnecessarily exoticized approach to representing black subjects by white and black artists alike. In Crite's opinion the dichotomy between the "Exotic Negro" and the "real" Negro in current art was the difference between a fictionalized Harlem

¹ Allan Rohan Crite, diary entry, February 22, 1936. Crite recorded this passage from his diary into his self-published autobiography. Allan Rohan Crite, "Appendix I: The Works Progress Administration," *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston, MA; copy in Boston Public Library.

jazz personality and the familiar black middle class people he knew from his daily experiences in Boston.

When Crite penned the statement of his artistic goals in 1936 in the very private space of his diary, he was engaged in the very public work of painting easel pictures of black Bostonian street life for the Federal Art Project, producing religious artworks for display in the Episcopal Church, and illustrating African American spirituals with the intent to publish them in a series of volumes. Crite's portraits depict the same black middle class people that he portrayed in his contemporaneous street scenes, church interiors, and religious artworks. The men and women he pictured wear formal clothing, have a reserved demeanor and exude qualities of gentility and respectability, all attributes the artist associated with a black middle class Bostonian persona.

An important aspect of Crite's self-portraits and portraits is the highly personal conditions of their production. As was the case for most African American artists working during this period, obtaining portrait commissions was not a viable option, so his portraits almost always depict family members and friends.² In a 1979 interview with Robert Brown of the Archives of American Art, Crite described his portraits as artistic exercises and mementoes of his social interactions with friends and relatives, giving the impression that he did not follow the usual requirement of portraiture to please a specific patron.³ But,

² Robert Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite and Susan Thompson, January 16, 1979 – October 22, 1980," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

³ Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 65-67.

Crite did indeed have a patron in mind when he was creating his self-portraits and images of family friends. Crite's patron was the black middle class community for which he felt a responsibility to insert into the history of art and represent truthfully.

In this chapter I explore Crite's description of the physical and psychological dimensions of his black middle class Bostonian identity by focusing on his *Self-Portrait* of 1938 as well as several portraits he produced during his early career. Although Crite's portraits display the qualities of a black middle class Bostonian identity, these images also reveal the anxiety and uncertainty that characterized the artist's professional and personal life during the late 1930s. I argue that Crite's apprehensions, and those of his mother, stem from their inability to maintain their middle class status due to economic hardships caused by the Depression and a family tragedy.

Crite's acts of self-portraiture and portraiture are performances of his black middle class identity, for they reveal his personal connection to a way of life he and his family knew in Boston. The artist's investment in representing and distributing his black middle class outlook in his portraits fulfilled his central artistic goal to replace negative visual stereotypes of African Americans with images of middle class blacks. Moreover, Crite's performance-portraits represent a black middle class Bostonian way of a life as a means of documenting and preserving it for himself and his family in the wake of changes that threatened its continued existence.

Performativity and the Goals of Portraiture

Historically, portraiture has fulfilled a variety of roles: from announcing social status and exploring interior life to advertising an artist's technical skills and serving as a manifesto of his or her artistic goals. As a genre of art primarily concerned with representing individual and collective identities, portraiture is not only a mimetic device; it is also a performative one.⁴ In her study *Portraiture*, art historian Shearer West observes that the performative nature of social behavior relates to the act of self-portraiture and portraiture.⁵ Since the Renaissance period, conduct books, such as Baldesar Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528), suggested that there was a certain set of appearances and behaviors associated with the upper classes.⁶ Once people realized that public appearance and behavior could be learned and fostered, they began to view social interactions as a performance of an actor for an audience.⁷ Indeed, Crite's careful presentation of a public self in his portraits and self-portrait was a type of

⁴ Recent scholarship on portraiture has drawn from performance theory, which following from the work of Judith Butler defines identity not as a static state of being by as a process by which an individual creates and maintains her identity through a set of prescribed and learned behaviors that are repeated in daily life. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Shearer West, *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ West, *Portraiture*, 173-175. In addition to West's text, my discussion of the conventions and functions of self portraiture and portraiture as they apply to Crite's works draws from the following sources: Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991) and Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1980).

⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1959), 17-76.

performance. In his daily life, the artist created and maintained his middle class identity through a set of prescribed behaviors, including his mode of dress, speech, and demeanor. He learned these behaviors from his family and his immediate community as well as from his experiences in Boston's artistic and religious circles. Crite then used these performative gestures to enact his middle class identity in his self-portraits and portraits.

As artists became conscious of their own social status, they realized they could use portraiture's visual conventions of dress, pose, setting, and possessions to announce their own ambitions as well as those of their clients. *Portrait of a Bass Violin Player (South End Music School)* of 1941 (fig. 2) exemplifies the way in which Crite performs a black middle class identity through a set of recognizable visual codes of appearance and conduct.⁸ More than this, the black middle class identity he enacts belongs to Boston and is aligned with a New England Yankee mentality. Dressed formally in a jacket and tie, the subject faces the viewer while in the act of playing his bass violin. The large figure, along with his oversized instrument, fills the canvas space and makes the room appear small in comparison. Crite's placement of the sitter in the front-most part of the composition as well as his depiction of the stand-up piano and open window at a sharp angle to the picture plane compresses the space even further. The small physical space in the painting relates to the setting described in the painting's subtitle as a practice room in the South End Music School. Crite's representation

⁸ Although the title of this work does not identify a specific person, I have grouped it with the artist's portraits rather than his neighborhood paintings because of the specificity of his description of the subject's physiognomy and the painting's relationship to *The Violin Player (Joseph Howard)* (1940; Harmon and Harriet Kelly Collection, San Antonio, TX).

of the figure's handling of his bass violin and his choice of setting seem calculated to convey a middle class outlook. Significantly, the young man sits to play his instrument. The fingers on his left hand are poised on the neck of the bass, while his right hand draws a bow across the strings. Staring forward with his eyes open and a solemn expression of concentration, the subject performs the role of a classical music student. With these attributes, Crite's image contradicts the familiar stereotype of the Harlem jazz musician whose spontaneous improvisations are executed with exaggerated gestures and a minstrel-like smile.⁹ Crite's portrayal of the bass violin's player's reserved demeanor is also a key signifier of a Yankee mentality, for the classical music student displays the very qualities that black middle class Bostonians identified with, namely an appreciation of education, refinement and high culture.¹⁰

Crite's portraits of black middle class Bostonians relate to a broader tradition established in early nineteenth century African American art: the art of portraiture has served as a potent weapon in the visual campaign to construct positive African American identities within the public sphere. From Joshua

⁹ Lizetta LeFalle Collins and Leonard Simon, *The Portrayal of the Black Musician in American Art* (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Art Museum, 1987).

¹⁰ As art historian Edmund B. Gaither has explained, the conservative attitudes of early twentieth century Black Bostonians carried over into the community's arts and music scene. Edmund B. Gaither, "Seeing Ourselves," in Kim Sichel et. al., *Black Boston: Documentary Photography and the African American Experience* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1994). In an interview with the author Gaither stated: "[W]hile Harlem's most talked about musical event of the late 1920s was the Broadway stage show *Shuffle Along*, the highlight of the musical season [in Boston] was a Symphony Hall performance by world-renowned African American tenor Roland Hayes." Edmund Barry Gaither, interview with the author, August 17, 1998, Boston, Massachusetts.

Johnson's *Portrait of a Gentleman* (1805-1810) (fig. 3) to W.E.B. Du Bois's exhibition of portrait photographs of middle class blacks at the 1900 Paris Exposition (fig. 4), artists and intellectuals have used images of successful individuals to stand for the potential of the race as a whole.¹¹ Portraiture was also a central feature of the New Negro Renaissance. The movement's central text, Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, was illustrated by a series of pastel portraits created by Winold Reiss that depicted the period's leading black intellectuals and writers as well as images of black middle-class figural types, such as *The Librarian* (1925) (fig. 5).¹² Both kinds of portraits emphasized the beauty and distinctive attributes of African American physiognomy and presented the New Negro personality as self-possessed, urban *and* urbane.¹³

Many of the period's leading African American artists, including Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, Malvin Gary Johnson, William H. Johnson, Lois Mailou Jones,

¹¹ For more on Joshua Johnson's portraits, see Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth Century America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1985), 39-50. For more on Du Bois's calculated use of photographic portraits of middle class blacks, see Deborah Willis and David Levering Lewis, *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress* (New York: Amistad, 2003) and Shawn Michele Smith, "'Looking at Oneself Through the Eyes of Others': W.E.B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 581-599.

¹² Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; repr., New York: Athenaeum, 1992). Locke commissioned German émigré artist Winold Reiss to create a series of modernist-inspired portraits. For more on Reiss and the New Negro anthology commission, see Jeffrey Stewart, *To Color America: Portraits By Winold Reiss* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989).

¹³ The omission of Reiss's portraits from all of the subsequent reprints of Locke's *New Negro* anthology is a glaring instance of the way in which the original importance of a black middle class or "Talented Tenth" approach to defining a black aesthetic in the New Negro period of the 1920s-1940s has been obscured over time. Subsequent editions include the modernist and African inspired images by Aaron Douglas and Miguel Covarrubias as well as photographs of African sculpture serves to emphasize the later reading of the New Negro Renaissance as an African-centered artistic movement.

Archibald J. Motley Jr., and Laura Wheeler Waring, produced self-portraits and portraits that fulfilled a range of artistic goals from emphasizing middle class aspirations to celebrating their African ancestry and a commitment to modernism. Although Crite's portraits were intended to serve as an alternative to Harlem's New Negro, they also expressed his rootedness in his black identity by aligning the style and content of the portraits with a Bostonian middle class sensibility and the local conventions of portraiture.

Artistic Context: Portraiture in Boston

The impact of Crite's conservative training on his stylistic development and artistic goals cannot be overestimated. After completing the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' high school vocational arts program, Crite won one of two scholarships awarded each year to attend the Museum's prestigious art academy, known as the Museum School.¹⁴ The artist continued to receive tuition scholarships throughout his seven-year tenure at the Museum School between 1929 and 1936. Crite's training gave him the skills necessary to engage in the art of portraiture, and it also provided him with knowledge of the conventions of Boston portraits. Founded in 1877, the Museum School quickly established a reputation as an art academy for training fine artists drawn from the city's upper

¹⁴ Information about the Museum School's history is drawn from Roberta Sheehan, "Boston Museum School: A Centennial History, 1876-1976" (EdD diss., Boston College, 1983). Crite's decision to study at the Museum School was a reflection of his aspirations to pursue a career in the fine arts for the other prominent art school in the city, the Massachusetts Normal Art School, focused on training art teachers, a more practical profession.

class families.¹⁵ Through his long-standing association with the Museum and its art school, Crite gained an awareness of being a member of a prestigious art institution.

Unlike many of his New Negro Renaissance contemporaries, who used the art of portraiture to declare their allegiance to a bohemian lifestyle and modernist artistic outlook, Crite followed a traditional approach in his portraits in order to identify himself and his work with a conservative point of view associated with a Bostonian artistic disposition. From John Singleton Copley's Colonial era portraits of Boston's elites to the early twentieth century upper class portraits of a group of artists, known alternately as the Ten and the Boston School, portraiture was a popular art form in Boston.¹⁶ The city also claimed the period's most famous portraitist John Singer Sargent as one of its own despite

¹⁵ During the years he attended the Museum School, Crite recalls that he was one of the only African American students. However, when he enrolled in 1929, Crite certainly would have been aware of one of its recent black alumni, Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998), who attended the School from 1923 to 1927. Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 78. In addition, the sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968) was the local exemplar of an established black artist. Active in Boston since 1906, Fuller had ties to the African American art scene in New York and was devoted to portraying racial subjects in an academic style. For more on these artists and their connection to Boston, see Tritobia H. Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate Art Books, 1994) and Renee Ater, "Race, Gender and Nation: Rethinking the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller" (PhD diss., The University of Maryland, 2000).

¹⁶ Even Boston's avant-garde artists of the 1920s and 1930s, such as William B. Hazelton, Charles Hopkinson and Charles Hovey Pepper made their living as portraitists to the city's upper class patrons. Leah Lipton, "The Boston Five: Pioneers of Modernism in Massachusetts," *American Art Review* 6., no. 4 (1994): 132-139. Interestingly, as Crite explained, he knew these three artists through his involvement in the Boston Society of Independent Artists and he studied watercolor painting briefly with Hazelton and Hopkinson. Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 89-90.

the fact that the artist was based in England for the last decades of his career.¹⁷ In the early twentieth century, Boston's art community as a whole was small; local white artists generally came from the upper classes, and their taste in art was conservative. In fact, modern art was not widely accepted in Boston until the 1940s.¹⁸ In the first decade of the twentieth century, as the New York Ash Can School artists were rebelling from the academic conventions and seeking out subject matter in their city's poor and immigrant neighborhoods, the Boston School painters became further entrenched in traditionalism and in depicting the insular world of Boston Brahmin women.¹⁹ Writing in 1915, the painter and art critic Guy Pene Du Bois described the Boston painters as "aristocratic" and "aesthetic," and he added "the outstanding virtue of the Boston Group is one very characteristic of Boston. . . . It is refinement."²⁰

Crite learned the Boston School approach directly from its members, many of whom had been instructors at the Museum School since the 1890s.

¹⁷ During the early 1900s, Sargent made several trips to Boston during which he completed many important portrait commissions. Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, eds., *John Singer Sargent: The Later Portraits* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ For an overview of the Boston art scene in the early decades of the twentieth century and the importance of the Boston School influence on local art practice, see Trevor J. Fairbrother, *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant Age, 1870-1930* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1986) and Erica Hirshler, *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870-1940* (Boston: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 2001). For more on the development of modernism among Boston artists in the 1930s and 1940s, see Elizabeth Sussman, et. al., *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985) and Sinclair Hitchings, et. al., *The Visionary Decade: New Voices in Art in 1940s Boston* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery and the Boston Public Library Print Department, 2003).

¹⁹ Guy Pene Du Bois, "The Boston Group of Painters: An Essay on Nationalism in Art" *Arts and Decoration* 5, no. 12 (October 1915): 457.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 458.

These artists established a curriculum based on traditional academic principles with a strong emphasis on drawing skills, and Crite's coursework included classes in cast and life drawing, perspective, design and color theory, anatomy, figure and still-life painting, mural decoration, and the history of western art.²¹ In Crite's final year at the Museum School, he won the coveted Boit Prize for Painting, a confirmation of his high level of achievement and his apparent acceptance of the Museum's academic teachings.²² From this initial grounding in a traditional art approach, Crite maintained a preference for using a realist style throughout his career.

Crite's graphite figure drawings from his student years, such as *Portrait of Emma Nixon*, 1934 (fig. 6) demonstrate mature qualities of draftsmanship and reveal a thorough understanding of the human form.²³ In this early work, Crite used his grounding in academic principles to convey a sense of the dignity of his subject. In particular, the artist pays careful attention to the depiction of the

²¹ Although Crite's school records have been lost, one can surmise the scope of his coursework from the curriculum descriptions printed in the *Museum School Bulletins* for the years, 1929-1936, Vertical Files, Library of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

²² During his Museum School tenure, Crite also completed a degree in industrial design. According to the *Museum School Bulletin*, the courses offered in this program included book decoration, pen and ink illustration, Japanese brush drawing, stage set and costume design, metal work, and stained glass design. Although Crite's primary practice as a professional artist was as a painter, he utilized various aspects of his design training during his early career to create his brush and ink illustrations, liturgical objects created in hammered metal, church murals, and designs for church vestments and stained glass windows.

²³ *Emma Nixon* is part of a large group of Crite's early works on paper in the collection of the Museum of National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston. The collection contains drawings and watercolors from the artist's childhood and his student work from the Museum School and the Museum's high school vocational art program.

distinctive aspects of the young woman's African American physiognomy and hair. As we will see, Crite's emphasis on the physical beauty and refinement of his subjects reflects an approach taken by the Boston School of Painters, who emphasized the upper class status of their sitters with aestheticized depictions of visage, dress, and surroundings. When Crite matriculated in 1929, the Museum School was under the leadership of Philip Leslie Hale, a leading member of Boston School of Painters and a member of a prominent Boston Brahmin family.²⁴ Through courses in antique cast and life drawing and art history lectures, Hale transmitted the hallmarks of the group's artistic style and philosophy to his students. Works such as Hale's *Self-Portrait* of 1917 (fig. 7) modeled a way to perform class identity through the conventions of formal dress and serious demeanor. Hale's Boston School approach to depicting class status and a Bostonian identity is also evident in Crite's self-portraits and portraits.

With the appointment of the Russian émigré artist, Alexandre Iacovleff (1887-1938), as the new head of the School's Painting and Drawing Department in 1934, Crite was exposed to new approaches to portraiture. Unlike Hale and the Boston School painters, Iacovleff was a modernist known for his interest in ethnographic portraiture.²⁵ Iacovleff taught students to forgo traditional

²⁴ Hale assumed direction of the cast drawing classes in 1893 and remained at the School until his death in 1931. For more on Hale's career, see R.H. Ives Gammell, *The Boston Painters 1900-1930* (Orleans, MA: Parnassus Imprints, 1986) and Fairbrother, *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant Age*.

²⁵ Iacovleff trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, where he joined the artist group *Mir Iskustva* and developed an interest in ethnology. Before he immigrated to the United States, Iacovleff participated in two historic motorcades across Africa (1924-25) and Asia (1931-33), during which he produced several series of ethnographic portraits in tempura and pastel for which

academic drawing exercises and work quickly in conté crayon, his preferred medium. Rather than featuring local elites, Iacovleff's portraits focused on anonymous people from Africa and Asia, emphasizing sitters' cultural characteristics rather than visual markers of their class status (fig. 8). Iacovleff's teachings must have confirmed Crite's own inclination to make positive images of African Americans the focus of his artwork.²⁶ In addition, Iacovleff may have encouraged Crite to begin to loosen his painting style, which later gradually shifted away from academicism towards a more simplified style influenced by the aesthetics of folk art and figurative expressionism.²⁷ However, Crite always maintained an allegiance to the class-conscious portrait style of Hale and the Boston School painters for this particularly Bostonian art approach facilitated his interest in performing a black middle class persona of gentility and quiet reserve. As we will see, this artistic goal is evident in the self-portraits and portraits Crite produced in the period following his Museum School training.

he would become most well known. For more on Iacovleff, see Caroline Haaardt de la Baumethe, *Alexandre Iacovleff: L'Artiste Voyageur* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000).

²⁶ Some of Crite's African American artist contemporaries drew different lessons from the training and encouragement of their European modernist artist teachers who, like Iacovleff, were engaged with African subject matter. For example, both the German émigré artist Winold Reiss, who taught Harlem-based artist, Aaron Douglas in the mid-1920s, and the Russian émigré artist, Viktor Lowenfeld, who instructed John Biggers at Hampton University in the early 1930s, encouraged their students to look to their African heritage and explore the lessons of African art in their work. As a result, much of the art of Douglas and Biggers focused on African themes and engaged with modernism. Amy Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 59-64 and Alvia J. Wardlaw, *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 26-29.

²⁷ I discuss this aspect of Crite's stylistic development further in Chapter Two.

Performing the Role of Black Middle Class Artist: Crite's Self Portrait

In Crite's oil *Self-Portrait* of 1938 (fig. 9), a three-quarter-length portrait featuring the artist dressed in street clothes, he presents his "front" as a middle class person. An essential characteristic of a middle class mentality, the term "front" describes the performative qualities of identity as established through appearance and behavior, for it is the means by which a person establishes and maintains a public socialized self.²⁸ In his self-presentation, Crite uses his formal dress and demeanor to indicate a concern not with the display of material wealth, but with the display of decorum, respectability and moral integrity, qualities he believed middle class Bostonians possessed.

In his self-image, the artist appears much younger than his twenty-eight years, and his boyish face contrasts with his reserved demeanor and respectable attire of a white shirt, dark jacket and tie. The artist stares at the viewer through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses with a look that could be described as both serious and apprehensive. His stiff body posture and tense facial expression communicate a degree of vulnerability rather than the confidence one would expect from a person posed in such a public manner. Unlike the formal oil portraits created by many of his Boston contemporaries during this period,

²⁸ As described in the Introduction, Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton used the term "front" in their description of members of Chicago's black middle class. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 519. The term "front" has been used more broadly to describe the external visual signs of a person's socialized self and the visual indicators of identity that a person constantly crafts and revises in order to establish and maintain their identity. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, 22-30. The term continues to have meaning in a black cultural context, such as when rappers use the word "frontin'" to describe the public display of one's material status or racial identity.

Crite's *Self-Portrait* does not employ a tightly rendered academic painting style. Rather, in his handling of elements, such as his hair, moustache, and necktie, we see the young artist attempting to imitate the bravura brushwork that was characteristic of the style of many Boston School painters and, most notably, a hallmark of Sargent's portraits.²⁹ Thus, Crite's painting style was another convention of Boston portraiture that allowed the artist to identify himself and his sitters with a middle class identity.

Interestingly, a framed religious artwork hangs behind and directly to the right of the artist's face. Presumably one of his own creations, the scene of the Entombment of Christ is rendered with figures that are clearly identifiable as black, a hallmark of Crite's religious art at the time.³⁰ However, the work is uncharacteristically unfinished with the figures appearing without defined facial features.³¹ Crite's inclusion of a religious scene in his *Self-Portrait* adds to our knowledge of the artist's abilities as a producer of liturgical art and infers his moral character as a religious person.³² And, as we will see, the artwork's

²⁹ A regular visitor to Boston's museums and galleries throughout his early life, Crite would have had ample opportunity to view portraits by these artists.

³⁰ Crite religious art works will be discussed further in Chapters Three and Four.

³¹ In my extensive study of Crite's early oeuvre, I have come across almost no example of drawings that were unfinished in this manner. A pen and ink drawing by Crite entitled *Last Station Suggestion for the Station of the Cross* (1935; David C. Driskell Collection) resembles the image in the background of Crite's *Self-Portrait* but here the figures faces are carefully rendered.

³² Although an unusual choice of composition, a possible precedent is *Portrait of Charles Barbaro* (c. 1936), a self-portrait by one of Crite's fellow artist on the Boston Easel Division of the Federal Art Project (FAP) in the mid-1930s. This painting's composition portraying the artist seated in three-quarter view beside a painted scene of Christ carrying the cross is strikingly similar to that of Crite's *Self-Portrait*, however, Barbaro also depicts himself as a cleric wearing a

subject, a scene from the Passion of Christ, conveys a sense of melancholy that may refer to the artist's disheartened mood at the end of the 1930s.

As far as artists' self-portraits go, this painting is somewhat unusual. Excepting the inclusion of a work of art, nothing in the picture speaks to Crite's identity as a visual artist.³³ Although he was just two years out of art school and in the midst of one of the most prolific periods in his early career, Crite chose not to present himself actively engaged in the production of his art. Thus, despite his preference for a traditional art approach, Crite did not follow the convention of self-portraiture by portraying himself in the context of a studio or in the act of painting. Further, he crops his image in such a way as to obscure his hands, a physical attribute artists often emphasize in their self-portraits as the embodiment of their technical and creative abilities. Rather, by emphasizing qualities of formality and reserve, Crite underscores his role as a member of the middle class.

The ability of portraiture to index both individual and collective perceptions of identity makes Crite's portraits valuable tools for understanding the social milieu in Boston that helped to shape his black middle class identity as

priest's robe and hat. Crite may have known this painting through local exhibitions of FAP art. Barbarao's *Self-Portrait*, as well as many lost FAP works by Crite, are documented by photographs in the Final Report of the Massachusetts Division of the Federal Art Project located in Print Department at the Boston Public Library (BPL). I am grateful to Sinclair Hitchings, former Keeper of Prints at the BPL for directing my attention to this important resource.

³³ Interestingly, during his early career, Crite created two additional self-portraits neither of which identifies him directly as an artist: *Self-Portrait* of 1933, a pencil drawing (Collection of the Museum of National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston) and *Self-Portrait* of 1942, a watercolor (Collection of the Boston Public Library Print Department).

well as his desire to enact this subjectivity in his art. As Cromwell explains in her study of Boston's black high society, "class status was not measured by how much money one had or even one's profession, but by lifestyle, how one lived, entertained, and dressed, where one worshipped."³⁴ As Cromwell points out, black upper and middle class Bostonians regarded themselves differently than did members of a similar class in other African American urban communities such as Harlem or Chicago.³⁵ Black Bostonians chose to identify with their racial background on their own terms, regarding themselves as Bostonians first and as Negroes second.³⁶ The tendency of black middle and upper class Bostonians to identify with upper class white society, also known as Yankee or Boston Brahmin society, is evident in Crite's own speech patterns, manner of dress and demeanor, all of which closely resembled those of a white upper class Bostonian.

³⁴ Adelaide Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 65-74.

³⁵ Adelaide Cromwell uses the term "atypical north" to describe the social situation among African Americans in Boston. Unlike the larger black communities of Harlem or Chicago, the atypical north resembles a cross between Philadelphia and New Haven, in terms of its size and temperament as a small somewhat isolated black community which identified strongly with aspects of the city's and region's white majority. For black Bostonians, the ideal was a staunchly conservative outlook stemming from the region's Puritan legacy and also a sense of moral superiority and pride in Boston's history as a center of abolitionism. Cromwell also points out the ironies of how this view contradicted the social realities for blacks in Boston in the early twentieth century. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 196.

³⁶ Cromwell explains that the tendency of black Bostonian to identify with Boston Brahmin society was the result of social and economic factors peculiar to Boston. As newly arrived Irish and Italian immigrants began to dominate the lower income job and housing markets, African Americans attempted to distinguish themselves from these groups by emphasizing their long history in the city. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 118-21.

Although Crite was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, he and his parents, Oscar and Annamae Crite, relocated to Boston, before his first birthday.³⁷ This New England city, specifically its African American neighborhoods of Lower Roxbury and the South End, remained home to the artist for his entire life. Like many African Americans living around the turn of the twentieth century, Crite's parents had middle-class aspirations. The desire for upward mobility not only prompted African Americans to migrate from the rural south to the urban north but also inspired northern blacks to seek opportunities in new cities.³⁸ The Crites probably were attracted to Boston for its reputation as a place of unprecedented educational and cultural opportunities for African Americans.³⁹ At the time the city was known nationally for its well-established community of free blacks dating back to the seventeenth century, and its history as the birthplace of

³⁷ The artist was born Oscar Allan Rohan Crite. His life dates are March 20, 1910 to September 6, 2007.

³⁸ For concise account of the Great Migration and its effect on African Americans already living in the North, see John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000).

³⁹ When the Crite family settled in Boston's Lower Roxbury district in 1910, the neighborhood was in the process of becoming the new center of the city's African American community. During the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, blacks lived in a concentrated neighborhood on the north side of Beacon Hill and were able to command some degree of political, economic, and social status in the city. In the early 1890s, black Bostonians began to migrate from Beacon Hill to parts of the South End and Lower Roxbury, a move that was all but complete by 1920. During the first half of the twentieth century, these two districts were regarded as the heart of the city's African American community. The major studies on the social history of Boston's African American population in the early twentieth century are John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1914), Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*.

abolitionism and superior public education system, the first in the nation to be integrated.⁴⁰

Crite's early family life typified a Bostonian black middle class upbringing. Crite's father worked as a stationary engineer, and he owned his home, a small brownstone in the center of Boston's black neighborhood of Lower Roxbury.⁴¹ Crite's mother was a housewife and actively engaged with local charities and the Episcopal Church of St Bartholomew's in Cambridge, where Allan also belonged.⁴² Crite's parents placed a high value on education and the fine arts, and they encouraged their son to do so as well. They sent their son to two of the city's two most prestigious public schools, the Boston Latin School and the English High School, where he graduated in 1929. From childhood, Crite was an avid library patron, and he frequently attended art classes, art museums, and classical music concerts. His mother especially encouraged him to pursue a

⁴⁰ The first enslaved African arrived in Boston in 1638. By 1800, the African American population was approximately 1,000, making it one of the largest free black communities in North America. Important African Americans in Boston's early history include Frederick Douglass, who along with the Anglo-American, William Lloyd Garrison led the abolitionist movement from Boston. For more on the early history of African Americans in Boston, see James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979), and Robert C. Hayden, *African Americans in Boston: More Than 350 Years* (Boston: Boston Public Library, 1991).

⁴¹ Boston census records for 1920 indicate that Crite senior owned his home. For more on the history of African American life in Crite's neighborhood, see Roland Bailey, Diane Turner and Robert Hayden, *Lower Roxbury: A Community of Treasures in the City of Boston* (Boston: The Lower Roxbury Community Corporation and the Department of African American Studies, Northeastern University, 1993) and Museum of Afro-American History and the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, *Roxbury: Yesteryears* (Boston: Museum of Afro-American History and the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 1974).

⁴² In Chapter Three, I discuss in greater detail Annamae and Allan Crite's involvement in the Episcopal Church and the relationship of their religious identity as Episcopalians to their identity as black middle class Bostonians.

career as a professional artist, for she saw this as a suitable middle class endeavor.⁴³ In addition, Crite's life-long affiliation with the Museum of Fine Arts and its prestigious Museum School was an important asset to the young artist, an association he often used to demonstrate his middle class Bostonian identity.⁴⁴ The Boston Brahmin artists he encountered at the Museum School also provided the artist with an important model of appropriate middle class and Bostonian social behavior. Additionally, these interactions facilitated many important opportunities to create and exhibit his artwork. For example, in 1929 Crite met Walter and Jane Kilham, who invited the young artist to spend the summer at the artist colony they had established at their farm in Tamworth, New Hampshire and encouraged him to join the Boston Society of Independent Artists, which provided Crite with his first professional exhibition experience.⁴⁵

⁴³ Interestingly, Crite said that his father was less enthusiastic about his career choice questioning its practicality. The artist's decision to take business courses at night from Tufts University and to complete the Museum School's program in industrial arts alongside his fine arts courses may have been reflected his father's influence. Allan Rohan Crite, interview with the author, October 16, 2001, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁴⁴ Crite began attending Saturday morning art classes at the Museum as a child and later he was accepted into the Museum's high school vocational art classes. From his participation in that program, the artist won a scholarship to attend the Museum School. After he graduated in 1936, Crite continued to maintained close ties with the School often exhibiting in their alumni shows.

⁴⁵ According to Crite, he had his professional debut in the art world when Albert Franz Cochrane, the art critic for *The Boston Transcript*, featured his oil painting, *Settling the World's Problems* (1933; Afro-American History Museum, Boston) in his review of the Seventh Annual Exhibition of the Boston Society of Independent Artists. Cochrane described the work as "an interesting composition, one of the most ambitious and successful present." Cochrane, "An Improved Edition of the Society of Independent Artists' Joy Street Seventh Annual Is More Even in Its Performance," *Boston Evening Transcript* (Saturday February 10, 1934). In an interview on October 16, 2001, Crite explained to me how important it was to him at the time to receive recognition from the art critic of the city's "Brahmin newspaper." It is worth noting the important role that independent artist societies in Boston and other American cities played for providing artists of color and women artists with opportunities to show their work to the public.

Kilham and two other artists from the city's elite class, Charles Hopkinson and Charles Hovey Pepper, also fostered Crite's acceptance onto the roster of artists in the Massachusetts Division of the Federal Art Project and at the Grace Horne Gallery on Newbury Street in Boston.⁴⁶ Crite's early exposure to the arts coupled with a high degree of acceptance from upper class white Bostonians, may have given him a feeling early on that he belonged in the art world of Boston and that a career in the arts was expected.⁴⁷

As Theresa Cederholm Dickason explains, "a no-jury, no awards exhibition . . . allowed anyone to exhibit regardless of social rank, club membership, academic art training, artistic style or medium, progressiveness or adherence to tradition— notions which flew directly in the face of Boston's closely monitored artistic meritocracy, collecting tradition, and exhibition practice." Theresa Dickason Cederholm, *The Battle to Bring Modernism to Boston: The History and Exhibition Record of the Boston Society of Independent Artists, 1927-1961* (Boston: Falk Art Reference in association with the Boston Public Library, 2005), 13.

⁴⁶ Allan Rohan Crite, interview with the author, October 16, 2001, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁴⁷ Another important formative experience for Crite was studying with the well-known watercolorist and educator, Charles Woodbury at the Children's Art Centre in the South End. As a student of Woodbury, and his associate Elizabeth Ward Perkins, Crite would have been introduced to their egalitarian philosophy of art education. Woodbury's decision to include a number of Crite's "stickmen drawings" created at the Children's Art Centre in his book authored with Perkins, *The Art of Seeing: Mental Training Through Drawing* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), was another early confirmation of Crite's artistic talent. As Crite recalled in 1998, "One of the features of drawing classes at the Art Centre was 'stickman' figure drawing, action figures stressing movement and action. I remember one occasion . . . when a few of us selected children made drawings, action drawings from movies. We were impressed with the idea of seeing, understanding movement and translating that movement on to our drawings. I suppose in a way Mr. Woodbury was translating to us children that sense of movement in nature which he, as a famous marine painter, felt in the movement of the waves of the sea." Quoted in Michael Culver et. al., *Charles Woodbury and his Students* (Ogunquit, ME: Ogunquit Museum of American Art, 1998). A large group of Crite's stickmen drawings are in the collection of the Addison Gallery of Art, Andover, Massachusetts. For more on Woodbury's role as an art educator, see Roberta Zonghi, "The Woodbury School: The Art of Seeing" in Joan Loria, Warren A. Seamans et. al., *Earth, Sea and Sky: Charles H. Woodbury, Artist and Teacher 1864-1940* (Cambridge: MIT Museum, 1988).

Crite's Bostonian approach to his self-representation contrasts with the approach of many African American self-portraits familiar to viewers of New Negro Renaissance era art. In Malvin Gray Johnson's well-known *Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)* of 1934 (fig. 10), the artist paints himself in the guise of a bohemian modernist. Dressed in an orange turtleneck and brown trousers and holding a black bowler hat, Gray Johnson uses clothing not as signifier of social status but to signal his self-critical stance towards bourgeois society. Furthermore, by using a bright palette of colors chosen for their decorative rather than their naturalistic effects and portraying himself seated in a room whose space appears to tip up rather than recede, the artist announces his stylistic allegiance to modernism through the use of figural expressionism.⁴⁸ Although Gray Johnson does not represent himself in the act of painting, his inclusion in the scene of one of his artworks, *Negro Masks* of 1932, serves as another visual indicator of his artistic persona. Art historians often comment on the significance of the way Gray Johnson juxtaposes his a still life of African masks with his own body so that his face appears like a third mask. Scholars have read this aspect of Gray Johnson's *Self Portrait* as the artist's affirmation of his rootedness in the New Negro ideal of emphasizing his African cultural heritage and connection with modernity.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jacqueline Francis, "Modern Art, 'Racial Art': The Work of Malvin Gray Johnson and the Challenges of Painting, 1928-1934" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2000), 124-25.

⁴⁹ This cultural nationalist interpretation of an aesthetic of "rootedness" in terms of African origins has been standard in studies of African American art since the 1970s, including, David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976), Alvia Wardlaw, *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art* (Dallas, TX and New

Crite's self-presentation and inclusion of a religious artwork in his *Self-Portrait* defines him in relation to the tradition of art in an entirely different manner: as a producer of liturgical objects. Crite's choice of a passion scene in his *Self-Portrait* has art historical precedence, for this iconography has a long history in western art. From Durer's *Self-Portrait* (1500) to Paul Gauguin's *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ* (1889), artists have chosen to associate themselves with Christ's divinity and experience of human suffering. An example of a contemporary work by an African American artist that addresses this theme is William H. Johnson's *Jesus and the Three Marys*, 1939 (fig. 11) in which the artist lends his own facial features to an image of a crucified black Christ.⁵⁰ However, while Johnson's representation, articulated in a neo-folk style, is meant to express his identity as a modernist primitivist and his allegiance to an African American, southern folk sensibility, Crite's representation and artistic style communicate his orthodox approach to religion and art.⁵¹

York: The Dallas Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1989), and Samella Lewis, *Art: African American* (Los Angeles: Hancraft, 1990).

⁵⁰ Kymberly Pinder points out the relationship between William H. Johnson's *Self-Portrait* of 1944 and the visage of Christ in his crucifixion paintings of the same period. Kymberly Pinder, "Our Father, God; Our Brother Christ; or are we bastard kin?": Images of Christ in African American Painting," *African American Review* 31, no. 2 (1997): 227-228. Another parallel to these works by Crite and Johnson is self-taught, African American artist, Horace Pippin's *Holy Mountain* series, in which the artist represents himself as prophet. Richard Powell, "Biblical and Spiritual Themes," in Judith E. Stein, *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1993).

⁵¹ Art historian Richard Powell describes Johnson's artistic approach in this painting as reflective of an "internalized primitivism," a conscious expression of his African American "rootedness." Powell has also described Johnson's African American "rootedness" in terms of a "homecoming." As Powell explained, after years of study and professional experience in Europe, the artist returned to the United States first to Harlem and then to his hometown of Florence,

One could also interpret Crite's representation of a Passion scene juxtaposed with his own visage in his *Self-Portrait* as an indication of his melancholic state of mind at the end of the 1930s. Crite's tense facial expression and body posture may not only be meant to communicate his serious and reserved Bostonian demeanor, but also reveal the degree of anxiety he felt at the time. Likewise, the artist's use of a limited color palette of black, white, and red with a contrasting chartreuse yellow background, may be intended to convey his uneasy mood.⁵² Indeed, the late 1930s brought many changes to Boston that challenged Crite's sense of himself, his family, and his community as middle class. The Depression, the approach of the Second World War, the beginnings of city-sponsored urban renewal projects, and an influx of southern migrants to Boston contributed to the growing instability of the African American community.⁵³ Crite's diary entries from this period are filled with descriptions of his fears: whether to stay in art school, whether he will find a job, whether he

South Carolina, to reconnect with his African American background. In so doing, Johnson stepped away from his twenty-year exploration of modernist artistic styles, from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism to Expressionism, and developed a folk-inspired, neo-primitivist style that he felt better communicated his new focus on African American subject matter. Powell, "In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition: William H. Johnson's *Jesus and the Three Marys*," *American Art* 5, No. 4 (Autumn, 1991): 21-33 and Powell, *Homecoming: The Art of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1991), 123-215.

⁵² Although the chartreuse yellow background of Crite's *Self-Portrait* adds greatly to its expressive mood, the wall color may also be a documentary element for it is similar to the wall color portrayed in several of Crite's other artworks also situated in the artist's living room, such as *Portrait of My Mother* of 1939 (fig. 12) and the still life, *Fruit and Snow* (1940; Boston Athenaeum).

⁵³ Crite also describes this situation at length in "1930-1939," *An Autobiographical Sketch*. Crite's observations are confirmed by historical accounts of mid-twentieth century Boston: Howard Mumford Jones and Bessie Zaban Jones, eds., *The Many Voice of Boston: A Historical Anthology, 1630-1975* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979) and Lance Carden, *Witness: An Oral History of Black Politics in Boston, 1920-1960* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 1989).

will marry, and whether he will be drafted into the armed services as a result of the Second World War.

More than anything else, however, personal tragedy challenged the middle class way of the life the artist's family had established for themselves in Boston. In 1929, just after Crite began his studies at the Museum School, his father suffered a severe stroke from a work-related accident. The incident left Crite senior paralyzed and bedridden for the next seven and a half years until his death in 1937. The impact of Crite senior's infirmity was devastating to his young wife and son who immediately saw their family roles change to those of caregivers and their economic circumstances worsen. With Mr. Crite no longer able to provide for the family, they lost ownership of their brownstone and were left in the more precarious position of leasing their house. It was at this point that Crite says his mother did an extraordinary thing for him and his artistic career. Against the judgment of her husband and friends, Mrs. Crite decided to step out of her comfortable middle class lifestyle as a housewife and work as a domestic in order to support Allan's art education at the Museum School. As we will see, the artist acknowledged his mother's own anxieties about her decision to work outside the home and their family's future in his portrait of her.

*Family Ties: Black Middle Class Identity Performance in
Portrait of My Mother*

In addition to his self-image, Crite constituted his black middle class identity in his portraits of family members. As Adelaide Cromwell argues in her study of Boston's black upper class, there was a strong sense of social caste in

Boston's black society, in which family history was of the utmost importance in determining an individual's position on the social ladder.⁵⁴ Crite used his family portraits to establish that the qualities of refinement, decorum, and taste associated with a Bostonian middle class identity were the result of his heritage and upbringing.⁵⁵ By titling his work *Portrait of My Mother* (fig. 12), rather than introduce his subject by her own name, Annamae Palmer Crite, the artist chose to emphasize his connection to her.⁵⁶ As we will see, in *Portrait of My Mother*, the artist not only pays tribute to Mrs. Crite's middle class character, he also depicts the sacrifices she made to ensure her son would achieve a middle class way of life and her apprehensions about her family's precarious circumstances at the end of the 1930s.

Crite announces his mother's middle class status by emphasizing her sense of cultivated taste, which he makes visible in her elegant dress and composed demeanor. Crite paints his mother as a young, beautiful woman

⁵⁴ Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 90-1. As Cromwell points out, this view was expressed in a number of period accounts of Boston's black society, including Eugene Gordon, "Negro Society" *Scribner's Magazine* 88 (August 1930): 134-42 and "Freedom Proud Boston," *Ebony* 2 (March 1947): 9-15.

⁵⁵ Art historian Amy Mooney's analysis of the family portraits of Chicago artist, Archibald J. Motley Jr. as extensions of the artist's self-presentation has been useful for my thinking about Crite's *Portrait of My Mother*. Mooney asserts that Motley's representation of his "ancestry, origins, religion, place of residence, professional associations and appreciation of culture contributed to a sense of self that elevated the artist above prevailing bigotry." Amy Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr., The David C. Driskell Series in African American Art, Volume 4* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate, 2004), 13.

⁵⁶ That Crite's family portraits have great personal significance for him is indicated by the fact that unlike most of his oil paintings, these works have remained in the artist's possession for his entire career. They were hung prominently in the Allan Rohan Crite House Museum and were rarely loaned out for exhibition.

dressed in a maroon silk dress, accessorized with a single strand of pearls, broach, and bracelets. Her hair is pulled back from her face in a neatly pinned bun, a reserved yet fashionable style that also emphasizes her delicate facial features. The carefully chosen objects he includes in her surroundings likewise communicate her sophistication. Mrs. Crite sits beside a large bay window in the family's home at Two Dilworth Street in Lower Roxbury.⁵⁷ The comfortably appointed room has brocade and lace curtains, a table with ceramic vases and a candle, and a framed oil painting hanging on the wall, perhaps a work by her artist-son.

Several visual elements in the picture reference Mrs. Crite's membership in the Episcopal Church, an essential marker of middle class status in Boston's black community.⁵⁸ She holds the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer in her lap, and she wears a broach displaying the Episcopal crest pinned to the front of her dress.⁵⁹ A church façade appears in the background of the scene represented through the window, signaling the importance of religion in her life and in the life of her community. The artist also refers to his subject's religious faith and

⁵⁷ Crite completed several other works from this vantage point in front of the bay window at Two Dilworth Street that also express his family's middle class status, most notably his watercolor *Self-Portrait* (1942; Boston Public Library Print Department) and the watercolor *Still Life with Religious Figurine* (1940; Boston Athenaeum).

⁵⁸ As Cromwell points out, membership in the Episcopal Church was particularly important for African Americans who wished to solidify their ties to the Boston Brahmin tradition for it provided an additional way for blacks to distinguish themselves from the Irish and Italians, who customarily belonged to the Catholic Church. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 118-21.

⁵⁹ This pin may refer to Annamae Crite's membership in a national Episcopal woman's lay religious order, The Companions of the Holy Cross. Jackie Cox Crite, telephone interview with the author, January 15, 2008.

role as a devoted mother by including an image of a black Madonna and Child within a small orb placed in the center of the painting along the horizontal line of windowpane (fig. 13). By painting the holy pair as if it is reflected in a convex mirror, Crite refers to the manner of Jan Van Eyck, one of the Old Master painters who the artist said he admired during his early career.⁶⁰ This religious image, therefore, not only serves as another attribute of Mrs. Crite's identity, but by referring to the work of a famous artist, it fulfills another goal of portraiture: to display the artist's technical skill and knowledge of art history.⁶¹

While the material contents of the portrait suggest that Mrs. Crite possesses the physical, intellectual, and moral qualities befitting her black middle class status, the formal elements of the picture, particularly the artist's use of color, communicate her possession of the Bostonian qualities of Yankee reserve and gentility. The artist's use of a subdued color palette of yellow, green, purple and brown brings a sense of harmony and balance to the picture. More specifically, Crite highlights the light brown hue of his mother's skin by contrasting it with the dark brown of her hair and the deep purple shade of her dress. Comparing Crite's *Self-Portrait* with his mother's painted image indicates

⁶⁰ Crite stated that Van Eyck along with Pieter Brueghel and Rogier Van Der Weyden were artists that influenced him most during his early career. Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 48.

⁶¹ The most famous example is Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1434; National Gallery, London), which Crite may have known from his art studies. Like Van Eyck, who used the image as a kind of signature showing himself reflected in the mirror as the creator of the scene, Crite inclusion of a black Madonna and Child indicates their presence in the room and acts as a kind of signature by referencing a hallmark of his own culturally specific approach to representing religious subject matter.

that he inherited her light skin color, another marker of upper class status in the black community.⁶² Growing up in a class-conscious family and community in Boston, both Crite and his mother would have understood how they benefited from the “color line,” an understanding of the existence of a color hierarchy in which African Americans with light skin color were given preferential treatment by both whites and blacks.⁶³ Color hierarchy may have contributed to the degree of acceptance both mother and son experienced within Boston’s black and white society, and it also may have aided their ability to achieve a black middle class life.

Crite’s mother was the central influence on his life, particularly his understanding of Bostonian attitudes of middle class respectability. Although Crite’s parents came from entirely different social and geographic backgrounds—Annamae Palmer Crite (1891-1977) was from a working class Methodist family in Philadelphia, while Oscar William Crite (1875-1937) was raised in a rural county in North Carolina by parents who were former slaves—

⁶² In contrast, Crite’s portrait of his father, *Portrait of Dad* of 1935 and a double portrait of his parents, *Weary*, completed the following year (both Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston), indicate that his father had a much darker complexion. As discussed below, although born in the south and only one generation removed from slavery, Crite senior established his middle class status in the north through the attainment of higher education and professional status as an engineer.

⁶³ Color hierarchy was a legacy of slavery when skin color was used to determine which slaves would work as field hands and which would stay in the house as servants. The more arduous and dangerous work in the fields was designated to those with dark skin, while the less difficult work in the house was restricted to those with light skin. The color line also assumed that people with light skin gained this physical attribute by miscegenation. For more on the color complex that linked light skin with high status, see Willard Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 149-181 and Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor, 1993).

both came to Boston with similar expectations of raising their status to middle class.⁶⁴ However, while Mr. Crite sought economic advantages unavailable to him in the South, Mrs. Crite understood the New England city's social milieu in relation to the black society she knew from her childhood and adolescence in another northern city. She regarded Boston as a place where she could further her class standing through education and membership in the Episcopal Church, and she impressed these ideas on her son.⁶⁵ However, the degree to which Mrs. Crite placed an inordinate amount of effort on achieving and maintaining a middle class identity reflects her lack of qualifications for membership in this social group when she arrived in Boston in 1910. In contrast to her husband, who was in his mid-thirties and had already established himself as educated, having completed coursework in Medicine at Cornell University and engineering at the University of Vermont, and as a professional, with work experience towards obtaining a first-class engineer's license, Mrs. Crite was a young mother of nineteen without any higher education or social affiliations.

⁶⁴ Mrs. Crite further described the differences between herself and her husband when explaining his ancestry as African and Native American and hers as English. Untranscribed audiotape interview between Allan Crite and Annamae Palmer Crite, no date, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.

⁶⁵ For example in an interview with Edward Clark, Annamae Crite described her previous affiliation with the Episcopal Church during her childhood in Philadelphia, and her understanding of it as a place where one could acquire education and refinement: "My aunt's family were Methodist, my father's Baptist, the children attended Episcopalian because it gave studies outside your school class—history and drawing and painting and how to make things." Edward Clark, "Mother and Artist Son—An Interview," *MELUS* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 69.

Crite's mother was particularly enamored with Boston's association with the nation's oldest and most prestigious institution of higher learning, Harvard University. According to Mrs. Crite:

When I arrived [in Boston], of course, I went directly to Harvard. . . . Harvard University and the Episcopal Church have been my two loves. I went to church that was on a Sunday and the next day I went to Harvard. I visited the museums . . . and [studied] in the evening Extension [School]. . . . I love Harvard. My son has inherited the same affection for Harvard."⁶⁶

Although several of the country's most influential black leaders had graduated from Harvard before 1910, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and local newspaper publisher, and activist, William Monroe Trotter, for Mrs. Crite, Harvard symbolized the upper class Bostonian lifestyle she desired for herself and her son. Crite and his mother maintained a life-long affiliation with Harvard University through its Extension School, where Mrs. Crite took classes from 1910 until the 1950s. Crite's mother encouraged him, upon completing art school, to study at the Harvard University Extension School for his Bachelor's degree, which he received in 1968.⁶⁷ After Crite retired in 1970 from a thirty-year career

⁶⁶ Annamae Palmer Crite quoted in *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁷ Crite's association with Harvard University was extremely important to him. In the resume he included in his autobiography and in the biographical entries he submitted to the publication, *Who's Who Among Black Americans*, Crite emphasized his ties with Harvard University without mentioning the Extension School. Specifically, he referenced his bachelor's of arts degree, his membership in the Harvard Club and Harvard Alumni Association and his publications with Harvard University Press (*Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* of 1944 and *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* of 1948). In addition, Harvard chairs and his framed Harvard diploma were prominently displayed in the Allan Rohan Crite House Museum. Crite attended Harvard Extension School graduation ceremonies well into his nineties and took pride in presenting the Annamae Palmer and Allan Rohan Crite Scholarship named in honor of his family's long association with the School. In 1986, Crite was the recipient of the 350th Annual Harvard University Medal. "Crite, Allan Rohan," *Who's Who Among Black Americans*, 2nd ed.,

as a draftsman at the Boston Naval Shipyard, he went back to Harvard working as a part time librarian in the Extension School Library.⁶⁸

A devoted member of her parish of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, in Cambridge, one of the areas oldest black Episcopal congregations composed entirely of middle and upper class black families, Mrs. Crite taught Sunday school, where she says she took charge of educating the children about history and culture through outings around Boston.⁶⁹ She also was active in the Church's Altar Guild, a group that organized the decoration of the sanctuary and altar and was known locally and nationally for attracting middle and upper class women to their ranks. Mrs. Crite's interest in affiliating herself with the group may have been a calculated move to further her social standing, and it also may

Volume 1 (1977-78): 201 and Christopher Queen, "Allan Crite at Home: A Tour of his House Museum in Boston's South End," *Harvard University Alumni Bulletin* 32, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 10-13.

⁶⁸ Although Crite's career at the Naval Shipyard meant he could not devote full time to his artistic career, he nonetheless viewed his work as a draftsman as integral to his life's pursuit of art. As the artist explained to Robert Brown, "I've earned my living by drawing. As an illustrator in the Navy Dept of course, I had to use all the skills that I had learned in school. I looked upon my work in the Navy Dept. as a means towards an end of promoting myself as an artist. It gave me a more secure financial basis, in a way. It really helped me a great deal." Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," *Archives of American Art*, 17. In addition, as Edmund B. Gaither pointed out to me in a telephone interview on May 8, 2003, working at the Naval Shipyard also gave Crite a sense of the larger world beyond Boston which may have contributed to his conception of the universalizing and multicultural imagery in his religious works created after 1940 and for his important series of self published drawings, *Reflections on the Afro, Asian, American Cultural Heritage of People of Color* (1985).

⁶⁹ Edward Clark, "Annamae Palmer Crite and Allan Rohan Crite: Mother and Artist Son—An Interview," *MELUS*, 68-70. For an abbreviated history of black Episcopalians in Boston, see Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace*, 230-31, Mark J. Duffy, *The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 1784-1984: A Mission to Remember, Proclaim, and Fulfill* (Boston: Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 1984) and Robert C. Hayden, *Faith Culture and Leadership: The Black Church in Boston* (Boston: Institute for Boston Studies, Boston College, 1985).

have helped her facilitate her son's interest in producing liturgical art for the Episcopal Church.⁷⁰

Like many middle class African Americans, Mrs. Crite disliked Jazz music and what she perceived as its attendant culture of vice. She preferred classical music and the fine arts and instilled an appreciation of these cultural expressions in her son. From childhood, Crite's mother exposed him to all of the cultural attractions of Boston. Together they were frequent visitors to the Museum of Fine Arts, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, as well as the art and science museums of Harvard University.⁷¹ They walked in the gardens of the Boston Commons and toured the State House. They attended concerts at the Boston Symphony and private performances at the home of the renowned African American tenor, Roland Hayes. Mrs. Crite also viewed her son's interest in the performing arts as a suitable middle class pursuit. As a teenager, Crite joined a local black theater group, the Allied Arts Players, and sang concert versions of

⁷⁰ In addition, Mrs. Crite did her volunteer work at the Settlement House, a charity focused on helping poor families adjust to life in the city. Through the Settlement House Movement, the upper classes instructed the lower classes in "proper" social behavior. Like the Altar Guild, the Settlement House was the preferred charity of white Boston Brahmin women as well as the city's upper class blacks. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 143.

⁷¹ In a lecture Crite delivered on September 22, 1993 as part of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's Eye of the Beholder Series, the artist offered the following recollection of visiting the Gardner Museum with his mother on a field trip from The Children's Art Centre where he studied drawing as a child: "I was astonished, amazed and overwhelmed by the beauty of the place. Later I made some drawings from memory, and as I understand, the drawings were very well received. . . . Somehow [Mrs. Gardner] asked my mother and the other mothers to come up and have a cup of tea with her. And my mother's impression of Mrs. Gardner was a very gracious and kind person. . . . So I do have a kind of personal relationship." Allan Rohan Crite quoted in Jill Medvedow, ed., *The Eye of the Beholder* (Boston: The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1994).

the spirituals with a local choir.⁷² Mrs. Crite instilled her middle class orientation in her son by encouraging him to engage in these leisure activities as an aspect of a Bostonian way of life.

Crite's interest in pursuing a career in the fine arts and the degree of acceptance he received from Boston's art establishment was exceptional for an African American artist working in the early twentieth century. This situation may also have been a function of Crite's inheritance of his mother's middle class attitudes, an early degree of acceptance in the field of art, as well as the particular social milieu of Boston. The artist had a keen ability to move within the city's elite educational and cultural circles, and early on he established relationships with the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library and the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, which he maintained throughout his career. Crite's willingness to cross racial and class lines to maintain these associations reflects his own motivations as well as a situation Adelaide Cromwell described in her study of black Boston society: "The walls of the Negro ghetto [in Boston] are deceptive: now you see them, now you don't. For the more sensitive, or

⁷²In *An Autobiographical Sketch*, the artist noted his participation in the Allied Arts Players' theatrical productions as both an actor and set designer and that he sang spirituals on the radio with the Clef Choir. Significantly, the artist described the Allied Arts Players' interested in producing classical plays about black historical subjects, such as "Dessalines, the First Emperor of Haiti" (1930), while the other black theatre group in Boston, performed plays about the gritty aspects of contemporary urban black life. The theatre groups' divergent ideas about representing black subject matter were part of a vibrant theatre movement in Boston. Crite also recalled that Alain Locke came to Boston in the 1930s to lecture on a national black theatre movement. Allan Rohan Crite, Interview with Beryl Wright, untranscribed audiotape, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.

perhaps less protected, the barriers are relentless and strongly built, but for the protected or insensitive the walls are web-like in their permeability."⁷³

That Crite's outlook was unusual even for Boston is evidenced by the contrasting views of his artist contemporary, John Wilson (b. 1920). Although Wilson also grew up in Crite's neighborhood of Lower Roxbury and attended the Museum School, the younger artist has an entirely different impression of life in Boston's black community, which he pointedly refers to as the "ghetto" rather than the neighborhood:

[T]here was sense of the impossibility for a black male to get a job and live a kind of, well you didn't even use the word middle class. . . . I mean if you were black you just didn't make enough money. . . . So there was this sense of being part of this left out community. That was my reality, which made it impossible for me to ignore, and for whatever reason Allan's background was such that, his Mother especially, gave him this ability to ignore [the poverty of the black neighborhood].⁷⁴

Wilson has said that in his early portraits he was looking for a visual language with which to translate the feelings of disconnection from and disillusionment with white American society expressed in the contemporary social realist writings of Richard Wright.⁷⁵ Characteristic of Wilson's particular approach to

⁷³ Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 133.

⁷⁴ John Wilson interview with author, October 17, 2001, Brookline, Massachusetts. In this interview Wilson also explained that Crite encouraged him to pursue a career in art. According to Wilson, Crite was an important role model of a professional black artist, Crite introduced him to the existence of a larger black community of artists by lending him a copy of Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, and Crite encouraged him to submit his work to the Annual Atlanta Art exhibitions organized by Hale Woodruff. For a brief discussion of Wilson's early interactions with Crite, see Stacey I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature 1930-1953* (London and Athens: Georgia University Press, 2004), 116 and 121-122.

⁷⁵ In 1945, Wilson completed a series of charcoal drawings of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Wright's novel *Native Son* (1945). For more on Wilson's career, see Morgan, *Rethinking Social*

representing a black Bostonian identity is his *Portrait of My Brother* of 1942 (fig. 14). In this image, the artist utilizes a tightly painted realist style to portray the visage of young man who stares at the viewer with an expression that is a mixture of anger and hopelessness. In the background, a sketch-like image of a tenement building reflects the social realities of Boston that may have contributed to the young man's feelings of despair.

In contrast, Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* utilizes conventions from the Boston School manner of portraiture to communicate his subject's identification with the values of Boston Brahmin society. As art historian Trevor Fairbrother explains, the Boston School painters' commissioned female portraits emphasized the qualities of the ideal Bostonian woman as "a combination of feminine beauty, intelligence, and reserve."⁷⁶ Given Crite's familiarity with the Boston School's approach through his Museum School studies, it is plausible that he had their class-conscious images of women seated in New England interiors in mind as a model when he depicted his mother seated in her Roxbury living room.⁷⁷

Edmund C. Tarbell's *Reverie (Katherine Finn)* of 1913 (fig. 15) is characteristic of this sub-genre of Boston School painting. Tarbell signals Finn's elite social status

Realism: African American Art and Literature, 114-139 and Museum of the National Center, *Dialogue: John Wilson, Joseph Norman* (Boston: The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists and the Museum of Fine Arts, 1995). The latter source also contains a transcript of an interview with Wilson conducted by Patricia Hills.

⁷⁶ Fairbrother, *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant Age*, 66.

⁷⁷ As Fairbrother explains, "A mainstay of the Boston School was the commissioned female portrait, which typically presents the sitter against a quiet background while strongly suggesting that she is both stylish and intelligent, elegant and accomplished." *Ibid.*

by portraying her bathed in diffused light, dressed in elegant clothing, and surrounded by beautiful objects. The Boston School painters also depicted their female subjects engaged in domestic activities, such as daydreaming, sewing, drinking tea, or reading, as visual conventions to communicate their status as ladies of wealth, fine taste, and above all, leisure.⁷⁸

However, Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* departs from the tenor of the Boston School portraits by also acting out a particular black middle class Bostonian female identity that is associated with menial labor. Unlike Tarbell's *Reverie*, Crite does not portray his mother in a state of repose or in the midst of a daydream. Rather she sits forward in her chair with a degree of alertness and apprehension that reflects her engagement with the world outside the boundaries of her living room. Her expression, which reveals a sense of anxiety rather than complacency, marks her psychological difference from the white Brahmin women pictured in the Boston School's rarified interiors. As Mrs. Crite turns her gaze to the right, she draws our attention to the view through the bay window, a carefully depicted street scene of the Crite's neighborhood of Lower Roxbury (see fig. 13). Like a landscape view inserted into the background of an Old Master portrait of a landed gentlewoman, the view through Mrs. Crite's window represents her class status by establishing her connection to her environs. The shiny new automobile and woman dressed in a fur-trimmed coat are visual indicators of the black middle class status of Mrs. Crite's community, as are the clean streets, sidewalks and brick building facades.

⁷⁸ Lauren Buckley, *Edmund C. Tarbell: Poet of Domesticity* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2001), 93-105.

The scene outside the window acts as another prop within the portrait to give us more information about Mrs. Crite's life beyond the private sphere of her middle class home; the female figure in the lower right of the neighborhood scene may allude to Mrs. Crite in her public role as a domestic. The woman wears a plain coat over a black and white uniform and has a hairstyle similar to the image of Mrs. Crite seated in formal dress in her living room. Perhaps the artist included a vision of his mother's alter ego as a domestic to acknowledge what he viewed as her courageous and selfless act to serve as his patron, sustaining his artistic training and professional aspirations throughout the difficult years of the Depression and her husband's illness.⁷⁹ As such, Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* describes a black female Bostonian identity, while also revealing the larger social reality that many African American women needed to work in menial jobs in order to maintain their middle class status.⁸⁰

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⁷⁹ Crite's autobiographical writings emphasize his relationship with his mother and focus on her family's lineage and upbringing in Philadelphia. In contrast, Crite gives few details about his father's early life and instead establishes his father's middle class status by describing his interest in obtaining a medical degree and then being one of the first black men in New England to earn a first-class engineer's license, which the artist stated was "no small accomplishment in those days." Crite, "Prelude: 1910-1920," *An Autobiographical Sketch*, 1977.

⁸⁰ In fact, as Crite explained in his interview with Robert Brown, work as a domestic could be a precarious occupation for a young African American woman, even in the genteel environment of Boston, and the young men for whom his mother worked looked out for her because they recognized her as an upstanding middle class woman. As Crite stated, "They appreciated what she was trying to do -- help me go through school, and so forth. They also appreciated her character. So they made sure she was never molested. And they would recommend other people, when she got through working for one person or another. And they would be scrupulous about that. Because it would have been very easy for a person like my mother to have all kinds of unexpected difficulties." Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 45.

Like his *Self-Portrait* and *Portrait of a Bass Violin Player*, Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* present a black middle class Bostonian identity as a means of combating negative stereotypes of African Americans and inserting black Bostonians into the history of art. The performance-portraits also memorialized a way of life the artist feared was disappearing both for his family and his community as an influx of lower class black southerners migrated to Boston and threatened the artist's perception of his neighborhood as a small and coherent middle class community. In the two chapters that follow, I explore the ways in which Crite utilized a performative approach to create generalized portraits of his black middle class community and congregation in a series of neighborhood street scenes and black Episcopal Church interiors.

CHAPTER TWO

Portraits of Community: Enactments of Black Middle Class Identity in the Neighborhood Paintings

In the case of the American Negro his activities in the fine arts must serve a double purpose: for he must make the rest of the United States aware of his offerings: and therein have his contribution enrich the cultural life of the nation: and also he must awake his own people to the needs of the fine arts: so that they too may take part in these activities as portions of their daily living.

Allan Rohan Crite¹

In a series of street scenes depicting aspects of daily life among black middle class Bostonians that Crite refers to alternatively as the “neighborhood paintings” and the “neighborhood series,” he realized his stated artistic goal to have an impact on African American and white viewers and to contribute to the culture of his local community as well as his nation. Specifically, Crite realized this goal in the neighborhood paintings by portraying his black middle class community as a representative example of African American assimilation into American society. The obligation Crite felt to use his art for a larger cultural and social purpose reflects his identification as a “race” man, a person who felt a responsibility to emphasize the positive aspects of “Negro” life in order to demonstrate the potential of “the race” to both African Americans and whites.²

¹ Allan Rohan Crite, “Lecture for the Fine Arts Program,” unspecified institution, February 20, 1944, reel 3911 #515, Allan Rohan Crite Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Original copy at the African American History Museum, Philadelphia).

² As explained in the Introduction, when period writers used the term “race” man, it was analogous to describing a black middle class outlook. See, Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton,

In his role as a “race” artist, Crite expressed a black middle class sensibility that was at the heart of the formation of a New Negro aesthetic in the 1920s and 1930s.

Like Crite’s performance portraits, the neighborhood street scenes are performative paintings: they represent a black middle class Bostonian way of life based upon the artist’s own experiences and class values as a member of this social and regional group. However, while his self-portraits and portraits rehearse the individual attributes of his black middle class Bostonian identity, the street scenes portray groups of anonymous figures that enact a collective or communal middle-class Bostonian persona. All of the figures in his street scenes wear formal clothing and conduct themselves with a degree of refinement and reserve that corresponds to the artist’s notion of respectability, the epitome of proper black middle class and Bostonian behavior. Further, the artist’s careful depiction of the setting as a clean and well cared for neighborhood is an additional visual indicator of the middle class character of his community.

Similar to his social aims for his portraits, Crite wanted his street scenes to demonstrate the exceptional quality of black urban life in his New England city and challenge the negative stereotypes of African Americans popular in current art. Crite felt that the best antidote to the exoticized images of African Americans that were becoming stereotypical by the 1930s was to focus on middle class people engaged in the commonplace activities with which all Americans

Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 394-395.

could identify. In particular, Crite was interested in showcasing black Boston as an alternate to the more familiar images of the Harlem jazz musician or the southern sharecropper.³ The artist wrote in his diary in 1936 of the progress he had made towards this aim: “Already my efforts are meeting with satisfying results. White critics have changed their opinion of my paintings from being paintings of Boston’s Harlem to paintings of the South End.”⁴

Although the neighborhood paintings are an extension of the artist’s performance portraits, Crite has often referred to the street scenes as his “genre paintings.” These artworks can also be understood as “representations of everyday life.”⁵ As art historian Elizabeth Johns has explained, within their seemingly neutral images of daily life, American genre painters expressed ideologies of race, class, gender, and region that addressed both the aspirations

³ As the artist stated in his interview with Robert Brown, “I was making studies of black people just as ordinary human beings, because the usual picture that one had. . . was that the artist was strongly influenced by . . . the jazz person up in Harlem, or of the sharecropper in the deep South. There was nothing in between--of just the ordinary middle-class person who goes to church, does the work, etc.” Allan Rohan Crite, in Robert Brown, “Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite and Susan Thompson, January 16, 1979 – October 22, 1980,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 55.

⁴ Allan Rohan Crite, diary entry, February 22, 1936. Crite recorded this passage from his diary into his self-published autobiography. Allan Rohan Crite, “Appendix I: The Works Progress Administration,” *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston, MA; copy in Boston Public Library.

⁵ As Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer explain in their essay, “The History of the Term Genre,” Denis Diderot based his definition of genre on French word for type or sort in order to describe images of daily life that portray anonymous groups of figures as types standing in for larger social classes of people. Although Crite expressly rejected the replication of stereotypes in his artwork, his group scenes do use typing to some degree as he applies middle class traits to groups of people he want to stand for the larger middle class identity of his community. Stechow and Comer, “The History of the Term Genre,” *Allen Memorial Museum of Art Bulletin* 33, no. 2 (1975-76), 89.

and the anxieties of their viewers and patrons.⁶ Crite's neighborhood paintings express an ideology based on the artist's subjectivity as an African American male and his identification with middle class and Bostonian values. In addition to his fears over whether his family would be able to maintain their middle class status, Crite's paintings express a degree of class anxiety shared by other members of his community over whether their middle class way of life could survive the economic hardships of the Depression and the social instability caused by an influx of southern working and lower class blacks to Boston. By omitting any reference to these economic and social threats to his neighborhood, Crite's street scenes preserve his memory of the black middle class way of life his family and community had enjoyed in recent past.

In this chapter, I examine a small number of neighborhood paintings as representative examples of the artist's performative approach to representing a black middle class Bostonian identity. I am interested in the various motivations Crite had for enacting his community's black middle class identity and the reasons why he wanted to distribute his paintings to a broad audience of black and white viewers. I also consider how the artist adapted his painting style in his neighborhood paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s to express the loss of a stable middle class life he had known in the 1910s and 1920s and as a means of memorializing it for himself, his family, and his community.

⁶ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xi.

*Performing a Black Middle Class Community Identity:
Parade on Hammond Street*

In the oil painting *Parade on Hammond Street* (fig. 16), Crite performs his black middle class Bostonian identity by constructing a scene of leisure and civic pride that identifies black Bostonians with the values and ideals of an American way of life. The scene is typical of the neighborhood paintings as a whole due to its upbeat mood and use of a detailed naturalism. Completed in June of 1935, the painting records the artist's memory of a parade near his home in Boston's Lower Roxbury district, which was the heart of the African American community at the time. Referring to this painting Crite explained: "The parade was one of those district conventions of the Elks, a fraternal order, and the parade was a feature of the festivities. They would be at times on a Sunday preceding a service at one of the churches. It was a festive affair and everyone [was] in the Sunday best of attire."⁷ In the scene, a marching band of African American men plays before a crowd of black men, women and children, who we identify as middle class by their formal attire and reserved demeanor. The figures watch with an appreciative interest from the sidewalks alongside the street and from the front steps and windows of a red brick apartment building in the background. In the right of the picture, the tall black man leading the parade captures our attention with his perfect posture, blue and white baton and striking yellow plumed hat. The open foreground space on either side of the

⁷ Allan Rohan Crite to Janice Miller, December 10, 1981, quoted in Richard Rubinfeld, "Allan Rohan Crite, *Parade on Hammond Street*," in Erika D. Passantino and David W. Scott, eds., *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: A Collection in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 496.

bandleader allows us to view more of the crowd and the physical space of neighborhood, which are as important to Crite's enactment of a black middle class way of life as the parade itself.

What interests me about *Parade on Hammond Street* is the way the artist draws from his memory of a real experience and uses it to represent an instance of a black middle class Bostonian communal way of life. This painting is particularly notable for the various performative levels of its visual imagery. The parade participants perform music for the crowd, and they also perform their identity as members of an Elks club, a national fraternal organization associated with white middle class Americans. The audience members are also acting out their individual identities as middle class professionals, housewives and citizens. And, the neighborhood itself, with its immaculate sidewalks and streets and pristine building facades, also plays a role by reflecting the decorous nature of the black middle class identity of people who reside there.

Crite's meticulous reconstruction of the setting of *Parade on Hammond Street* helps to ground its narrative in reality and make his imagery accessible to a wide audience. However, it is important to remember that *Parade on Hammond Street* and other neighborhood paintings are not documentaries, for the descriptive approach the artist used to create his street scenes was limited to the planning stages of his compositions. The artist's research process involved taking daily walks through his neighborhood to record details of the neighborhood architecture and topography in a sketchpad. Crite's sketchbooks of the period have very few portrait drawings of people, and the artist has said that in order to

create individualized figures for the final paintings, he referred to a mental file of faces that interested him.⁸ The final paintings are, then, carefully constructed compositions executed entirely in the artist's studio from a combination of his on-site drawings, memories, and imagination.

Given their reportorial style, much of the existing scholarship on Crite's neighborhood paintings ascribes a documentary quality to their meaning. In reading Crite's street scenes as visual documentaries, scholars have relied almost exclusively upon comments the artist made about this body of work after 1970. In the wake of several decades of city-sponsored urban renewal projects that removed or dramatically altered many sections of Crite's neighborhood, including his home of fifty years at Two Dilworth Street in Roxbury, the artist reevaluated the meaning his neighborhood paintings and emphasized their preservationist value as documents of a lost era in the history of the city.

It is true that in many cases Crite's street scenes are the only remaining visual records of the buildings, alleyways, and parks that once defined his middle class community. However the revisionist history Crite developed for his neighborhood paintings has had an effect upon the historiography of his early career. By using Crite's post-urban renewal description of himself as an "artist-reporter" and by focusing on the descriptive qualities of his street scenes, scholars have neglected, what I contend was, the artist's original desire for his

⁸ Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," *Archives of American Art*, 12.

images: to enact a black middle class way of life.⁹ My reading of the neighborhood paintings as middle class performances, rather than as unmediated documentaries of black urban experience, seeks to give Crite a greater amount of agency as the inventor of his imagery and allows for a broader interpretation of his style and iconography.¹⁰

In fact, Crite's use of a realistic, documentary style in his neighborhood paintings was the result of his application of the skills he learned from his academic art training at the Museum School. In works such as *Parade on Hammond Street*, the artist began by applying a graphite sketch to the surface of a primed canvas. Then, he added a thin layer of pink, on top of which he applied a rich oil medium using a varied brushstroke. Typically, Crite built up his image from back to front in a traditional manner, completing the buildings first and

⁹ These statements originate in Crite's papers and unpublished autobiography both compiled in the 1970s and he repeated them to me during our meetings in the 1990s. In my own experience interviewing the artist, I have found him to be more interested in recalling the names of streets and buildings no longer present or the long forgotten horse and carts than in discussing the meanings behind the types of people he portrayed or the activities and narratives in which he engaged them.

¹⁰ The emphasis placed on the documentary and historical value of Crite's neighborhood paintings reflects an inherent bias within the discipline of art history to privilege the racial identity of the artist when interpreting the content of his or her art. As art historian Jacqueline Francis points out: "Too often, imagery by African-American artists is regarded as being transparent. The work is, in effect, framed as a direct translation of cultural experience or an unmediated documentary of it." Jacqueline Francis, "Modern Art, 'Racial Art': The Work of Malvin Gray Johnson and the Challenges of Painting, 1928-1934" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2000), 152. Viewing the work of African American artists solely as documentary of their experience closes down the imagery to the broad range of questions that art historians ask of white artists, including their relationship to established traditions in painting, stylistic analysis, and social context.

then the figures.¹¹ Crite's realistic approach relied on his understanding of figure modeling, perspective, and naturalistic color and lighting. In *Parade on Hammond Street* and other neighborhood paintings, the artist often used a limited palette of primary and secondary colors arranged in a balanced manner throughout the composition. He further activated his compositions by repeating forms, figures, columns, and windows across the surface of the picture plane and by contrasting the bright colors of the figures' clothing against the bleached-out reds of brick facades and the sober tans and grays of sidewalks and streets. Crite used these conventional pictorial devices to give his imagery the appearance of visual truth that satisfied his desire to make his paintings reflect his allegiance to a Boston standard of painting

In support of his social aims for his art, Crite's realist approach aided his commitment to have his imagery faithfully represent the people of his community, whom he saw as both the subject and patron of his art. Crite's desire to present uplifting images of modern black urbanites had conceptual ties with the goals of New Negro Renaissance artists and intellectuals to convey the

¹¹ My analysis of Crite's artistic style in *Parade on Hammond Street* is based upon the findings in a 1998 X-ray study and conservation of the painting by The Phillips Collection, which owns the work. In addition to confirming that Crite planned out many details of his composition, the X-ray analysis suggests that in some areas, Crite scumbled a thin layer of opaque oil over another area of oil without completely obscuring the underpainting and that Crite painted some of the figures directly onto the surface of the canvas *alla prima*. The conservation report by Elizabeth Steele is summarized in the endnotes of the catalogue entry for *Parade on Hammond Street* in Passantino and Scott, *The Eye of Duncan Phillips*, 784. In March of 2001, I met with the assistant conservator at the Phillips Collection and examined *Parade* alongside the X-ray photographs and the conservation report. In addition, my first-hand study of a number of contemporaneous neighborhood paintings confirms that Crite routinely used this painting process throughout his early career.

humanity of black people to white America as a means of improving race relations.¹² Reflecting on this aim, Crite stated that “artists are observers of what they see, but sometimes artists can bring about a change in what they see, for . . . they can help others to see and thus act as a catalyst for change.”¹³

The appearance of reality in the neighborhood paintings notwithstanding, Crite’s depiction of the people and the setting in *Parade on Hammond Street* conforms to the black middle class ideal of maintaining decorous appearance and behavior in public.¹⁴ As described in the Introduction, sociologists explained this black middle class attitude as the value of the “front” and the practice of the “genteel performance.” As in all of the neighborhood paintings, *Parade on Hammond Street* depicts a community event that enables the subjects to display their “front” as black middle class people for each other and for the implied white viewer. As we will see, the middle class performances in this painting

¹² The degree to which Crite’s painting successfully communicated these ideals is supported by the work’s provenance. First shown at Boston’s Grace Horne Gallery, which represented Crite at the time, *Parade on Hammond Street* was lent to Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery in New York for her historic exhibition, “American Negro Art,” which opened late in 1941. It was from this exhibition that the Washington, D.C. collector Duncan Phillips selected Crite’s painting for his growing collection of contemporary American painting. A letter from Phillips to Halpert dated February 23, 1942 describes the sale of *Parade* along with several other important works of African American art, including half of the forty panels of Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series* (1941). Allan Rohan Crite curatorial file, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. Also, see Passantino and Scott, eds., *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: A Collection in the Making*, 496.

¹³ Allan Rohan Crite quoted in Edmund B. Gaither, “Allan Rohan Crite: An American Original” in Julie Levin Caro, et. al, *Allan Rohan Crite Artist Reporter of the African American Community* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press and the Frye Art Museum, 2001), 17.

¹⁴ Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 519 and Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 182-209.

fulfill the ideals of racial uplift on several levels. Crite's imagery demonstrates black respectability to whites in order to argue for the potential of the race for full citizenship rights and at the same time models proper behavior for lower class blacks as a means of inspiring them to improve themselves and in turn help elevate the race.

Crite's decision to make the subject of *Parade on Hammond Street* a public performance by a black fraternal organization is a significant aspect of his painting's enactment of black middle class identity. Belonging to a black fraternal organization or social club, like membership in the right church, helped constitute middle class status in the black community. The Elks, one of several national white fraternities that had local African American chapters in Boston and other black communities in the urban north, reached their peak of popularity and prestige in the 1920s.¹⁵ Like other fraternal orders, the Elks served as a mutual aid society providing life insurance for its members, but their more important role was in establishing and maintaining members' middle class identity by promoting sociability and carrying out charitable activities among the poorer classes. In general, African American chapters of the Elks, and other national fraternal orders, such as the Masons, drew their identity as a social and civic organization from a white middle class ideal. This was particularly true for black Bostonians, as Adelaide Cromwell notes in her study of Boston society, "Clubs were part of the whites' established pattern and, as usual, were adopted

¹⁵ Derek Maus, "Social and Fraternal Organizations," in Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkleman, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Routledge Library Reference, 2004), 1133-34.

by Negroes.”¹⁶ As exclusive clubs, black fraternities conferred a degree of status to their members as well as sense of belonging within the local and national community. *Parade on Hammond Street* demonstrates these aspects of a black middle class Bostonian sensibility by drawing parallels between the parade participants’ sense of belonging to their middle class social club and the community’s sense of belonging to the middle class, as well as to American society.

The subject of an Elks parade also facilitates Crite’s goal to have his street scenes represent African American assimilation, for this image resonates with viewers then and now as a familiar American public activity undertaken for both leisure and civic pride. Dating back to the beginning of the country’s history as an independent republic, parades were part of a distinctive brand of American democracy. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his two-volume study *Democracy in America* (1835), a defining feature of American social and political life was the inclination of the ordinary American to express his individual and communal identity by organizing into civic groups and through public practice of parading.¹⁷

¹⁶ Adelaide Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston’s Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 75.

¹⁷ De Tocqueville completed his study after a nine-month tour of the new nation in 1831-1832, during which he observed aspects of American culture, society, and politics that distinguished it from Europe. In particular he noted the practice of parading as an aspect of “the general equal condition among the people,” while also acknowledging the reality of class and racial inequality in the country. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vols. 1 and 2 (1835, repr., Henry Reeve Translation, Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863), 277.

The theme of a parade is also significant because of the long and important history that parades and marches have had within the African American community.¹⁸ In representing a parade of African American members of the Elks, however, Crite reverses the traditional purpose of the black march or parade as either a protest statement for equal rights or a public expression of racial pride, such as the late nineteenth century parades celebrating emancipation and the early twentieth century parades of uniformed members of Marcus Garvey's separatist organization, the United Negro Improvement Association, held in many black urban communities, including Boston.¹⁹ These organized and public presentations of African Americans asserting their civic rights and racial independence differ from Crite's image of a celebratory parade of black Bostonians displaying their achievement of middle class status through their association with a white middle class institution. The Elks parade also demonstrates the community's involvement in the pursuit of leisure, a hallmark of upper class status and, in the 1930s especially, with Americaness.²⁰ At the

¹⁸ For example, the celebration of Juneteenth, although begun in Texas, quickly spread across the country. As Edythe Quinn describes in her history of the Hills, an African American community founded in the early eighteenth century in Westchester County, New York, local accounts of Juneteenth celebrations demonstrated that society's middle class values for writers emphasized the need for participants to parade responsibly and respectfully. Edythe A. Quinn, "The Hills in the Mid- Nineteenth Century: The History of a Rural African-American Community in Westchester County, NY" (Master's Thesis, Lehman College, City University of New York, 1988).

¹⁹ Community histories and oral interviews of black Bostonians describe the regular occurrence in Roxbury of black marches for equal rights as well as UNIA parades. Lance Carden, *Witness: An Oral History of Black Politics in Boston, 1920-1960* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 1989).

²⁰ As Stephen L. Recken points out, in addition to finding happiness through a sense of belonging, mass media images and popular psychology advice columns and books of the 1930s encouraged

same time, Crite's representation of an Elks parade is intrinsic to Boston's African American community: the black parade participants and onlookers perform for themselves without the need for whites to sanction their activity. Through the act of painting this scene and presenting it in public exhibitions in Boston and New York, Crite allowed a broad audience of white and black viewers to witness the middle class performances within his community.

Fashion has always been an important signifier of class status in the black community, and in *Parade on Hammond Street* Crite identifies the figures as black middle class Bostonians with the use of various types of clothing. The matching blue and white and grey and white uniforms worn by the Elks marching band aid their performance of their middle class identity. Their uniforms identify them as members of an exclusive club whose values of civic duty and the pursuit of leisure are drawn from middle class white society in Boston and elsewhere. The sense of belonging and pride the Elks must have felt while wearing their club uniforms on a Sunday afternoon may have counteracted the lack of social status they may have endured when wearing their weekday work uniforms as Pullman porters, waiters, factory workers or maintenance men.

In contrast to the uniformity of the band's outfits, the members of the crowd in *Parade on Hammond Street* appear as individuals because each wears a unique ensemble that also performs a black middle class Bostonian identity. Significantly, none of the crowd members wear their work uniforms, rather each

Americans to relax and enjoy life and engage in leisure pursuits. Stephen L. Recken, "Fitting-In: The Redefinition of Success in the 1930s," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 205-222.

person is dressed for a leisure activity and, as Crite explained, “in their Sunday best of attire” to attend the church service that traditionally followed an Elks parade. Crite represents these figures as they see themselves rather than as how they may have been seen by the white world during the workweek. The men are conservatively dressed in dark jackets and ties with white shirts and light-colored pants. The children are also attired smartly with the girls appearing in sailor dresses with white bobby socks and the boys in jackets, ties and knickers. The women, on the other hand, depart from the Yankee or Boston Brahmin “front” of wearing sensible dresses with subdued colors and simple styling.²¹ While some of the women’s solid or pinstripe dresses with high or lace collars exemplify this standard, many of the dresses pictured are long, sleeveless and tightly-fitted gowns in white or bright colors. Some of the women wear wide brimmed hats pushed down at an angle covering part of their faces. Although all of the women in the scene behave with a degree of decorum and refinement, the women wearing the gowns seem alluring, even sexy, and their appearance contradicts the notion of middle class respectability that forms the ideological basis of Crite’s neighborhood paintings.

Given the artist’s own middle class and Bostonian sensibilities, and his strong desire to identify his community with these values, it is curious that he would include these portrayals of female sexuality in *Parade on Hammond Street* as well as many other his neighborhood paintings, such as *School’s Out* of 1936 (fig. 17) and *Tyre Jumping on My Street* from the same year (fig. 18). In these

²¹ Cromwell, *The Other Bostonians*, 167-68.

representations, Crite expresses his own subjectivity as a young single male, who clearly appreciates the women of his neighborhood and regards their youth and beauty as an important aspect of his community's vibrancy. The sensual women who appear throughout Crite's street scenes also may represent the artist's sublimated desires to be romantically attached and to achieve the middle class norm of being a husband and father. By the middle 1930s, when this painting was completed, Crite's family had already fallen on hard times, and the artist had abandoned his long-standing desire to marry his childhood sweetheart, Lois Porter Clue. Crite knew that he could not provide Lois with the kind of middle class lifestyle to which she had been accustomed as a member of leading black family in Roxbury.²² Deciding instead to devote himself to caring for his parents and pursuing his art, Crite's neighborhood paintings, with their disproportionate number of images of women and children, enact his desire to have a family of his own.²³

²² Crite's diaries go into great detail about his conflicted feelings for Lois, and in his autobiography he described that Lois eventually married someone else, moved away and died young in the late 1940s. Crite's diaries also include pencil and wash drawings that depict the artist embracing and dancing with a young African American woman who resembles Lois. In 1933, Crite painted the oil, *Portrait of Lois Porter Clue* that, like *Portrait of My Mother*, was displayed prominently in the living room/gallery of the Crite House Museum.

²³ Some other examples of neighborhood paintings that depict mothers and children are the watercolor, *A Maternity Club* (1940; Boston Athenaeum), the oil, *Street Scene* (1934; Boston Athenaeum), and the oil, *Sunlight and Shadow* (1941; Smithsonian American Art Museum). In addition, *Busy Street*, a pencil drawing from 1933 that is a combination of a self-portrait and neighborhood street scene filled with couples and families, depicts the artist walking down the center of a crowded thoroughfare on the arm of a beautiful young woman. Describing this image the artist stated, "there was always a pretty girl on the block and she always seemed to get away, that's the story of my life." Christopher Queen, "Allan Crite at Home: A Tour of his House Museum in Boston's South End." *Harvard University Alumni Bulletin* 32, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 12.

In *Parade on Hammond Street* and other neighborhood paintings, Crite's representation of the black middle class identity of his community is achieved as much by what he represents in the scene as by what he omits from it. Despite the fact that the South End and Roxbury consisted of people from a diverse range of ethnic and class backgrounds, Crite depicts these neighborhoods as an insular world of black middle class people.²⁴ Likewise, Crite's characterization of the pristine character of the neighborhood streets and buildings conflicts with the presence of soot-covered buildings, garbage on streets and sidewalks, and buildings in disrepair common to American cityscapes then and now.²⁵ The imagery in *Parade* also belies the social and economic hardships faced by African Americans in Boston and elsewhere during the Depression era by emphasizing a middle class existence that is harmonious, stable, and peaceful.²⁶ One other important omission from Crite's image of the parade is the sound emanating from the marching band and the crowd. Although we cannot hear the music, we

²⁴ Roland Bailey, Diane Turner and Robert Hayden, *Lower Roxbury: A Community of Treasures in the City of Boston*. Boston, MA: The Lower Roxbury Community Corporation and the Department of African American Studies, Northeastern University, 1993.

²⁵ A collection of historical photographs of Boston published in Luix Overbea, *Black Bostonia: Boston 200 Neighborhood Series* (Boston, MA: The Boston 200 Corporation, 1976) confirm this observation.

²⁶ In his diary entries from the 1930s and his autobiographical writings of the 1970s compiled in *An Autobiographical Sketch* (1977) and *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers (1930-1979)*, the artist described the Depression era as an extremely difficult period, especially for African Americans. In particular, Crite describes the impact of the two World Wars and the Depression on his childhood and early adult years, his growing awareness of the intensity of segregation and racial violence in the South. Although Crite never depicts images of unemployment or poverty in the Neighborhood Paintings, he did explore these subjects in a handful of drawings and watercolors, some of which he used to illustrate his autobiography. Crite, "1930-39" and "1940-49," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

assume by the appearance of the orderly procession and the reserved audience that the musicians play a respectable American composition, such as a march by John Phillip Sousa, and not a jazz composition by W.C. Handy. Likewise, Crite's image encourages us to imagine that the crowd's verbal response to the performance is also decorous.

Crite's manner of representing black middle class Bostonian street life contrasts with the approach of many of his African American artist contemporaries who created images that celebrated the urban folk masses and their participation in the culture of jazz. Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s *Saturday Night Street Scene* of 1936 (fig. 19), a work from his Bronzeville Series of paintings depicting black life in Chicago, is characteristic of the type of jazz imagery Crite sought to refute with his black middle class performance paintings.²⁷ In contrast to Crite's preference for creating daytime scenes illuminated with natural light and color, the majority of Motley's Bronzeville paintings take place after dark allowing him to explore the formal qualities of the artificial lighting of street lamps and neon signs and, more importantly, to highlight some of the gritty aspects of black urban life. Much of the imagery in *Saturday Night Street Scene* depicts the exoticizing stereotypes of African Americans that Crite's paintings of "ordinary human beings" consciously avoided. Motley's image portrays people performing, listening, and dancing to jazz music, expressing exuberant religious

²⁷ Bronzeville, also known as the Black Belt, was a colloquial name for Chicago's African American neighborhood. Motley's Bronzeville series of approximately twenty paintings created between 1929 and 1943 are an interesting parallel to Crite's neighborhood paintings. For more on this body of work, see Amy Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, vol. 4 of *The David C. Driskell Series in African American Art* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate, 2004), 60-108.

feelings, and engaging in improper or illicit activities, such as smoking and prostitution. In contrast, *Parade on Hammond Street* expresses Crite's Bostonian perspective that rejects these negative social behaviors and instead emphasizes the pursuit of leisure that conforms to a middle class and Yankee standard of wholesome fun and respectability.²⁸

The differences between Crite's performative approach to representing black urban identity and Motley's depiction of black figures who appear to perform for the viewer reflects each artists' differing relationship to the black communities they made the subject of their art. Unlike Crite, Motley did not live in the neighborhood he portrayed, and his Chicago scenes reveal his disconnection from the people and activities he represented.²⁹ The majority of Motley's compositions appear as if they were painted at some physical distance from the action, enhancing the feeling that figures depicted are on display as exotics. By contrast, Crite's use of naturalistic color, modeled figures and perspective allows viewers to identify the figures as real people and to easily imagine safely entering the space. Further, the vantage point the artist establishes for himself and the viewer is that of a witness but also a participant

²⁸ In addition to using the narrative of leisure to show how African Americans fit into American society, Crite's preference for the theme in many of his neighborhood oils may also have served his goal to refute the negative visual stereotype of African Americans as lazy and shiftless.

²⁹ As Amy Mooney explains: "As a mixed race individual, who lived in a predominately white Chicago neighborhood and was married to a white woman, Motley did not participate frequently in the black life he depicted. . . . In his paintings, the artist extended his own status as outsider with insider privileges to his prospective audience; . . . He permitted his viewers to look into the streets of Bronzeville, . . . [without having] to risk actual engagement with the crowds." Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, 86.

observer in the daily life of a community. The resulting intimacy and directness of Crite's representations remain unique among the work of his fellow artists and reflect his desire to visualize his black middle class rootedness.

*A Sociological Approach:
Serial Imagery in the Neighborhood Paintings and the Negro Problem Debate*

In the neighborhood paintings Crite fulfills W.E.B. Du Bois's claim that African American art must be used as propaganda to combat prejudice within mainstream American culture.³⁰ Crite's social aims for his portraits of Boston's black middle class community not only reflect his wish to refute popular stereotypes associated with Harlem and the culture of jazz music, but also his interest in contributing new visual evidence to the period debate over African American urban social progress known as the "Negro Question" or the "Negro Problem." Referring to his neighborhood paintings Crite explained:

Back in the 1920s and 1930s there was a lot of talk about the "Negro Question." There were so many sociological studies about the Negro's place in American society. People were so enamored with the subject and so interested in statistics that they forgot they were taking about people. . . My purpose was to establish a record, just to show the life of black people in an ordinary setting--to show them 'just as people' and not as a social problem."³¹

³⁰ As Du Bois wrote in 1926: "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has always been used for propaganda, for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda." W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," (1926; repr. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, 259.

³¹ Allan Rohan Crite, interview by author, July 25, 1998, Boston, MA.

The debate over the “Negro Question” arose in the post-Emancipation period of the late nineteenth century in an atmosphere of extreme racism in both popular and scholarly thought.³² By the early twentieth century, in the wake of the Great Migration, in which tens of thousands of African Americans left the rural south for the urban north in search of greater economic opportunity and social freedoms, the writings on the “Negro Question” considered whether African Americans could successfully assimilate into American society and culture.³³ White writers often cited the many social and economic hardships urban African Americans faced, including poverty, crime, and unemployment, as major obstacles towards race progress and to the realization of an integrated American society.

Black intellectuals responded to this complex set of issues by means of in-depth sociological studies or urban ethnographies. From Du Bois's pioneering study, *The Philadelphia Negro* of 1899, to Sinclair Drake's and Horace Cayton's, *Black Metropolis* of 1945, urban ethnographies attempted to account for the

³² W.E.B. Du Bois, et. al., *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-Day* (1903; repr., Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, Inc., 1969) and Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

³³ Underlying this question was the more fundamental inquiry of whether African Americans possessed a culture at all, according to the accepted norms of western European society. In general, sociological theory before World War I maintained that people of African descent were inherently inferior to whites, both biologically and culturally. Cultural theory of the period held that Anglo or European culture was the dominant culture, while all others were considered sub-cultures. Anthropologists maintained that black Americans had been stripped of their culture during the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World and after during slavery. When sociologists investigated African American life or culture, they measured it against some standard of white society, such as the middle class nuclear family.

progress that African Americans were making towards assimilation and argued that the source of the economic and social problems among poor and working class African Americans was the lack of adequate education and employment opportunities, due to white racism.³⁴ In addition, by describing the existence of an upper class of wealthy and well-educated black elites as well as stable black middle and working class communities, these studies also provided convincing evidence that a good number of African Americans had already assimilated into American society.³⁵

In images like *Parade on Hammond Street*, Crite took a similar sociological approach by representing his black middle class Bostonian community as a representative example of African American assimilation and citizenship. Unlike much of the documentary photography of the era that depicted black urbanites as victims of poverty and unemployment, Crite portrays a community of middle class people whose achievement of a level of success is indicated by their neat appearance, decorous behavior, and ability to engage in the same leisure activities enjoyed by middle class whites. In addition, *Parade on Hammond Street* includes a number of visual metaphors that challenged the common perceptions

³⁴ Examples of urban ethnographies by African American sociologists include W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1903; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) and Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945). In addition, John Daniels, a white sociologist took a similar approach and drew some of the same conclusions as Du Bois, Drake and Cayton in his study of black urban life in Boston, *In Freedom's Birthplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914).

³⁵ Drake and Cayton also described the lower class society in Black Chicago as a colorful and dangerous world of the uneducated, unemployed, oversexed, and superstitiously religious "shadies." Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 564-599.

of black urban neighborhoods as stark, dirty, and overcrowded places. The composition is open and light filled with a large foreground space framed by well-manicured apartment buildings. Crite's images of the cloudless sky, clean sidewalks and streets, as well as the polished appearance of the parade participants and audience, are visual indicators of the successful character of the neighborhood and its inhabitants.³⁶

A correlative to Crite's pictorial performances of a black middle class Bostonian identity in *Parade on Hammond Street* and other neighborhood paintings is Dorothy West's novel *The Living is Easy* (1945).³⁷ Like Crite's neighborhood paintings, West's fictionalized account of the social scenarios and opinions of black middle and upper class Bostonians was rooted in her own experiences and identification with this regional and class outlook. As her title suggests, African American Bostonians believed their quality of life stood apart from both popular and scholarly accounts that defined black urban existence in terms of various social problems, including unemployment, crime, and poor housing conditions.³⁸

In addition to generating positive opinions about black urban life with individual images like *Parade on Hammond Street*, Crite must have recognized the

³⁶ In her Master's thesis on Crite's neighborhood paintings, Emile Boone explores Crite's depiction of crowds and the specificity with which the artist rendered the architecture as visual indicators of the health and status of the community. Emilie Boone, "Envisioning the Crowd: The 1930s Neighborhood Series of Allan Rohan Crite" (Master's Thesis, Washington University in St Louis, 2008).

³⁷ Dorothy West, *The Living is Easy* (1948; repr., New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

³⁸ Adelaide Cromwell, "Afterword" in West, *The Living Is Easy*, 357.

cumulative effect that the neighborhood paintings had as serial imagery.³⁹ In the neighborhood paintings, Crite repeats the narrative of black middle class Bostonians engaging in typical American activities to constitute and maintain his community's black middle class status. Unlike the depersonalized statistics, graphs and pie charts of contemporary urban ethnographies, Crite's performative approach in the neighborhood paintings represents the people he knew in his own community and emphasizes their experiences as real. In the mid-1930s, Crite fully realized his goal to advertise a black middle class Bostonian way of life for his own community and for a broad audience of whites and non-Bostonians when he created a series of neighborhood paintings under the patronage of the federal government.

Reaching a National Audience: Crite's Federal Art Project Neighborhood Paintings and the Performance of American Cultural Nationalism

In the mid-1930s, Crite produced a number of neighborhood paintings under the patronage of the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP) and the Federal Art Project (FAP), two government-funded programs in support of the visual arts that were part of President Roosevelt's New Deal Policy.⁴⁰ Although

³⁹ During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of American artists produced serial imagery focused on black urban life. For example, "Harlem Document" (1937-1940), a photo-essay by Aaron Siskind and other members of the New York Photo League and Jacob Lawrence's "Harlem Paintings" (1942-43).

⁴⁰ Crite was one of a small group of black artists included on the roster of 3500 artists of Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). An experimental art program, the PWAP was short lived and ended in December of 1934 due to limited funding. In 1935, the government established the Federal Art Project (FAP), a larger program that operated in all of the states and supported artists until 1943. For more on the federally funded art programs, see Marlene Park and Gerald E.

he participated in the FAP for a little less than a year, between February and December of 1936, Crite used this opportunity along with his brief tenure on the PWAP, from February to May of 1934, to create ten oil paintings, two watercolors, four drawings, and one linocut print, a substantial portion of his total output of neighborhood street scenes. Crite exemplified the type of artist that FAP director, Holgar Cahill, wished to support. Formally trained at one of the country's leading art schools, Crite already had exhibited his work professionally with the Boston Society of Independent Artists and the Harmon Foundation's traveling exhibitions of African American art.⁴¹ Crite's experience on the Projects provided the artist with his first national art exposure when he exhibited neighborhood paintings in showings of PWAP and FAP art at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the Museum of Modern Art in New

Markowitz, *The New Deal for Art* (New York: The Gallery Association of New York State, 1977), Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphics Society, 1973), and Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). For more on black participation in the government supported art programs of the 1930s see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists, From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993) and Rena, Fraden, "Feels Good, Can't Hurt: Black Representation on the FAP," *Journal of American Culture* 10 (Winter 1987): 21-29.

⁴¹ Crite had joined the Boston Society of Independent Artists in 1929, and he exhibited neighborhood oil paintings in nearly every annual exhibition between 1934 and 1948. He also showed watercolors and pencil drawings in the Harmon Foundation's annual exhibitions in 1930, 1931 and 1933. For more on Crite's involvement with these two organizations see, Theresa Dickason Cederholm, *The Battle to Bring Modernism to Boston: The History and Exhibition Record of the Boston Society of Independent Artists, 1927-1961* (Boston: Falk Art Reference in association with the Boston Public Library, 2005), 22; 69; 77; 150 and Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum, 1989), 166-171; 284. Crite's artist file in the Harmon Foundation Papers in the Library Of Congress, Washington, D.C. is another valuable resource.

York.⁴² By the time Crite began his tenure with the FAP, he had already established the essential content and style of the neighborhood paintings.⁴³ Crite's approach to depicting black urban life in his street scenes reflected many of the democratic ideals that Cahill wanted Project artists to promote to the American public.⁴⁴ In particular, Crite's FAP neighborhood paintings emphasize the theme of African American assimilation by including scenes of black and white Bostonians interacting equally within the public spaces both in and out of the African American neighborhoods in Roxbury and the South End.

Crite's FAP painting, *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets* (1936) (fig. 20) illustrates the way in which his street scenes enact a Bostonian version of a black middle class outlook through his depiction of black Bostonians enjoying the full rights and privileges of American citizenship. Unlike *Parade on Hammond Street*, which depicts an insular black middle class world, in *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets*, Crite includes a mix of black and white

⁴² While on the PWAP, Crite participated in exhibitions of government-supported art at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston and at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and one of Crite's FAP work was selected for the exhibition *New Horizons in American Art*, held in 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

⁴³ Interestingly, although Crite was producing neighborhood paintings with religious themes and liturgical works of art while employed by FAP, he focused his FAP production on the secular theme of the neighborhood. According to the notes in Crite's diary, he did submit one religious themed work in October of 1936; a brush and ink drawing entitled *The Mass*. This was the only work that local FAP administrators returned to the artist, and the drawing is still in his possession. The rejection of *The Mass* seems to be in keeping with local and national preferences as there are very few religious images depicted in surveys of FAP art. Likewise, a collection of several hundred photographs of works of art produced on the Massachusetts division of the FAP includes only a handful of overtly religious images. "Final Report of the Massachusetts Division of the Federal Art Project," Print Department, Boston Public Library

⁴⁴ See Holgar Cahill, "Introduction," *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

Bostonians. In this scene, people enter and exit a streetcar at a busy intersection where the elevated Orange Line crossed with the Green Line and marked the boundary between the multi-ethnic residential neighborhood of the South End and the business district of downtown Boston. The carefully composed scene with its group of figures set against a detailed architectural background, in which Crite includes representations of identifiable shops, restaurants, and even a clock showing the time as twenty past noon, is typical of Crite's documentary approach in neighborhood paintings.

As in other neighborhood paintings, Crite defines the middle class status of the figures in *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets* through their clothing, accoutrements, and demeanor. What is new here is that by introducing middle class whites into the scene, Crite demonstrates his black middle class Bostonian perception of the similarity of these two social groups. Crite portrays all of the figures in the similar middle class attire of fur-trimmed coats, suits, and hats, and he emphasizes their middle class roles as workers and consumers by showing them carrying groceries, newspapers, purses, and briefcases. Despite the fact that this is the lunch rush hour, both black and white Bostonians in the crowd proceed with a sense of calm and orderliness understood commonly as appropriate Yankee public behavior.

As representations of Boston's black middle class, Crite's FAP paintings *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets* and *School's Out* (see fig. 17) fulfilled the goals of the government sponsored art projects to encourage cultural nationalism through the visual arts. As Jonathan Harris has argued, a large

number of New Deal artworks envisioned a pluralist American society in which racial and ethnic participation was the shared goal.⁴⁵ The pursuit of cultural nationalism in the visual arts of the United States during the 1930s was directly connected to the American Scene and Regionalism, the dominant American artistic movements of the period.⁴⁶ As defined by art historian Matthew Baigell, the American Scene was “a democratic art easily accessible to the ordinary person, capable of moving him along nostalgically, politically, and aesthetically, by means of commonly recognizable images presented in easily understood styles.”⁴⁷ Likewise, as art historian Donna Cassidy explained, Regionalist artists shared the goals of the American Scene while creating images of distinctive areas of the United States to fulfill a communal need for “a sense of place.”⁴⁸ Although often linked solely with artists of the Midwest region, such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, recent studies have argued for understanding Regionalism as a larger cultural phenomenon and have argued for its existence

⁴⁵ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 49-53.

⁴⁶ Crite’s neighborhood paintings also have affinities with the contemporary American art movement of social realism. See Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University Art Center, 1983) and Stacey Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 18.

⁴⁸ Donna M. Cassidy, “On the Subject of Nativeness:” Marsden Hartley and New England Regionalism,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 227-228.

in many areas of the country, including New England.⁴⁹ As depictions of specific Boston locales that also portrayed widely shared American experiences, Crite's neighborhood paintings expressed cultural nationalism by emphasizing his "rootedness" in his black middle class community and his "sense of place" in his New England city and region.

Central to the success of both American Scene and Regionalist imagery was the collective experience of the Depression.⁵⁰ During the 1930s, many artists and writers often turned to accounts of everyday life to demonstrate the capacity of ordinary Americans to persevere through difficult times. In his FAP works, such as *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets* and *School's Out*, Crite focused on the ritual aspects of daily life that seemed to transcend the social and economic uncertainties of the period. Crite's neighborhood paintings reassured viewers that despite the economic and social hardships of the Depression, the fabric of community life and its American values of education, hard work and leisure remained in tact.

In addition to fulfilling the Project's aim to promote the achievement of a unified American culture, neighborhood paintings such as *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets* satisfied Crite's personal goal to highlight aspects of black middle class urban life particular to Boston. Many African American northerners, especially Black Bostonians, were proud of the fact that their cities

⁴⁹ Ibid. and Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism from Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁵⁰ Michael C. Steiner, "Regionalism in the Great Depression," *Geographical Review* 73 (October 1983): 443-446.

and towns were not segregated. In *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets*, notice in the line of people exiting the streetcar, that African Americans emerge ahead of whites, suggesting that black Bostonians were not required to sit in the rear. Crite's images of black Bostonians going about their daily routine alongside white Bostonians within the shared public spaces of streets, sidewalks, and streetcars were visual analogues for much of the period's race rhetoric demanding equal employment and housing rights.⁵¹

This feeling of entitlement was solidified for Crite when he experienced Jim Crow segregation first hand on a trip to Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1929. According to the artist:

[U]p here in Boston, I'd been used to working with people, with white people, and from my point of view, all I saw was just a person who happened to be white, or happened to be Black; and that was about it. I didn't have -- I still don't have -- the sense of race consciousness per se. . . . I always lived in what you'd call an integrated neighborhood, for the most part. So that was my early impression. The only time I became racially conscious was when I . . . was hit with official segregation. That made me racially conscious in the negative sense. That was a traumatic experience, and a poisonous one. So, it took me . . . a long time to get over that.⁵²

The experience of not being seen as a middle class person and not having access to all public places may have prompted Crite to have his Boston street scenes highlight the ordinary daily life experiences of a black urban community in New England that he now understood as exceptional. Crite highlights this fact for a national audience by having many of his FAP neighborhood paintings advertise

⁵¹ In his autobiography, Crite wrote that in the 1930s along with his community's preoccupation with social status, there was a strong interest in community activism. Crite, "1930-1939," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

⁵² Crite quoted in Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," *Archives of American Art*, 111.

black Bostonian's shared access to public places, such as streetcars, schools, shops and restaurants.

Some of Crite's FAP paintings seem to address directly the contrast between black society and culture in New England and the south. Crite represents a Boston version of the popular southern stereotype of an African American social gathering in his aptly titled work *Slade's Barbecue* (fig. 21). In a rare instance when a neighborhood painting represents an interior scene, *Slade's Barbecue* depicts an integrated lunch counter, in which a range of African American figures, from the elegantly dressed female clientele to the tuxedoed waiter, enact their black middle class Bostonian identities as people with a refined and reserved manner.

In addition to satisfying his goals to reach a national audience with his neighborhood paintings, Crite's employment on the Project was an important form of patronage that gave him a degree of prestige and confidence similar to his affiliation with the Museum School, and it also enabled him to maintain his middle class status as an artist.⁵³ Ironically, it was Crite's black middle class Bostonian sensibility that brought an early end to the significant source of financial and professional support that the federal government provided for his

⁵³ According to Crite, his involvement on the Projects, along with his affiliation with the Boston Society of Independent Artists, brought him to the attention of a local art gallery run by Grace Horne and later Margaret Brown. As the artist explained to Robert Brown, "As a matter of fact, [the Grace Horne Gallery] became my semi-patrons Back in those days, for an artist to be on Newbury Street, where the Grace Horn [sic] Galleries [sic] was, was unusual, and I think I was probably the only black artist who had any gallery working for him at that time They gave me several one-man shows. These are the neighborhood paintings. One of them was sold. I didn't sell very many things." Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 12-13.

art. Despite the importance that his ninety-four dollars a month salary must have had for his family's strained financial circumstances in the mid-1930s, Crite voluntarily chose to leave the FAP after only eleven months when cutbacks in the non-relief worker category funding would have required that he register for relief assistance in order to continue his participation. According to the artist, the designation "relief worker" was synonymous with "being on the dole" and he explained, "My mother and I, we didn't quite like that connotation. So we took [sic] the painful decision to not continue."⁵⁴ Crite's refusal to be labeled as needing assistance in the public record reflects the middle class attitudes his subjects display in the neighborhood paintings. Thus, unlike many artists who worked for the FAP for its duration from 1935 to 1943, Crite forfeited an opportunity to further his career through this type of institutional support.⁵⁵ However, Crite continued to produce neighborhood paintings independently until the mid-1940s even as changes to his middle class community and the art world of Boston challenged his original stylistic and narrative intentions.

⁵⁴ Allan Rohan Crite, interview with the author, October 16, 2001, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁵⁵ One exception was a painting technique class Crite says he joined after he voluntarily left the WPA/FAP in December 1936. Held at a government-sponsored artist workshop located at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Crite studied fresco, wax painting, and mosaic and mixed media techniques, all of which he would later put to use when he worked on large-scale liturgical art works for the Rambush Decorating Company in the late 1940s. See Brown, "Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," *Archives of American Art*, 18-22; 61-62. An important source of patronage for Crite's neighborhood paintings in the 1940s was the Annual Exhibitions of African American Art sponsored by Atlanta University and organized by Hale Woodruff.

*Preserving Community and Responding to Change:
New Formal Approaches in the Neighborhood Performance Paintings of 1939-1945*

Much of the recent Crite scholarship fails to acknowledge the artist's stylistic development within the more than fifty neighborhood oils and watercolors he created between 1933 and 1945. Rather, when analyzing Crite's style in the neighborhood paintings, art historians tend to refer to the realist, documentary style of works from the early to middle thirties, such as *Parade on Hammond Street*, to characterize the style of the entire body of work. However, when we compare Crite's neighborhood paintings of the mid-1930s to his compositions created between 1939 and 1945, several distinct transitions in the artist's style are evident. Many of the shifts in the artist's personal style parallel the general stylistic tendencies among FAP, American Scene and Regionalist painters of the period as well as local stylistic preferences among Boston artists. And, as we will see, Crite's later style in the neighborhood paintings was also affected by his growing realization that his community's black middle class way of life was disappearing and by his desire to fix a positive vision of his middle class community with imagery that reflected his memories rather than his day-to-day reality.

While Crite's FAP works, such as *Corner of Washington and Northampton Streets* and *School's Out*, have denser compositions, more solidly painted forms, and a greater amount of visual detail than previous neighborhood paintings, such as *Parade on Hammond Street*, all of these works have a documentary focus and a celebratory mood. A more significant shift in the artist's style is evident in his neighborhood street scenes of the late 1930s, such as *Roller Skate Derby* (1939)

(fig. 22) and *The Handy Street Bridge* (1939) (fig. 23). Both compositions reflect the period interest in the use of flattened surfaces, silhouetted forms and simplified compositions inspired by the aesthetics of American folk art, the fifteenth-century Dutch and Flemish Masters, and the fourteenth-century Italian Primitives. Beginning in the 1920s, American painters, such as Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, and Yusuo Kuniyoshi, as well as many sculptors, were drawn to the simplicity of the geometric forms and bold designs of American folk art.⁵⁶ The simplified style of the scenes of daily life by Dutch artists Pieter Brueghel the Elder and Rogier Van Der Weyden influenced Crite during this period, and both the artist and contemporary critics noted the connections.⁵⁷ The comments of Crite's artist contemporary in Boston, Yvonne Twining Humber, are instructive

⁵⁶ As a museum curator in the early 1930s, Holgar Cahill organized exhibitions that encouraged artists and audiences to rediscover and appreciate the unique culture and aesthetics of the United States, and as director of the Federal Art Project from 1935 to 1943, Cahill oversaw the Index of American Design, a program that employed artists to document thousands of folk and popular art objects created before 1890. Two important exhibitions New York's Museum of Modern Art during this period were Cahill's *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America: 1750-1900* (1932) and Sydney Janis's *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century* (1942).

⁵⁷ Crite comments on the Dutch Masters who influenced him in Brown, Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 76. Crite would have had been able to view the works of the Dutch Masters in local museums. Since the nineteenth century, there was a strong interest in collecting Dutch painting in Boston and by the 1930s, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Boston Athenaeum, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and Harvard's Fogg Art Museum all had established collections. Ronni Baer, *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Dutch Painting in Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002). In a *New York Times* article on the FAP exhibition *New Horizons in American Art*, the writer described Crite's painting *School's Out* as "[A] street scene in Boston with a crowd of colored people is done by a Negro artist in the manner of Pieter Breughel." H.I. Brock, "Under Uncle Sam: *New Horizons in American Art*: In the First Representative Round-Up of the Federal Project Our Painters Derive Fresh Inspiration From a Wide Sweep of Their Own Country," *New York Times Magazine* (September 13, 1936): 14-15, 25. In addition, James A. Porter described Crite's 1930s illustrated spirituals as akin to the "pictorial terms of the Italian Primitives." Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943), 123.

for understanding the appeal that early European art had for 1930s American artists working a style art historian Sharon Baerny Long characterizes as “hard-edged Regionalism.”⁵⁸ According to Twining Humber: “[T]he Italian primitives took me away from the influence of Impressionism . . . I wanted to consciously paint forms rather than impressions of forms so I began hardening up the lines.”⁵⁹ Twining Humber’s street scene *View of Boston (Commons)* of 1939 (fig. 24), like Crite’s *Roller Skate Derby* and *Handy Street Bridge*, displays an interest in creating a streamlined effect through the use of a simplified composition and the repetition of flattened forms, both of which emphasize the two dimensionality and decorative quality of the canvas surface.⁶⁰

In particular, the figures in Crite’s late 1930s neighborhood paintings are more simplified and animated than those of his earlier compositions because they are constructed with fewer details and with the use, in some places, of visible brushstrokes that appear to have been applied quickly. Also new in these later canvases is the addition of pronounced and elongated shadows that also draw our attention to the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane. These aspects of Crite’s stylistic development in the neighborhood paintings display his growing ability to suggest forms and figures without relying on detailed physical

⁵⁸ Sharon Long Baerny, “Yvonne Twining Humber: An Artist of the Depression Era,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1995-Winter 1996): 16-23.

⁵⁹ Yvonne Twining Humber interview by author, Seattle, WA, March 9, 2001.

⁶⁰ Baerny, “Yvonne Twining Humber,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, 18.

description and an increased confidence, which allowed him to depart from his previous pictorial formulas.⁶¹

Although both *Roller Skate Derby* and *Handy Street Bridge* are images of children at play, a major theme of the neighborhood paintings as a whole, the former work continues to preserve the artist's memory of a peaceful and carefree time in his community, while the latter bears witness to the artist's growing sense of unease about his community's future. In *Handy Street Bridge*, Crite depicts two boys pulling a makeshift cart filled with wooden boards along a street that a sign within the painting identifies as Shawmut Avenue. Unlike Crite's earlier depictions of the main thoroughfares in Boston's African American community of Lower Roxbury, this scene is not filled with people but appears empty and lonely. The dark palette and swept surfaces obscure the sense of depth, which had contributed to the inviting atmosphere of the earlier street scenes. Likewise, the elongated shadows, buildings and street lamp make the boys appear small in comparison to the background, and as a result they are overwhelmed by the neighborhood structure rather than integrated into it. The streets and sidewalks are still characteristically immaculate, but here the dark brown wooden apartment houses in the background do not seem as affluent or

⁶¹ In a review of the artist's work held at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston, local art critic Dorothy Adlow described Crite's *The Handy Street Bridge* as a breakthrough in his imagination and artistry: "[T]he painter has relaxed in his literalness, given more prominence to one detail at the expense of another, stressed major factors of design, arranged hues in harmonic tonalities. He is no longer the faithful journalistic recorder of the South End; he is an artist taking familiar material rearranging it so that it will relate with greater effectiveness his distinctive response to it. . . . The departure is a most significant one and marks a new phase of his career, which puts him into the artistic society of artists like John Sloan and George Grosz." Dorothy Adlow, "Allan Crite's Art Shown," *The Christian Science Monitor* (December 15, 1939), 18.

stable as the tall red and yellow brick apartment houses featured in works such as *Parade on Hammond Street* or *School's Out*. Also, the boys are not dressed with the same attention to the up-to-date middle class fashions as pictured in these earlier canvases. Finally, there is a sense of ambiguity in this scene that differs from the carefree mood of previous neighborhood works. Although the title refers to a wooden bridge visible in the background, it is unclear what the boys are doing. Is their activity part of their innocent childhood play or are they gathering wood for more practical purposes related to the hardships of the period?

In Crite's neighborhood painting, *The News (Death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt)* of 1945 (fig. 25), the artist continued to explore the theme of African American citizenship while adapting his style further to incorporate elements of expressionism. This work is notable because it is the last neighborhood painting the artist executed in oil, and it is the only one in the series that portrays an historical event.⁶² In this scene, Crite reflects upon a contemporary national crisis to demonstrate his community's identification with American values. Four solemn-looking men, one of whom is clearly dressed as a soldier, stand on a street corner reading newspaper reports of the sudden death of President Roosevelt. The artist's depiction of the black men joining in the country's collective sense of loss through the act of reading a newspaper was a significant statement of their Americanness and an also an indication of their

⁶² An important factor in Crite's decision to stop producing Neighborhood Paintings in 1945 was that he had less time to pursue large-scale artworks. In 1940, the artist took a full-time job as a technical illustrator for the Boston Naval Shipyard, a position he held until his retirement in 1970.

literacy. In contrast, the majority of period photographs, such as those published in *Life Magazine*, defined the African American response to the President's death as purely emotional by portraying black men and women openly weeping. In the background, Crite includes a number of documentary details that also serve an iconographic function. The wide street, which the artist identified as Columbus Avenue, is lined with the South End's characteristic brick bow-front apartment houses and a church façade. For a touch of patriotism, the artist included an American flag flying at half-mast in the middle distance.⁶³ In particular, Crite's inclusion of a church building within the neighborhood streetscape enhances the solemn mood of this scene while also fulfilling his broader goal to emphasize the moral values of his community through an overt reference to religion.⁶⁴ As in nearly a third of his neighborhood paintings, Crite's inclusion of a large, free-standing church building made of brick or stone masonry suggests that Boston's black Christian community is large, successful and, most importantly, established - - all contrasts to the characteristic storefront churches of the urban folk masses, who began to arrive in Boston in large numbers during the 1940s.⁶⁵

⁶³ Crite identified the street as Columbus Avenue and the church as A.M.E. Zion. Also notice the yellow bricks placed in two rows in the middle of the street indicating where the trolley ran. Interestingly a partial view of this area on Columbus Avenue, including the church facade is visible in the background of *Portrait of My Mother* (fig. 12).

⁶⁴ The Dutch masters Jacob van Ruisdael (ca.1628-1682) and Pieter Brueghel Pieter Brueghel (c. 1525 –1569) frequently used this iconographic conceit. As described above, the artist stated that Brueghel's works were models for his neighborhood street scenes.

⁶⁵ According to Byron Rushing erection of new church buildings in the early twentieth century by black Episcopalians was an important indication of the stability of Crite's community and the overall

Although *The News* is consistent with Crite's original goals for the neighborhood paintings, the stylized and expressionistic way in which he handles the figures and the pictorial space they inhabit may suggest the artist's response to changes in his community and country. The artist has rendered the bodies as elongated and angular and tipped up the surrounding space. As if to suggest the sense of shock caused by the President's unexpected death, the jagged angles that define the postures of the four men reverberate within the depiction of the newspapers and the orientation of the buildings. Painted nearly a decade after he left the conservative influence of the Museum School, this work may have allowed Crite to try his hand at the modernist style of figural expressionism that had gained popularity in Boston in the 1940s. As an active member of the local art scene, Crite would have been aware of the work of Boston's figural expressionists, such as Hyman Bloom, Jack Levine and Karl Zerbe, since he often exhibited with them at the Boston Society of Independent Artists' annual exhibitions and at group shows at the Institute of Contemporary Art.⁶⁶ In this final work in the series, Crite addresses the changes to his middle

wealth of black congregations in Roxbury. Byron Rushing, interview by author, August 15, 2008. For example, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church built a large brick edifice in Roxbury between 1923 and 1924 and between 1918 and 1930 the People's Baptist Church raised over \$130,000 for missionary and education programs. Robert C. Hayden, *African Americans in Boston: More than 350 Years* (Boston: Trustees of the Boston Public Library, 1991), 132.

⁶⁶ Qualities of Boston Expressionism that may have influenced Crite's stylistic shift in *The News* include the use of sober colors, a loose handling of paint, figural distortion for expressive possibilities, and an attention to relating the structure of the composition to the surface of the picture plane. For more on the expressionist movement in Boston see Institute of Contemporary Art, *Boston Expressionism: Hyman Bloom, Jack Levine and Karl Zerbe* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1979).

class community with an artistic style that openly expresses his and his community's anxieties, rather than masking it in a visual performance of documentary realism.⁶⁷

Crite's different approach to representing his black middle class identity in his later neighborhood paintings, such as *The Handy Street Bridge* and *The News*, reflects the artist's sense of loss of a communal way of life in Boston and his need to preserve his memories in his paintings. As I have explained, just as the artist's portraits reflect the anxiety he and his mother felt about their family's ability to maintain their middle class status due to Crite senior's infirmity and death, the street scenes express his concern about the future of his community's middle class character. In the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Crite's community experienced increased uncertainty caused by the Depression, the approaching world war, threats of city sponsored urban renewal projects in Roxbury, and by a sharp rise in the number of working and lower class southern migrants arriving in the city after 1940. These changes forever altered Crite's notion of his community as a small and close-knit middle class society.

Thus, another aspect of the black middle class Bostonian ideology of Crite's neighborhood genre scenes is the way they reflect the residents'

⁶⁷ Although Crite did not continue to explore the more expressionistic aspects of his painting style visible in *The News*, he did take the neighborhood theme in a new direction. Beginning in 1946, Crite introduced black biblical figures into a series of pen and ink and watercolor street scenes of Boston that he refers to as his "Madonna of the Neighborhood Series." In fact, this series, as well as his Urban Contemporary Stations of the Cross, were a continuation of the community based religious themes Crite explored in his neighborhood paintings of 1933-1945. I plan to explore these works in a later project.

understanding of the history of their community in the early twentieth century. The positive assessment of Boston's black community that informed Crite's opinion was based largely on its nineteenth century reputation.⁶⁸ Up until World War I, Boston's African American community was one of the most highly regarded in the nation, and the city was understood as a progressive center of black politics, culture, and education. However, during the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North between 1915 and 1945, black migrants avoided Boston because of its lack of industrial jobs.⁶⁹ As a result, Boston's African American population remained small during the period between the World Wars, while the black communities in cities like New York and Chicago became large and diverse centers of modern art, literature, and jazz music. Black Bostonians, on the other hand, continued to live according to the Victorian standards of the late nineteenth century.⁷⁰ After 1940, there was a

⁶⁸ Edmund Barry Gaither, "Seeing Ourselves," in *Black Boston: Documentary Photography and the African American Experience* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1994), 19-20. I am indebted to Mr. Gaither for providing me with his insights on the social and cultural dynamics of Boston's African American community and how they impacted local artists, particularly Allan Crite. In addition, Representative Byron Rushing shared his extensive knowledge of Boston's black community history with me in an interview in Boston, MA on October 25, 2001 and in a telephone conversation on August 15, 2008.

⁶⁹ In particular, the region's failing manufacturing industry and the influx of European immigrants made it increasingly difficult for African American to secure jobs and housing. An explanation of Boston's labor history and its impact on the African American community is included in Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians; Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973), 176-219.

⁷⁰ Edmund Barry Gaither, interview by author, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 16, 1998. Sociologist Adelaide Cromwell uses the term "atypical north" to distinguish certain black communities, such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New Haven, from those in other northern cities, such as Chicago and New York. According to Cromwell the characteristics of the "atypical north" include "a northern climate of opinion, a long settled Negro community, and limited

sharp rise in the city's black population due to an influx of southern migrants drawn to the city by wartime job opportunities.⁷¹ This drastic change in the size and social makeup of Boston's African American community challenged Crite's perception of his neighborhood as a monolithic society of middle class people.

The positive qualities of black middle class communal life that Crite enacts in his neighborhood paintings are drawn from his and his mother's recollections of an earlier, stable period in his community that coincided with his family's better circumstances in the period before his father's accident. Writing in his autobiography, Crite stated:

In the 1930s, there was in the Boston community of blacks, a black society, that is a group of those in the professions, educated and . . . elite. There were the coming out parties for debutantes . . . and there was an attitude towards those with no 'social standing' of a sense of difference, and the difference was real and not imagined . . . After World War number one . . . the elements of change in the black community started, namely at first a slow migration from the south. This accelerated considerably during World War number two, so that the close-knit, small black community . . . [and] the influence of a social class of an earlier period diminished and finally vanished.⁷²

As many long-standing residents, including Crite, lamented the loss of community cohesion, their sense of themselves as a small and, above all,

economic opportunity." It is in these locales, Cromwell says, that historical data exists for the long-standing existence of a black upper class. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 9.

⁷¹ Between 1940 and 1960, Boston's black population rose from 23,000 in 1940 to 63,000 in 1960, which is striking when compared to the marginal growth between 1900 and 1940 from 11,591 to 23,679. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, 179.

⁷² Crite, "1940-1949," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

respectable society only seemed to become more entrenched.⁷³ The neighborhood paintings reflect this sense of communal loss by depicting a Bostonian middle class way of being as a means of preserving it for the artist and his community.

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In the street scenes I have considered in this chapter, the artist performed the secular aspects of his community's black middle class identity, in terms of their identification with middle class American ideals of work, education, leisure and civic pride. In the next chapter, I analyze Crite's interior scenes of worship services and choir practices to consider his performance of the spiritual dimension of black middle class life in Boston. As we will see, Crite depicts the religious aspects of a black middle class Bostonian identity in terms of a black Episcopal experience.

⁷³ See Edmund Barry Gaither, "Seeing Ourselves," in *Black Boston*, 19-21 and Robert Hayden, *African Americans in Boston*, 21.

CHAPTER THREE

Congregation as Community: Enactments of Black Episcopal Identity in the Neighborhood Paintings

Belonging to a suitable church seems to be somewhat like living in a socially acceptable part of the city or belonging to a distinguished club.

David L. and Mary A. Hatch¹

The popular perception, among blacks as well as whites, was that communicants of the Episcopal Church did indeed constitute a “privileged” group.

Willard B. Gatewood²

All the nice colored families send their children to the Episcopal Church in Cambridge. You don’t have to be a shouting Baptist to be a child of God.

Cleo in Dorothy West’s *The Living is Easy*³

Although drawn from the different perspectives of sociology and literary fiction, the above quotations illuminate the religious aspect of black middle class identity by describing the role that membership in a respectable church played in establishing and maintaining class status. More than any other denomination, the Episcopal Church signified refinement, reserve and gentility, key attributes of middle class identity to black Bostonians. For members of Crite’s black middle class community, the association of the Episcopal Church with the city’s white

¹ David L. and Mary A. Hatch, “Criteria of Social Status as Derived from Marriage Announcements in the *New York Times*,” *American Sociological Review* 12 (August 1947), 398.

² Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 276.

³ Dorothy West, *The Living is Easy* (1948; repr., New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), 309.

upper class or Brahmin society, made it preferable to other Christian denominations favored by ethnic immigrant groups and working and lower class and blacks.⁴ Membership in the Episcopal Church encouraged the practice of “the genteel performance,” the assumption that proper appearance and conduct were indicative of one’s character and social status.⁵ The black middle class emphasis on maintaining respectability in all aspects of public life also included proper etiquette in church.

Crite’s neighborhood paintings of African American Episcopal worshippers and socializing are an important facet of the black middle class Bostonian identity performances depicted in his early artworks. Like his neighborhood street scenes, which perform a black middle class community identity associated with the secular values of assimilation and citizenship rights, Crite’s church interiors enact a black middle class way of life by announcing the elevated moral values and conduct possessed by black Episcopalians. The formality

⁴ Black Episcopalians in Boston were proud of their long history in the city dating back to the sixteenth century when slaves were permitted to worship in the sanctuary galleries. After the close of the Civil War until around 1910, many black Episcopalians enjoyed the freedom to worship at many of the city’s white Episcopal churches. However, as John Daniels reports, when the number of black Episcopalians increased, many white churches barred them from membership, and it was at this time that many of Boston’s black Episcopal congregations formed, including St. Bartholomew’s and St. Augustine’s and St. Martin’s. Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (1914; repr., New York: The New York Times and the Arno Press, 1969), 227-228. Boston’s West Indian immigrants, many of who were from the Anglican Church, and who possessed a memory of and desire for worshipping in independent churches also asserted their influence on the history of black Episcopalians in the city. St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church in the South End, established in 1923 was the center of the West Indian community’s religious and cultural life. Many West Indians had similar middle class aspirations and used their affiliation with the Episcopal Church to aid in their practice of the genteel performance. Violet Showers Johnson, *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁵ Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 272-299.

of the Episcopal Church, particularly its elaborate liturgical rituals, implied a desire and ability among its congregants to worship without spontaneous expressions of excessive emotion, qualities the black middle class associated with the religious practices of the folk and lower classes.

Crite's church interiors differ from the generalized community portraits of the neighborhood performance paintings discussed in the previous chapter, for his scenes of black Episcopalians not only represent a communal way of life they also have a strong autobiographical component. As the artist conveyed in his *Self Portrait* and *Portrait of My Mother*, religious identity was an integral part of his family's black middle class Bostonian identity. Nearly all of Crite's church interiors portray members of St. Bartholomew's in Cambridge and St. Augustine's and St. Martin's in Lower Roxbury, two prominent black Episcopal congregations in the Boston area with which Crite and his mother were affiliated.⁶ As we will see, Crite's church scenes rehearse the artist's own experiences within the Episcopal Church as an acolyte and liturgical artist, as well as his mother's role as a Sunday school teacher and prominent church woman.

Crite's images of the dignified and solemn members of his Episcopal congregation fulfilled his artistic goal to highlight and validate aspects of black middle class experience in Boston. Moreover, his portrayal of black Episcopalians challenged the popular image of black worshippers as members of Evangelical,

⁶ Although St. Bartholomew's in Cambridge was their parish church, both Annamae and Allan Crite worshipped frequently at St. Augustine's, which was located close to their home in Lower Roxbury.

Fundamentalist or Holiness Churches located in the rural south or urban storefront churches.⁷ Many period artworks and documentary photographs represented the physical and emotional exuberance of traditional black religious expression embodied in the gestures of hand clapping, foot stomping, genuflecting and swooning.⁸ Such effusive behavior was openly discouraged in the Episcopal Church as evidence of a lower class or folk identity. For Crite, the image of the ecstatic black worshipper was another instance of an exoticizing stereotype of black identity akin to the Harlem jazz musician or southern sharecropper that he felt disparaged the reputation of African Americans. In contrast, Crite's images of black Episcopalians engaged in formalized worship services concur with Dorothy West's assertion, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that "one did not have to be a shouting Baptist to be a child of God."⁹ In other words, one did not have to display an exuberant worship style to achieve spiritual transcendence or a sense of community. Formalism was not just a characteristic of a black middle class identity; it was also an essential quality of a

⁷ Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (1944; repr., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 1-12 and Robert L. Gambone, *Art and Popular Culture in Evangelical America, 1915-1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 102-134.

⁸ Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1991), 183; and Maren Stange, *Bronzeville, Black Chicago in Pictures, 1942-1948* (New York: New Press, 2003), 199-205.

⁹ The subject of the ecstatic black worshipper was popular among American artists and photographers, both black and white, during the interwar period and a theme around which many scholars have defined the character of American religious art of the period. See Gambone, *Art and Popular Culture in Evangelical America*, 102-109 and Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of the FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 166-168.

Bostonian Yankee identity and a characteristic expressed throughout the city's religious life. As religious historian Peter Gomes explains, "there was a high degree of formality in all of Boston's denominations, even the Baptists were formalists."¹⁰

Like his other early works, Crite's church scenes are performative because they present aspects of the artist's own class and religious identity as a black middle class Episcopal. These works are also parallels to his neighborhood performance paintings, such as *Parade on Hammond Street*, because they enact a similar social milieu in which membership in a communal organization offers, as William Muraskin explains, "an environment conducive to the creation, maintenance and protection of a self-conscious, socially cohesive black middle class community."¹¹ In his scenes of worship and religious education, Crite portrays the ways in which black churches engaged in racial uplift by instructing their parishioners in appropriate social behavior through lessons in Episcopal rituals and respectable church demeanor. His images of polished and dignified black Episcopal worshippers also demonstrated to a white audience African American assimilation into mainstream American society and religion. Further, Crite's images of black Episcopal clergy and congregants highlight the ways in

¹⁰ Peter J. Gomes, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, December 16, 2003. My conversation with Gomes, Harvard University professor of religion, minister of Harvard's Memorial Church, and a long-time Boston resident, who knew Crite and his mother provided me with many insights on the history of black Episcopalians in Boston as well as Crite's religious and social attitudes, which were extremely helpful in completing my analysis of the artist's church paintings.

¹¹ William A. Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1975), 26.

which the black church provided opportunities for its members to inhabit elevated social roles that were often unavailable to them in the larger society.

*Leadership and Membership:
Black Episcopal Identity Performance in The Rector's Greeting*

In the oil painting *The Rector's Greeting* of 1938 (fig. 26), Crite portrays the members of his parish church, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal in Cambridge.¹² Similar to his other neighborhood paintings, this church oriented genre scene documents an ordinary event in the life of his community, while emphasizing the middle class character of its members through their mode of dress, decorous public behavior, and participation in an elevated social activity. *The Rector's Greeting* captures the self-assurance of St. Bartholomew's black minister and depicts the role black church leaders played in their religious institutions to inspire members to exhibit genteel behavior. In the center of the composition the rector shakes the hand of a female parishioner who meets his steady gaze with an equal amount of poise and confidence. The two figures stand among an equally self-possessed group of black men, women, and children, some of whom regard the central pair with an attitude of respect. Like many of Crite's street scenes, *The Rector's Greeting* is replete with visual details that encourage us to read the scene as a reenactment of an actual event, in this case, an informal

¹² St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, founded in 1908 by upper middle class African Americans and West Indian immigrants, was one of the oldest black Episcopal churches in the Boston area. The history of this congregation is summarized in Robert Hayden, *Faith Culture and Leadership: The Black Church in Boston* (Boston: Institute for Boston Studies, Boston College, 1985).

moment after the Sunday service has concluded.¹³ Notice that the candles on the altar have been extinguished and that the parishioners either wear or hold their overcoats as they prepare to leave the sanctuary. The artist also indicates the time of year for sign on the far wall reads “Epiphany,” indicating the three-week period following Christmas.

The figures in this church interior conform to the artist’s notion of middle class and Yankee sensibility in their formal attire and dignified manner. In fact, the clothing worn by the congregants is even more conservative than the attire of the figures in his contemporaneous street scenes. The men all wear dark suits with ties, and the women’s dresses, although brightly colored, are styled simply. All of the women cover their hair with hats, as was the custom for church. The children’s middle class outfits include shirts and ties for the boys and dresses, white socks and black patent leather shoes for the girls. The rector’s ceremonial attire consists of a long black stole worn over his floor-length clerical robes while his black dress shoes indicate that, beneath his liturgical garb, he is also wearing proper middle class clothing. Although the scene depicts a casual moment of socializing after the formal church rituals have ended, all of the figures continue to practice the genteel performance as Episcopalians and Bostonians, for they sit or stand with a degree of refinement and decorum.

As in many of Crite’s church scenes, *The Rector’s Greeting*, includes a number of portraits. Crite describes the facial features of all of the parishioners

¹³ Crite’s *The Baptismal Font* (1940), a companion oil painting to *The Rector’s Greeting*, also depicts members from Crite’s parish church. Crite gave both paintings to St. Bartholomew’s in 1977 in memory of his mother. The works remain in the Church and are displayed just outside the entrance to the main sanctuary.

with a great amount of detail, and he has identified two of the figures represented here as portraits of contemporary members of the church: the rector is the Reverend James W. Mitchell, who led the congregation from 1930 to 1938, and the little girl holding his left hand is the Reverend's daughter Jean.¹⁴ The inclusion of his church contemporaries in the scene contributes to the painting's autobiographical content. St. Bartholomew's was Crite's and his mother's parish church, and both were active in many aspects of church life.¹⁵ As a teenager and throughout his early adult life, Crite was an acolyte, lay reader, vestryman and member of the young people's fellowship.¹⁶ Crite also spent many hours dressing the altar with his mother, who, in addition to teaching the Sunday school classes, was a member of the church's altar guild.¹⁷ Through these activities within their own church, as well as their affiliations with the local and national Episcopal diocese, Crite and his mother performed the roles of race man

¹⁴ Crite identified Reverend Mitchell and his daughter Jean Mitchell McGuire in a conversation with the author on March 10, 2001. My close inspection of this painting revealed that in some instances the artist added in the detailed facial features separately from the rendering of the figure's bodies and clothing which leads me to believe that he completed the portraits of the figures after the composition was laid out.

¹⁵ In a telephone conversation with the author on January 30, 2008, Kathleen Wolcott, St. Bartholomew's historian described the recollections of older members of St. Bartholomew's, who remembered that when Crite and his mother were active in the Church the two were inseparable and engaged themselves fully in church life.

¹⁶ In addition, as a member of St. Bartholomew's Young People's Fellowship, Crite took charge of *The Knot*, a newsletter created by the parish for members serving in the armed forces during World War Two. Crite wrote and edited many of the articles and provided the illustrations. Allan Rohan Crite, *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston, MA; copy in Boston Public Library.

¹⁷ As described in Chapter One, the Altar Guild was woman's group within the Episcopal Church that was known for its association with upper class white society.

and race woman by engaging in respectable behavior while contributing to their community.

Crite's depiction of the distinguished black Episcopal clergyman at the center of *The Rector's Greeting* mirrors his representation of the Episcopal congregation's refined behavior. Dressed in formal church robes as well as middle class attire, Reverend Mitchell conducts himself with a measure of composure and confidence. Moreover, Crite's image of St. Bartholomew's rector represents the important leadership roles black clergy members provided in their communities. As Willard Gatewood points out, black clergy members, regardless of their denominational affiliations, were often considered role models and occupied leadership positions within the larger black community. However, not all black clergy members had the same level of prestige. As he explains, "while some black clergymen were uneducated and known as 'jackleg preachers,' their ranks also included individuals, especially in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches, who were erudite theologians."¹⁸

Crite's image of Reverend Mitchell conforms to the latter description and also fulfilled his goal to distinguish black Episcopalians from the stereotype of black evangelicals as embodied in the image of the black preacher. Exemplative of this category of imagery is Charles White's *Preacher* of 1940 (fig. 27), which portrays a modestly dressed man in the midst of his sermon. White's description of the preacher with a nervous line and exaggerated and oversized hands adds to his characterization of the folk preacher's ability to move his congregation through

¹⁸ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 273.

his imposing physical presence, raw energy, and impassioned oratory skills.¹⁹ In contrast, Crite's image of the Episcopal rector, the title itself denoting the clergyman's position in a formal religious order, emphasizes his ability to connect with the sensibilities of his middle class congregation through his display of respectability.

Another portrait in *The Rector's Greeting* holds the key to the painting's narrative content, for the woman shaking hands with the rector is an image of the artist's mother, Annamae Crite. Comparing her profile in this scene (fig. 28) with her visage in Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* (fig. 13), completed the previous year, we notice several similarities in her facial features, light skin color, and hairstyle.²⁰ By making his mother a focal point of the composition, *The Rectors' Greeting* functions as a tribute to her and her role as a leader of the St. Bartholomew's Sunday school. Her presence also contributes to our understanding of the scene as a reenactment of a moment after the service when

¹⁹ For a discussion of the black preacher as a figural type in African American art, see Amy Mooney, "Illustrating the Word: Paintings by Aaron Douglas and Jacob Lawrence," in Andrea D. Barnwell, et. al., *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington, Press, 1997), 44-45; 48-49.

²⁰ Two of the artist's pencil drawings, *Let Me Think, Children* (1939; Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston) and *At a Church Fair* (1934; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) may also be tributes to the artist's mother, for his depiction of a young woman teaching a Sunday School class in the former work and the female parishioner conversing with a priest in the latter work both strongly resemble Mrs. Crite. Crite's portrait of his mother in *The Rector's Greeting* also relates his performance portraits that establish his family's association with the Episcopal Church as a marker of their class status and moral stature. Recall that in Crite's *Portrait of My Mother* of 1937 (fig. 12), the artist included several props to indicate Mrs. Crite's affiliation with the Episcopal Church: she holds the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and she wears a pin indicating her membership in a national Episcopal lay woman's organization, the Companions of the Holy Cross.

both the Sunday school and Mass were complete.²¹ Notice that the children are not standing with their parents but rather surround their teacher, Mrs. Crite, who has just brought the children upstairs from their class to greet the rector. In *The Rector's Greeting*, Crite signals his mother's elevated position within her parish by placing her at the center of the composition and congregation and by portraying the moment when the reverend singles her out to thank her for her service to the church.

In the same way that Crite portrays Reverend Mitchell as the embodiment of black leadership, his image of his mother documents how some members of black churches were able to inhabit social roles unavailable to them in the larger society. As William Muraskin points out, the black church provided "a stage for the performance of these social roles," and it also provided members with an opportunity to learn how to perform leadership roles in society.²² Crite acknowledged his mother's contribution to her church and community and the seriousness with which she understood her responsibility as an educator and role model in a memorial statement he co-authored in 1978, a year after her death:

The Museum of Fine Arts, the Lowell Institute, the Episcopal Theological School, even the United Nations were resources used by Mrs. Crite in her personal quest for knowledge and in her desire to be an excellent teacher for the Church School of St. Bartholomew's, where she was an active member. The quality and extent of her intellectual interest—and her

²¹ According to St. Bartholomew's historian, Kathleen Wolcott, the Mass service and the Sunday school have always ran concurrently. Kathleen Wolcott, interview by author, January 30, 2008.

²² Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society*, 123.

artistic interest as well--were an inspiration to all who knew her but especially to younger people.²³

By highlighting her position as a religious educator and prominent church woman rather than her secular role as a housewife who also worked as a domestic, Crite's eulogy to his mother, like his portrait of her in *The Rector's Greeting*, establishes her identity as a middle class Episcopal.

*Learning to Perform Episcopal Rituals and Practicing the Genteel Performance:
The Children's Pilgrimage*

In *The Children's Pilgrimage*, a 1936 oil painting (fig. 29), Crite portrays the ways in which black churches used religious education to instruct and mandate their members to display proper conduct both in and outside of church. This scene depicts a group of young parishioners from St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Lower Roxbury participating in a Stations of the Cross service in the main sanctuary of the church.²⁴ As in *The Rector's Greeting*,

²³ Allan Rohan Crite and Edmund B. Gaither, "In Memory of Annemae (sic) Crite," *Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (March 1978).

²⁴ One of the oldest churches built by a black institution in Roxbury, St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Episcopal Church was established in 1908 with the joining of the congregations of St. Augustine's Church (organized in the West End in 1884) and St. Martin's Mission (organized in Roxbury in 1899) and with the consecration of a new church building on Lenox Street. The history of this congregation is summarized in Hayden, *Faith Culture and Leadership*. Crite produced several oil and watercolor paintings that portray the St. Augustine's sanctuary and he featured the Church in one of his neighborhood paintings created under the auspices of the Federal Art Project, *Beneath the Cross of St. Augustine* (1936; Howard University Art Gallery, Washington, D.C.). For a discussion of this painting, see Julie Levin Caro, "Allan Rohan Crite, *Beneath the Cross of St. Augustine* (1936)" in Richard J. Powell, Jock Reynolds, et. al., *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black College and Universities* (Andover, MA and New York: the Addison Gallery of American Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1999): 185-86.

Crite describes the middle class identity of the congregants through their respectable visual appearance and demeanor. Crite also includes a description of the formal visual atmosphere of an Episcopal Church sanctuary and the highly ritualized aspects of its liturgy.²⁵ The Stations of the Cross, liturgical objects displayed on the walls of an Episcopal or Catholic sanctuary, represent fourteen incidents from events surrounding Christ's Crucifixion. During a Stations of the Cross service, traditionally performed on Good Friday, worshippers circumnavigate the sanctuary standing before each of the Stations, reciting specific prayers to remember Christ's suffering and eternal sacrifice. As we will see, Crite's painting depicts the children learning to enact the intricacies of this ritual and perform proper Episcopal Church demeanor.

Like *The Rector's Greeting*, this painting appears to contain many portraits and has autobiographical resonances for the artist. Crite has explained that the elderly white priest holding the censor and leading the service is Father Frank Fitz, a church leader who also acted as a mentor to Crite during his teenage years, when he was most active at St. Augustine's as an acolyte.²⁶ Although he and his mother belonged to St. Bartholomew's in Cambridge, the Crites often attended Mass during the week at St. Augustine's, as it was located near their home in Lower Roxbury. Like St. Bartholomew's, St. Augustine's was a large

²⁵ St. Augustine's was a "high" Episcopal Church meaning that it used the liturgy and church furnishings that related closely to the Catholic Church.

²⁶ Fitz was member of the Cowley Fathers, a monastic order that administered St. Augustine's Church. In his autobiography, Crite describes Father Fitz's supportive role in encouraging both his spiritual and artistic development. Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

and successful congregation, and one of the only in the city to have undertaken the purchase and construction of their own building in 1910. St. Augustine's was a predominantly black congregation with some white members, and although they were not generally as wealthy or established as St. Bartholomew's membership, they were well educated with respectable positions in civil service or the professions.²⁷ However, unlike St. Bartholomew's, which maintained an all black clergy, white members of the priestly order of the Cowley Fathers and the Sisters of the Carmelite Order ran St. Augustine's, a fact Crite also documents in his painting.

Similar to the artist's neighborhood street scenes like *Parade on Hammond Street*, *The Children's Pilgrimage* depicts a performance of a performance. As the children learn to perform the ritual of the Stations of the Cross, thereby learning to be good Episcopalians, they also learn to demonstrate proper church etiquette, which will contribute to their performance of a middle class identity. Notice the role of the nun in the background, shepherding the children together and maintaining order in the group. With the title of the painting, *The Children's Pilgrimage*, Crite refers to the fact that the processional form of the ritual of the Stations of the Cross was originally undertaken as a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the site of the Way of the Cross. We can also understand the act of pilgrimage to relate to the spiritual and moral journey the St. Augustine's children take through their religious education.

²⁷ Peter J. Gomes, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, December 16, 2003.

By representing the education of the church's youngest members, Crite's painting depicts the ideal function of middle class churches which, like their secular counterparts of the fraternal organizations, was to "institutionalize a moral community."²⁸ According to sociologist Ivan Light:

Church and fraternal order also encourage active membership participation and a public way of life. . . . [which] resulted in peer group scrutiny of daily conduct and increased the social pressure on an individual to conform to the standards of his membership in the group."²⁹

In his study of black middle class identity, William Muraskin argues similarly when he explains that black churches performed a mutually supportive role with black fraternal organizations to form a protective environment that provided middle class blacks with a separate social and spatial environment from members of the lower classes. That separatism was thought to aid members' adherence to a social code of respectability.³⁰ Crite's depiction of the children learning the Stations of the Cross ritual emphasizes their acquisition of patience and discipline, qualities that Episcopalians needed to possess in order to participate in formalized worship. These qualities are also associated with the practice of the genteel performance.

Crite's mother understood the important role that Sunday school classes played in the development of middle class religious and social identity.

Recalling her childhood in Philadelphia, she emphasized her life-long affiliation

²⁸ Ivan Light, *Ethnic Enterprise in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1972), 130.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society*, 58.

with the Episcopal Church, “My aunt’s family were (sic) Methodist, my father’s Baptist. The children attended Episcopalian because it gave studies outside your school class—history and drawing and painting and how to make things.”³¹ In a 1976 interview with Edward Clark, Mrs. Crite explained the expanse of her Sunday School lessons which often included field trips and ranged from religion to history, the arts, and citizenship:

Many times I took as many as twelve black children from St. Bartholomew’s in Cambridge, where I taught my Sunday School class I would be sure their mothers knew where they were going and they would hold hands two at a time and walk in orderly procession all through downtown and I would tell them the history and that they were a part of it. They not only should honor it but live such a life that they would be honored by it.³²

Crite was a beneficiary of his mother’s instruction in the genteel performance, and he also learned the Episcopal rituals and how to display exceptional church conduct directly from the St. Augustine’s clergy members during the years in which he served as an acolyte. If fact, *The Children’s Pilgrimage* may be a recollection as well as documentation, and we may imagine a young Allan Crite as one of the children pictured in the congregation.

In *The Children’s Pilgrimage*, Crite also portrays the role of visual art in the young parishioner’s religious and moral education. As in his performance-portraits and neighborhood street scenes, Crite used his description of the physical setting of the church sanctuary to describe the high character of the people portrayed within it. The carved wooden furnishings on the altar, the

³¹ Edward Clark, “Annamae Palmer Crite and Allan Rohan Crite: Mother and Artist Son: An Interview,” *MELUS* 6, no. 4 (Winter, 1979): 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

Gothic-inspired wooden statue of a Madonna and Child in the background, and the large wall relief carvings of the Stations of the Cross all demonstrate the congregation's ability to appreciate and purchase high quality art as both church decoration and objects of veneration. In addition, these objects serve as markers of the congregation's elevated social status because they denote the "high" Episcopal or Anglo-Catholic orientation of the St. Augustine's congregation and its use of the formal rituals and appurtenances of the Catholic Church.³³ As Gatewood points out, an interest in the formality of liturgical rituals and objects also denoted the Episcopalists' critique of the informal and emotional worship practices associated with lower class status.³⁴ The impressive size and ornate decoration of the church's interior mirrors the commanding presence of the large stone or brick facades in the background of many of Crite's neighborhood street scenes. In contrast to the storefront holiness churches of the recently arrived southern black migrants, these large free-standing church buildings signified that black middle class Bostonian Christians were "established" with longstanding ties to the community and city.³⁵

³³ In contrast, "low" Episcopal churches maintained the simpler furnishings of the Protestant Church.

³⁴ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 285.

³⁵ The notion of being "established" or being an "Old Settler" was a key marker of upper class status in Boston as well as other northern cities, such as Chicago. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, 85-86 and Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 122.

*Redefining the Image of the Black Worshipper:
Black Episcopal Identity Performance in The Choir Singer*

The *Choir Singer* (1941) (fig. 30), a companion painting to *The Children's Pilgrimage*, encapsulates Crite's approach to imaging the formal and communal qualities of black Episcopal worship and also presents an alternative to what he felt was the exoticized image of the black evangelical worshipper.³⁶ Like *The Children's Pilgrimage*, this scene of black Episcopal worshippers has various performative levels to its visual imagery. As the figures carry out the ritual of the Mass service, they also perform their identity as respectable black middle class Episcopalians. This painting features a portrait of one of Crite's fellow parishioners who the artist has identified as Stanley Kirton, the church's organist.³⁷ Crite's image of Kirton performing the role of the choir singer, like his depiction of St. Bartholomew's black minister and Sunday school teacher resonates with the idea of the black Episcopal genteel performance. Crite depicts Kirton maintaining his "front" as a middle class Episcopal even within the relatively private space of the choir loft where he appears to be alone and beyond the view of the other congregants. Standing in profile in a gesture of prayer and looking at the church hymnal he holds in his hands, the bespectacled man wears traditional black and white choir robes over his middle class church attire of a white-collared shirt and jacket and tie. From his restrained conduct, we imagine

³⁶ The artist gave both *The Children's Pilgrimage* and *The Choir Singer* to St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Church sometime in the 1970s. The works remain in the Church's possession and are on display.

³⁷ Allan Rohan Crite, interview by author, March 5, 2000.

that Kirton is singing a traditional hymn or a concert version of the spirituals and not gospel, a musical style associated with emotionalism and not “book religion.” We view the scene from Kirton’s vantage point in the choir loft, and he appears as a fully described example of one of the Episcopal worshippers in the congregation represented below. Each of the parishioners is dressed similarly in middle class attire and all behave decorously, standing within their pews and giving their full attention to the ritual being performed on the altar by a white priest and black acolyte.³⁸

As in other church scenes, Crite’s image features a figure dressed in religious robes. The idea of robing is similar to that of wearing a uniform, and it is another vehicle for maintaining a middle class “front.” Like the uniforms worn by the members of the Elks band in *Parade on Hammond Street*, the choir robes have the effect of knitting the wearers together and conveying their membership in an exclusive group. In the case of Crite’s robed figures, whether they are performing their roles as clergy, acolytes, or choir members, they use their church uniform to identify with the larger fold of the Episcopal communion, a signifier of middle and upper class status. Crite also explored the performative aspects of robing in a pencil drawing, *In the Choir Robing Room, Epiphany Season* from 1939 (fig. 31). In this work, Crite invites us into the private,

³⁸ Crite’s painted depictions of the congregation are confirmed by the recollections of a long-time St. Augustine’s parishioner, who gave the following description of the services she attended there in the 1930s and 1940s: “Everyone dressed up for Mass. The men wore suits and ties and the women wore gloves and hats with veils.” Lilian Corbin, interview by author, Boston, MA, August 25, 1999. The black acolyte pictured on the altar may be another autobiographical reference, for Crite served in this capacity at St. Augustine’s during his teenage years.

behind the scenes space of the robing room, the place where the choir members practice for their musical performance and prepare for their genteel performance for the rest of the congregation.³⁹ Crite also shows us that the choir members still maintain their “front” as middle class people, for all prepare to wear their formal church clothing beneath their robes and behave with an equal measure of restraint as the congregants in the sanctuary.

The vantage point from which Crite portrays the scene of worship in *The Choir Singer* is another important aspect of his performance of the congregation’s black middle class Episcopal identity. An alternating pattern of light and dark shapes created by Kirton’s black and white robes, the white rectangular-shaped Stations of the Cross hanging on the wall, and the clerestory windows, encourage us to follow the choir singer’s gaze towards the altar. From this high vista, we can see the large and formally decorated sanctuary, and we fully appreciate the orderliness and coherence of the congregation who stand in neat rows within their pews. As they all participate in the service in unison, they reflect their discipline and refinement, qualities associated with proper Episcopal and middle class behavior.

By focusing on the experiences of black Episcopalians in Boston, Crite’s church interiors challenged the standard depictions of black worshippers as

³⁹ A similar pencil drawing, *The Choir Practice* (1936) also explores the theme of a black Episcopal choir’s genteel performance. Although lost, this drawing is documented in a black and white photograph included in the Final Report of the Massachusetts Division of the Federal Art Project (FAP) located in Print Department at the Boston Public Library. Based on my study of Crite’s entire known FAP oeuvre, *The Choir Practice* may have been the only one of Crite’s government-sponsored artworks to deal with a religious subject. This is interesting given the fact that he was producing a large body of religious and liturgical artworks at the time.

emotional evangelicals that pervaded 1930s visual art as well as theatrical and film productions. The image of the ecstatic black worshipper usually portrayed as unruly and uninhibited was considered a visual marker of the perceived primitive nature of black Christianity and by extension of black folk culture. An example from this category of imagery, which stands in opposition to Crite's church scenes, is Prentiss Taylor's 1934 lithograph *Experience Meeting at Massadony A.M.E.* (fig. 32). Unlike Crite's conservatively dressed middle class congregants, Taylor's men wear flamboyant suits, and the women wear long white dresses and headscarves, clothing that identify them as members of the folk class. Taylor also defines his worshippers as evangelicals by depicting them standing on their chairs and in the aisles and leaning over the railings, as they sing, dance, testify, and swoon. Crite's church scene, on the other hand, conveys the qualities of orderliness and decorum that were markers of formalized and institutionalized religion, qualities that the black middle class felt were a sign of their cultural maturation.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in contrast to Crite's description of the organized and sedate atmosphere of St. Augustine's Church, Taylor portrays the environment of the Massadony A.M.E. Church as congested, chaotic and cacophonous.

Like many Regionalist artists, Taylor was in search of local variations of American religious experience, and he based his imagery on his observations of black fundamentalist worshippers in rural churches in the south and storefront churches in Harlem and Chicago. Images like Taylor's emphasized the spiritual

⁴⁰ Peter J. Gomes, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, December 16, 2003.

transcendence and physical energy of black religious expression and fulfilled many Regionalist artists' interest in portraying the distinctive character of various ethnicities living in different geographic areas of the United States.⁴¹ Crite's church imagery also fulfilled a Regionalist vision, but his elegantly coifed and dignified Episcopal congregants emphasize a Yankee reserve that continues to be a hallmark of New England.⁴² As an increasing number of black migrants from the south settled in Boston, bringing with them their holiness churches and informal and emotive worship styles, Crite may have felt an increased urgency to record the experiences of his fellow black middle class Episcopalians.

Crite's consistent portrayal of his church scenes from the point of view of a worshipper in the congregation is another distinguishing characteristic of his artistic approach. Many of Crite's artist contemporaries portrayed their black church scenes from the distant vantage point of an outsider defining the black church as a voyeuristic space, separate from the Euro-American Christian tradition. For example, in Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s *Tongues (Holy Rollers)* (1929) (fig. 33), the artist used a draped curtain as an internal frame for his image to separate the viewer from the scene and present the worshippers as if they are performers on a stage. As a practicing Catholic and member Chicago's black upper middle class, Motley's experience of attending church was probably more

⁴¹ For more on the Regionalist's approach to representing black religious subjects, see Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America*, 102-178.

⁴² For a discussion of a New England version of American Regionalism, see Donna M. Cassidy, "On the Subject of Nativeness: Marsden Hartley and New England Regionalism," *Winterthur Portfolio* 29, no. 4 (1994): 227-245 and William H. Truettner, Rodger B Stein et. al., *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (Washington, D.C. and New Haven: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and Yale University Press, 1999).

similar to Crite's in Boston, than to that of the rural folk he portrayed in *Tongues (Holy Rollers)*. Thus, while Motley displayed one kind of African American artistic "rootedness" by celebrating the African- and folk-inspired religious practices of the "holy rollers," he was also portraying black Christian subjects that were at both a physical and psychological distance from his own experience. Crite's "rootedness" was one that demonstrated his identification with the religious experiences of the African American Christians he knew in his own community and congregation. He characterized Boston's black worshippers not as exotic "others" but as modern, sophisticated, and well-to-do members of the urban black middle class.

At the same time that Crite's paintings of Episcopalians challenged the stereotypes of black evangelical worshippers, they also revealed a visual paradox of some black Episcopalians' religious experiences. As both *The Children's Pilgrimage* and *The Choir Singer* document, the racial identity of the worshippers at St. Augustine's was not reflected in the white countenances of the clergy who led them in prayer or in the sacred objects they venerated, most of which featured white biblical figures.⁴³ Perhaps to counter the dominance of Eurocentric imagery in the St. Augustine's sanctuary, in the upper right hand corner of *The Choir Singer*, Crite featured an example of one of his own liturgical artworks, *The Four Joyful Mysteries* (1941) (fig. 34), which characteristically included black

⁴³ The clergy at St. Augustine's are predominantly white members of the Anglican monastic order known as the Cowley Fathers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. In contrast, St. Bartholomew's is an independent black church governed entirely by black clergy.

biblical figures.⁴⁴ This polyptych altarpiece, styled after Early Renaissance and Byzantine models, is made of hammered brass panels with the addition of gold leaf and tempera paint, and prominently features iconic pairs of biblical figures with broad African features and robes decorated with patterns derived from African textiles.⁴⁵ As in his *Self-Portrait*, Crite's autobiographical church scene uses an example of his own liturgical artwork both to advertise and perform his middle class religious and artistic identity. More than this, the inclusion of *The Joyful Mysteries* altarpiece demonstrates the artist's unique stance to representing biblical subject matter in ways that allowed black parishioners to envision their relationship with the divine, while at the same time identifying with a western canon of traditional biblical iconography and art.⁴⁶

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⁴⁴ A detailed discussion of the large number of liturgical artworks Crite produced during the 1930s and 1940s is not included in the present study, but this body of work is an important aspect of his early oeuvre and an area for further research on this artist. See Chapter Four for a discussion of Crite's illustrated spirituals, which the artist grouped with his liturgical drawings.

⁴⁵ Crite's altarpiece is one of two the artist created for St. Augustine's Church. Its companion, *The Joyful Mysteries: Finding the Christ Child in the Temple* (1941), originally created for the Lady Altar, the piece consists of several silver nickel panels with the addition of gold leaf and tempera paint. This altarpiece is pictured in the background of an untitled watercolor depicting the St. Augustine's sanctuary (c. 1940; Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston). Both altarpieces continue to be on display in the St. Augustine's sanctuary. Together, these altarpieces depict the theme of the Five Joyful Mysteries, which includes the narratives of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and Christ Among the Doctors. Rather than represent the scenes within one continuous narrative as is often done in Renaissance altarpieces, Crite's adopted the Byzantine style of depicting groups of iconic figures each contained within a separate rectangular-shaped panel.

⁴⁶ Crite's culturally specific liturgical objects also represent the artist's radical contribution to the history of American religious art, for in the 1930s and 1940s, many black congregations accepted, and even preferred, white religious images for display in their homes and churches. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art of William H. Johnson*, 186.

In the chapter that follows, I explore the ways in which Crite engaged with the western tradition of ecclesiastical art in a series of brush and ink drawings illustrating African American spirituals. Another instance of the artist's black middle class rootedness, these works use black biblical and contemporary figures as well as references to the liturgy of the Episcopal Church to identify the spirituals with his community's religious and class sensibility. In addition, Crite's illustrations were aimed at redefining the spirituals as a high art form with a universal message and at challenging their frequent characterization as quaint folk material.

CHAPTER FOUR

A New Kind of Rootedness: Black Middle Class Episcopal Identity Performance in the Illustrated Spirituals

Simultaneously with the creation of his portraits and neighborhood genre scenes of black middle class and Episcopal Bostonians, Crite produced a series of over three hundred brush and ink drawings that illustrate thirteen African American spirituals.¹ In the 1940s, the artist worked with Harvard University Press to publish four of his illustrated spirituals in two volumes, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (1944) and *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (1948).² In contrast to his vision for his paintings, Crite conceived of his illustrated spirituals as a new way to reach mainstream audiences and with these works he began a long-term interest in mass-producing his imagery.³

¹ Crite's entire body of illustrated spirituals include: *Go Down Moses (Let My People Go)*, 1937, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston (ARCRI); *Steal Away*, 1937, ARCRI; *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See*, 1937, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (HLHU); *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, 1937, HLHU; *Heaven*, 1937-38, HLHU; *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.; *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* (incomplete), 1940, ARCRI; *O Lord, Have Mercy on Me*, 1940, location unknown; *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 1941, ARCRI; *Ride on King Jesus*, 1941, ARCRI; *O Mary, Where is Your Baby*, 1942, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ; *I know the Lord he laid his hands on me*, 1943, ARCRI; *Somebody's Knocking at Your Door* (incomplete), no date, ARCRI.

² Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944) and Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948). Throughout this chapter I reference and illustrate the reproduction of Crite's brush and ink drawings published in the volumes, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (1944) and *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (1948), however, my analysis and discussion of Crite's illustrated spirituals also draw from my first-hand study of the artist's original brush and ink drawings located respectively in the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C and the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

³ In the 1950s, Crite purchased a lithograph printing press, which he kept in his home studio and used to make multiple reproductions of his liturgical art drawings and to create the weekly church

Although the spirituals were a popular subject in 1930s American art, Crite's interpretation is unique for the ways in which he translated the music into visual form using black figures, contemporary settings, an elaborate vocabulary of ecclesiastical symbols and a traditional artistic style rooted in Byzantine and Renaissance art. With their black and white graphic format, focus on biblical subject matter and close association with an oral form of black folk culture rooted in the rural south, Crite's illustrated spirituals seem like a departure from his other early works that represent contemporary black Bostonians.⁴ However, Crite's illustrated spirituals represent another instance of his artistic "rootedness" in his community's black middle class sensibility and display his performative approach to representing African American subject matter in terms of his own experience.

More than anything else, Crite's black middle class interpretation of the spirituals was an implicit rejection of the music's status as the embodiment of black folk culture symbolizing both African Americans' "natural" musical ability

bulletin covers that he sold to Episcopal congregations in Boston and other places in the United State and Mexico from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s. Crite also used his lithograph press to self-publish illustrated texts, such as *An Autobiographical Sketch* (1977), and *Recollections of My Childhood: A Walking Tour of the South End* (1982) and *Reflections on the Afro, Asian, American Cultural Heritage of People of Color* (1985), which he distributed to libraries, public schools and archives in Boston and elsewhere.

⁴ During his early career, Crite was equally well known for producing these religious images as he was for his images of black urban life, and he often exhibited both types of artwork together. Recent scholarship on Crite often obscures this point describing his early production either as focused solely on the neighborhood theme or on religious subjects.

and their unshakable religious faith.⁵ A secondary aim for Crite was to emphasize the spirituals' sacred function by characterizing them as "hymns of the church," or in other words, as part of the canon of western music and the Episcopal and Catholic Church traditions of hierarchical and institutionalized Christianity. The artist's anti-folk and anti-secular interpretation of the spirituals reflects the broader goals of his early oeuvre to combat visual stereotypes that he felt exoticized African Americans and to demonstrate the African American contribution to the culture of the nation.

This chapter focuses on Crite's illustrated spiritual, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* in both its original and published versions as well as a selection of individual brush drawings from the spirituals, *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See Heaven, Go Down Moses, Steal Away* and *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, a series of thirty-nine brush and ink drawings produced between 1937 and 1944, exemplifies the artist's anti-folk approach to interpreting the spirituals and his performative approach to representing black middle class identity. In this work, Crite illustrates the lyrics of the spiritual phrase by phrase:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble

Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble

⁵ As art historian Mary Ann Calo points out, "for many white Americans the so-called sorrow songs were the most familiar and therefore most representative form of black expression." Mary Ann Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1999), 596.

*Were you there when they pierced him in the side
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble*

*Were you there when the sun refused to shine
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble*

*Were you there when they laid him in the tomb
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble*

*Were you there when he rose form the dead
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble*

*Were you there when he ascended on high. . . .
O Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble*⁶

Crite translates the narratives of Christ's Passion, Resurrection and Ascension into a series of *tableaux vivants* of black figures performing the Stations of the Cross, a liturgical ritual in the Episcopal and Catholic traditions.⁷ In the opening sequence of drawings of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, Crite situates the incidents from Christ's Passion within an urban setting reminiscent of his Boston neighborhood as another means of defining the subject matter in

⁶ This quotation is an abbreviated version of Crite's rendering of spiritual's lyrics in his drawings, which repeat elements of each line. The lyrics for this spiritual are documented in James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson, eds., *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, vol. 2 (1926; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 136-137. The version published in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* does not include the final two stanzas referring to Christ's Resurrection and Ascension that Crite included in his illustrated spiritual. Crite may have added these verses himself, or it is more likely that he drew these lines from a contemporary version that was familiar to him.

⁷ As explained in Chapter Three, the Stations of the Cross are liturgical objects displayed in the sanctuaries of Episcopal and Catholic Churches and the Stations of the Cross service is performed on Good Friday. Typically, the Stations represent the following incidents from the narrative of Christ's Passion: First Station: *Jesus is Condemned to death*; Second Station: *Jesus takes up his Cross*; Third Station: *Jesus falls the first time*; Fourth Station: *Jesus meets his afflicted mother*; Fifth Station: *The Cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene*; Sixth Station: *A woman (Veronica) wipes the face of Jesus*; Seventh Station: *Jesus falls a second time*; Eighth Station: *Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem*; Ninth Station: *Jesus falls a third time*; Tenth Station: *Jesus is stripped of his garments*; Eleventh Station: *Jesus is nailed to the Cross*; Twelfth Station: *Jesus dies on the Cross*; Thirteenth Station: *The body of Jesus is placed in the arms of his mother*; Fourteenth Station: *Jesus is laid in the tomb*.

terms of his own black middle class experience and rootedness the biblical narrative in his community.

Like his neighborhood street scenes and church interiors, the imagery in Crite's illustrated spirituals contains various types of performances. For example, in the second illustration of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (fig. 35) three black biblical figures enact an incident from the Passion of Christ embodied in the third Station of the Cross. In the foreground of the drawing, a black Christ, accompanied by a sorrowful Virgin Mary and St. John, falls to the ground beneath the overbearing weight of the cross. In the background and within the same physical and spiritual space as the biblical figures, a chorus of young African American men and women walk down a tree-lined urban street in a solemn procession from left to right.⁸ With heads bowed and mouths open in song, the choral figures simultaneously recite the prayers of the Stations of the Cross and sing the lyrics and music of the spiritual. These actions suggest that they are engaged in a Stations of the Cross service or a Passion play in the context of an Episcopal Church.⁹ Appearing in each of the thirty-nine illustrations of the spiritual, the contemporary black figures also serve as surrogates for the viewer to connect with the meaning of spiritual's narrative of

⁸ The artist also links his translation of the spirituals to his neighborhood paintings by depicting a young African American woman watching the procession from the window of her well-manicured brick apartment building.

⁹ As described in Chapter Three in reference to Crite's painting *The Children's Pilgrimage* (fig. 29), a depiction of a Stations of the Cross service, parishioners stand before each Station observing a moment of silence during which they reflect on the meaning of the Christ's Passion. As part of the Stations of the Cross service worshippers circumnavigate the sanctuary space from left to right symbolically taking the journey with Christ to Golgotha, the site of the Crucifixion.

bearing witness both through the act of contemplation and the act of singing and listening to the spiritual. The various types of performances in Crite's illustrated spirituals call attention to the fact that the music itself must be performed in order to achieve its transformative effect of uplifting the singer and listener.

All of the figures in *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* also display their identity as black middle class Episcopalians through their formal appearance and reserved demeanor and by participating in the liturgical rituals of the Episcopal and Catholic traditions. As in his portraits and genre scenes of his family, community and congregation, Crite enacts a black middle class and Episcopal identity in *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* by defining the figures and their setting with the qualities of formality, gentility and reserve.

In particular, by depicting *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* as a performance of the Stations of the Cross, the artist linked the spirituals with the qualities of patience, discipline, and decorum. As we have seen, these are the attributes members of the Episcopal faith needed to possess in order to participate in a formalized worship service and that members of the black middle class needed to exhibit as part of the genteel performance. Through these various representations of a black middle class identity Crite's illustrated spirituals offered an implicit rejection of the music as a folk expression.

Despite Crite's seemingly conservative approach to illustrating the spirituals with a European-centered religious iconography and aesthetic, one should not overlook the radical nature of his representation of black biblical figures, including God, Christ, Mary, saints, apostles and angels, and his

placement of these black holy figures within the secular space of his African American neighborhood as well as the sacred realm of heaven.¹⁰ Crite's imagery not only challenged a white Christian sensibility, which categorically denied the black presence in the Bible, but as art historians David Driskell, Richard Powell and others have argued, most black Christians in the early twentieth century would have disapproved, if not totally rejected, the display of black biblical imagery in their homes and churches.¹¹ As we will see, one of the contributions Crite made with his rendition of the spirituals was to insert his black middle

¹⁰ I have explored the spiritual, psychological and political ramifications of using black religious imagery in the sacred space of the black church elsewhere in Julie Levin, "Forging a Vision of African American History, Culture, and Identity: Jean Lacy's 1990 Stained Glass Window Designs for the St. Luke 'Community' United Methodist Church" (Master's Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1996) and Julie Levin, "'Lord I fashion dark gods too': Representations of Black Christianity in African American Churches," a paper presented at the 1998 College Art Association annual meeting in Toronto, Canada.

¹¹ Richard J. Powell referring to the comments of art historian David C. Driskell in Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1991), 186. In "Biblical and Spiritual Motifs," in Judith E. Stein "I Tell My Heart": The Art of Horace Pippin (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1994), 126, Powell wrote, "the attitudes of most blacks in 1940 concerning physical ideas of beauty and dignity categorically excluded African physiognomy." As Massachusetts State Representative Byron Rushing, a longtime resident of the South End and member St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in Roxbury has explained, Crite's religious imagery did have a psychological effect on the members of the artist's black community and congregation. In a eulogy delivered at the artist's memorial service on September 13, 2007 in Boston, Rushing described the empowering effect of seeing Crite's black biblical figures each Sunday morning on the church bulletin covers the artist produced for this and many other churches across the country from the 1940s through the early 1990s. Likewise, viewing Crite's illustrated spirituals in local art galleries and in their published form must have provided audiences of the 1930s and 1940s with a similar form of inspiration and uplift. For a discussion of psychological issues faced by black artists who create black biblical imagery and for black audiences who view them see Kymberly Pinder, "'Our Father, God; Our Brother Christ; or are we bastard kin?': Images of Christ in African American Painting," *African American Review*, Volume 31, Number 2 (1997): 223-233.

class, Episcopal, and Bostonian sensibility into the history of art as well as into the history of the Christian church.

In my description of Crite's goals for his drawings of the spirituals and in my analysis of his visual approach, I consider the artist's role as narrator and translator. Writing in the introduction to Crite's first volume of illustrated spirituals, Harvard religion professor Kenneth J. Conant observed "These pictures are not 'illustrations' in the usual sense of visual elaborations of text. They are rather a translation from one medium of expression to another."¹² Throughout this chapter I explore the ways in which Crite translates the spirituals: from their association with black folk culture to a black middle class sensibility based on his own experience; from a musical and textual format to a serialized and graphic one; and from his original drawings to the published versions. I consider the various types of translations embodied in Crite's illustrated spirituals as a means of describing the complex nature of these images as well as his motivations for producing and distributing them.

*Translation I. Identity:
From Black Folk Expression to a Black Middle Class Episcopal Sensibility*

When the African American art historian and critic James Porter commented, in a review of Crite's published version of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, "perhaps they are a little over-serious," he was delivering not so much a critique of the imagery as he was offering an astute characterization of

¹² Kenneth J. Conant, "Introduction," in Crite, *Were You There*.

the artist's unique interpretation.¹³ With this comment and through his use of the words "complex," "labored" and "conscientiously executed," Porter pointed to some of the formal ways in which Crite's imagery rejected the folk identity of the spirituals. The imagery in Crite's final illustration for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (fig. 36), displays many of the qualities Porter described. The densely packed composition, which consists of over thirty figures stacked vertically and extending beyond the frame in the manner of a Byzantine altarpiece, portrays black biblical figures and angels as well as contemporary middle class African Americans assembled in heaven and having just witnessed Christ's ascension. Each figure is fully described, as are their garments, which range from intricately patterned biblical robes and liturgical vestments, to military officers' uniforms and the formal church attire of black middle class parishioners.¹⁴ Crite also utilizes the visual elements of the brush and ink medium to enhance the visual complexity of his imagery. The entire scene reads like a jigsaw puzzle of interlocking areas of positive and negative space created by the alternation of black and white in the patterned clothing of the figures and by the contrast of black faces silhouetted against white haloes. As we will see, Crite's formal approach is part of his effort to translate into visual imagery the

¹³ James A. Porter, "A Negro Spiritual Illustrated," *The Journal of Negro Education* 14, no. 4. (Autumn, 1945): 599.

¹⁴ Crite's inclusion of black figures wearing military uniforms in several illustrations for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* is another way his interpretation of this spiritual responds to the contemporary world for these drawings were completed in 1944 when the U.S was engaged in World War II. Showing African Americans in the military is another aspect of Crite's message of African American assimilation and citizenship.

sense of drama and elation in the narrative as well as the structural content of the music.

The style, format and tenor of Crite's drawings for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* can be understood as an implicit rejection of the qualities contemporary writers used to describe the folk essence of the spirituals. Typical were the comments of art critic and collector, Albert C. Barnes who praised the spirituals as a unique contribution to American society, while at the same time indulging in primitivizing language of the period. In the essay "Negro Art in America" published in Locke's manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro*, Barnes described the spirituals as "wild chants . . . natural, naïve, untutored, spontaneous."¹⁵ Crite was working to dispel such notions by associating the spirituals and his artistic interpretations with a black middle class sensibility and identifying the music as part of the western traditions of religious hymns and liturgical art. All of the figures in Crite's illustrated spirituals conduct themselves with a measure of deliberation and self-control similar to the black Episcopal worshippers and choir members he portrayed in his contemporaneous church interiors. Moreover, the specificity, orderliness and precision of Crite's drawings, as well as their sophisticated stylistic references and thoroughly researched ecclesiastical symbolism, demonstrate his self-identification as a traditionally-trained artist who is closely associated with the Episcopal Church, while at the same time contradicting the popular assertion

¹⁵ Albert C. Barnes, "Negro Art in America," in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1992), 21.

that the spirituals were a "natural" subject for the black artist.¹⁶ In his review of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, James Porter characterized Crite's status as a professional artist by describing "the decorative force" of Crite's drawings as the result of his "innate sense of design" as well as his "profound and lasting connection to early Italian Renaissance art."¹⁷ By making reference to Crite's abilities as a formally trained artist, Porter was legitimating Crite's project to illustrate the spirituals as serious art and not as the natural expression of his racial identity, another hallmark of contemporary descriptions of black folk expression.

In his illustrated spirituals, Crite's simultaneously rejects a black folk identity and creates a black middle class identity by robing his figures in clothing he identified with elevated moral and social attributes. As described in previous chapters with regard to the artist's neighborhood paintings, the artist robed his figures in formal street and church dress, fraternal club uniforms, and liturgical garments as visual signs for gentility, respectability and leadership roles, qualities he associated with a middle class and Episcopal identity. In two of Crite's illustrations for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* depicting the Third Station of the Cross (fig. 35) and the Crucifixion (fig. 37) Crite depicts the figures in the chorus wearing middle class church attire, including, for the men, white shirts, ties and slacks or knickers and, for the women, white blouses, long

¹⁶ Mary Ann Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars," *American Quarterly*, 598.

¹⁷ Porter, "A Negro Spiritual Illustrated," *Journal of Negro Education*, 600.

skirts and white scarves covering their hair--another indication that they are in church.¹⁸ Likewise, an illustration from Crite's interpretation of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* (1937) (fig. 38) and a drawing from his rendition of *Heaven* (fig. 39) demonstrate how the artist portrayed the elevated status of a black Jesus and a black God by robing each figure in elaborate liturgical garments. In each scene Jesus and God assume the role of the king of heaven by wearing the vestments of prelate, or high-ranking member of the clergy, and wearing a jeweled crown.¹⁹ In both illustrations, Crite embellished the robes of these two figures with images of black saints and apostles, whose frontal stance and elongated bodies resemble the black biblical figures in the artist's Byzantine and Renaissance-styled altarpieces and Stations of the Cross of the period as well as the rows of Old Testament figures on the door jambs and stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals.²⁰ The black figures on the robes, like the images of a black Christ and

¹⁸ In addition, Crite clothes Jesus, Mary and St. John in the traditional attire of first century Rome, and he signals their divine status, as well as his knowledge of Christian iconography and history by crowning Christ with a tripartite halo symbolic of the Trinity and Mary with a halo with twelve stars representative of the twelve tribes of Israel and St. John is vested in a cope, a type of liturgical garment with his symbol, the eagle. Crite described these aspects of the ecclesiastical symbolism he used in his illustrations of this spiritual in Robert Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite and Susan Thompson, January 16, 1979 – October 22, 1980," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 73-79.

¹⁹ Also visible in this scene, the members of the chorus are each vested in a dalmic, a two-piece liturgical garment draped with a stole as another indication of their high status. My description of the garments worn by the figures in Crite's drawings is based on the artist's own descriptions in Robert Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art and Allan Rohan Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*, self-published manuscript, 1977, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston; copy in the Boston Public Library.

²⁰ Specifically, Crite's religious figures call to mind the relief sculptures of Old Testament kings, queens and prophets on the West Portal of Chartres Cathedral, a monument Crite surely would have known from his studies at the Museum School. An example of similarly posed religious

a black God, act as symbolic references to the black presence within the early history and hierarchy of the church and serve as another means of interpreting the spirituals in relation to the Western canon of church music. Crite's imagery is also performative of his own status as an Episcopal and as a liturgical artist, for they signal his knowledge of western art history and ecclesiastical symbolism.

Crite's use of a modern urban background for the opening narrative sequence of drawings in *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* is another means by which he challenged the contemporary perception of the spirituals as the product of an atavistic, rural and southern world (figs. 35, 40 and 56).²¹ As in his performance-portraits and neighborhood paintings, Crite's illustrations of the spirituals demonstrate how he used the physical setting as a visual metaphor for the elevated social and religious status of the people portrayed within it, for the modern cityscape resembles the well-manicured streets and brick apartment buildings of his middle class Boston neighborhood. As the artist wrote in 1944, his illustrations refer to the modern world to express the essential meaning of the lyrics, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord," which he explained, "implies the eternal aspect of the sacrifice of Christ, the character of which enables us who are born out of the historical time of the Crucifixion to be one

figures from Crite's liturgical oeuvre is the altarpiece *The Four Joyful Mysteries* (fig. 34) pictured in *The Choir Singer* (fig. 30).

²¹ In addition to *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, Crite used a modern urban setting for his illustrated spirituals *Steal Away to Jesus* (1937) and *O Mary Where is Your Baby* (1942).

with the people along the Via Dolorosa and to stand beneath the Cross.”²²

Beyond this, the artist demonstrates the spirituals’ universality and their rootedness in his own middle class community.²³

Crite’s interpretation of the spirituals in his 1930s and 1940s brush drawings is a mixture of the period’s ideologies of Americanism and American cultural nationalism. Like his portrayal of African-American assimilation and citizenship in his portraits and genre scenes, the universalizing imagery in Crite’s illustrated spirituals redefine black experience as American experience by linking a black cultural production with a middle class sensibility and mainstream institutions, such as the Episcopal Church. At the same time, Crite’s illustrated spirituals, contribute to the project of American cultural nationalism because they emphasize the contribution of black folk culture to mainstream American music and religion. During the 1930s in particular, as Americans responded to the trauma of the Depression and the country’s isolationist stance in world politics, artists, writers and intellectuals called for the development of a unique American art separate from European influence. Cultural nationalism in American art, like Americanism, was based on images of “the American experience,” but more importantly, it focused on the representation of the

²² Crite, “Apologia,” *Were You There*.

²³ Crite explained that he wanted his illustrations for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* to refer to the way the spiritual retells the Gospel story as both an historic and the eternal event: “The wording ‘Were You there when they crucified my Lord’ implies the eternal aspect of the sacrifice of Christ, the character of which enables us who are born out of the historical time of the Crucifixion to be one with the peoples along the Via Dolorosa and to stand beneath the Cross.” Ibid.

nation's unique cultural products made by Americans of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. From the Shakers, to the Native Americans of the southwest, the white folk of rural Appalachia and the black folk of the rural south, the distinctiveness of American culture was thought to be present in its folk forms, especially those created at a remote distance from modern urban society.²⁴ Thus, as Jonathan Harris has argued, American cultural nationalism was based on the premise that cultural and ethnic diversity was *the* common attribute of a unified American experience and aesthetic.²⁵ Crite's interpretation of the spirituals was unique because it represented the cultural integrity of the spirituals while at the same time emphasizing the relationship of the spirituals to a multiplicity of black and white identities. The duality of Crite's position reflects his own varied experiences with the music and, as we will see, the sense of conflict many members of the black middle class felt in relation to the spirituals.

Motivations: Preservation and Autobiographical Resonances

Crite's desire to disassociate the spirituals from black folk culture relates to his larger artistic project to challenge familiar stereotypes of blackness. In the

²⁴ As William A. Wilson has argued, the teachings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) was an important source for the belief among many American intellectuals and artists of the importance of folk forms for the development of a national tradition. William A. Wilson, "Herder Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism," *Folk Groups and Folk Genres: A Reader*, Elliot Oring, ed. (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 49-53.

case of the spirituals, Crite worried that their original religious meaning and serious purpose were lost when they were misrepresented as generic folk songs. In describing his motivations for illustrating the spirituals Crite often told the following anecdote:

I heard a radio announcer say, with all good intentions, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, we'll listen to this beloved spiritual called 'Old Black Joe.'" I kind of figured we were in trouble, because that isn't a spiritual; it wasn't composed by Black people. I had a feeling that the spirituals were being lost. . . . [I wanted] people . . . [to] get an idea that spirituals are hymns of the church, part of the religious musical literature of the world. That's why I illustrated them, almost as an act of preservation.²⁶

As explained above, Crite's desire to preserve the spirituals as "hymns of the church" or as part of the canons of Western classical and liturgical music, is analogous to his overall artistic goal to show middle class blacks as assimilated members of American society. In addition, by translating the spirituals in terms of his black middle class experience and mass-producing his imagery, he fulfilled a goal that was similar to his aim for his portraits and neighborhood paintings. In all of these works, the artist sought to document and preserve his Boston community's black middle class Episcopal way of life that, like the spirituals, he feared was in danger of being lost.

Crite's varied experiences with the spirituals reflect their dual status in 1930s American popular culture as folk songs and classical music. Beginning in the 1890s with the successful national tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the

²⁶ Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 82.

spirituals began to be translated into concert music.²⁷ By the 1930s, spirituals were interpreted into a wide range of media including literature, modern dance, theater and film, and they could be heard in an equally diverse number of musical styles from classically based concert performances of internationally famous African American soloists, Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson and Marion Anderson, to folk, blues and jazz versions.²⁸ In addition to objecting to the misidentification of the spirituals as generic folk songs, Crite rejected the ways in which the spirituals were increasingly used as a secular form of entertainment. As he wrote in a 1938 essay, “one who knows and loves the spirituals has only to hear them horribly distorted into jazz as music for the dance to understand my desire to . . . preserve them in their original, pure and meaningful place of service.”²⁹ In other words, Crite wanted his illustrations to associate the spirituals with the qualities and functions of liturgical art, images and objects created in service of the liturgy.

Crite’s visual approach to illustrating the spirituals in terms of his religious identity as a black Episcopal was shaped by an experience he referred

²⁷ For more on the history of the spirituals, especially how they were translated and popularized as concert music, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 162-170 and John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House, 1972).

²⁸ For more on the influence of the spirituals on American culture, see Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *African American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale and Dance, 1600s -1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990 and Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday Press/Farrar Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 333.

²⁹ Allan Rohan Crite, “Why I Illustrate the Spirituals,” *World Horizons: A Magazine for Young People* 1, no. 3 (May 1938): 54.

to as his “Catholic revival.”³⁰ In the early 1930s, when the artist briefly considered converting to Roman Catholicism, he spent a year comparing the doctrines, ecclesiastical objects, vestments and rituals of both denominations. Crite eventually decided to remain an Episcopal, but he went from being a “low” churchman to a “high” churchman, an Episcopal who worships with the formal traditions and appurtenances used in the Catholic Church.³¹ Although Crite described his decision to remain an Episcopal as primarily a theological one, as we have seen, the Episcopal Church played an important role in the artist’s middle class identity. Crite’s mother, especially, would have perceived his conversion to Catholicism, a denomination that, in Boston in particular, was associated with working and lower class Italian and Irish immigrants, as a step down in social status.³² A more important consequence of the artist’s “Catholic revival” was the transformative effect it had on his approach to depicting religious subjects. According to the artist:

I had a new sense of the meaning of the word [sic] vocabulary and language for I saw that there was a vocabulary of sight and sounds as well as words, as for example, the vestments of the clergy. . . . The action of the priest at the altar, the whole movements of the celebration of the Mass or

³⁰ Crite, “Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings,” *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

³¹ Within the Episcopal faith “high” churches used the liturgy and church furnishings that related closely to the Catholic Church, while “low” churches used the unadorned vestments and simple rituals of the Protestant Church. Crite had experience with both types, for his parish church of St. Bartholomew’s is a “low” church and his adopted church of St. Augustine’s in Roxbury is a “high” church.

³² Adelaide Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston’s Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 85-86.

any other service was a form of drama, a form of storytelling, a form of oral or other traditions.³³

Crite's description of the church service in narrative and theatrical terms relates to his translation of spirituals, such as *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, into visual tableaux, each of which he described as "a miniature music drama."³⁴ As the artist explained in his autobiography, he translated the ceremonial processions he witnessed and participated in at St. Bartholomew's and St. Augustine's Churches, such as the one documented in the brush and ink drawing *Maundy Thursday Procession* of 1935 (fig. 41), into the processions of saints and Old Testament figures in his illustrated spirituals, such as *Heaven* (fig. 42) and *Go Down Moses* (fig. 43).³⁵ Working on several levels, these images convey the artist's desire to associate the spirituals with the formal aspects of the Episcopal Church and record his experience and memory of participating in an institutionalized and hierarchical form of religion.

In addition, the artist stated that he used the visual vocabulary of the church in his illustrated spirituals to make them accessible to a broad audience of Christians, including whites, blacks, Catholics and Protestants. According to the artist:

³³ Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

³⁴ Allan Rohan Crite, "Negro Spirituals," c. 1940s, transcript for public address, reproduced in *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers (1930-1979)*, Afro American History Museum, Philadelphia.

³⁵ As the artist explained, the Maundy Sunday procession was an elaborate Mass ceremony performed on Good Friday when the priests carried the host to an altar that was prepared especially for the Eater service. Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

[M]ost of Christianity is familiar with the Catholic expression Therefore, if I tell the story of spirituals using that particular medium, people will get an idea what it's all about. People who are Protestant, and the Black people from whom the spirituals come, they get an understanding of another dimension as far as the richness of the spirituals is concerned.³⁶

More than just a nod to accessibility, Crite uses the formal language of the Episcopal and Catholic liturgies to make the spirituals respectable or, in other words, to make them perform gentility. And, similar to his reliance upon his traditional academic training as a measure of his professional status, Crite's frequent references to his extensive knowledge of the "Catholic expression" was a means of elevating his credibility as a religious artist and, by extension, his interpretation of the spirituals.

Crite explained in his 1938 essay, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," that his brush and ink drawings have autobiographical components that included a range of experiences with the music.³⁷ From his mother, Annamae, the artist learned to sing the spirituals, and he also gained an appreciation of the music's connection to African American religious and cultural history by listening to his mother's recollections of witnessing the spirituals sung at the Methodist camp meetings she attended during her youth.³⁸ At the same time, the artist's first-

³⁶ Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," Archives of American Art, 75.

³⁷ Crite, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," *World Horizons*, 44-45.

³⁸ As Crite explained in "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," the camp meetings his mother attended were held at Darby, Pennsylvania, near her childhood home in Philadelphia. In this essay, the artist also credits his mother with teaching him the Spirituals and he explained "it had been a custom at home for Mother and me to sing various hymns, including many old spirituals." Ibid., 44. Crite and his mother also reflect on their experiences with the spirituals in Edward Clark, "Mother and Artist Son—An Interview," *MELUS* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 68-71.

hand knowledge of the spirituals included hearing them interpreted as concert music. As we will see, Crite drew from the folk aspects of the spirituals embodied in his mother's descriptions of the camp meetings as well as the black middle class and urban identity expressed in their concert form.

Although Crite never experienced the open-air religious gatherings of the camp meetings for himself, his mother's descriptions of them made a profound impact on him. As the artist explained:

Here under the most impressive circumstances, the Spirituals were heard chanted by thousands at huge open-air meetings. Mother said she was always deeply impressed with the full and tremendous power and dignity of these old hymns. Many of the old people who had been slaves in childhood, . . . poured into the singing of the Spirituals the fervent sincerity of their souls.³⁹

Crite's mother's reflections must have confirmed his own sense of the serious religious nature of the spirituals because he explained that, in his illustrations, he sought to capture the grandeur of the hymns as they were performed by the camp meeting choirs.⁴⁰ For example, in his illustrations of *Heaven* (fig. 44) and *Steal Away* (fig. 45), Crite portrayed large groups of black figures dressed in choir robes, singing in unison and moving in processions that appear to extend into infinity.

Above all, Crite's illustrations of the spirituals emphasized his mother's assertion that the camp meetings were conducted with a high degree of formality and propriety. As the artist recalled from his mother's descriptions, "they were

³⁹ Crite, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," *World Horizons*, 44.

⁴⁰ Crite described the relationship of his drawings to his mother's descriptions in Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite," *Archives of American Art*, 76-77.

quite formal—the men wore Prince Alberts, the women were formally dressed. When one speaks of camp meetings, . . . sometimes you get the idea of a sort of undisciplined shouting . . . but at these camp meetings the people sang spirituals.”⁴¹ In one of the final illustrations of the *Heaven* (fig. 46), Crite visualizes the atmosphere of gentility at the camp meetings by representing the black singers vested in elaborately embroidered liturgical robes and wearing jeweled crowns. As in his church scenes, Crite’s imagery in *Heaven* associates the spirituals with sacred music and with the middle class codes of church conduct. Standing in three neat rows, like a choir assembled on risers, the figures move in unison, their mouths open together in song and, in the case of the front row of singers, their hands clasped together in an identical gesture of prayer. Crite also depicts each row of singers composed of either all male or all female singers, indicating the sense of orderliness and strict decorum he imagined was maintained at the camp meetings.

Crite’s images in *Heaven* contrast with contemporary descriptions of the spirituals, which emphasized their atavistic qualities by relating them to the religious practices of the slaves, particularly the rhythmic dancing and singing of the ring shout.⁴² Crite rejected this assertion and instead redefined the spirituals

⁴¹ Crite, “Negro Spirituals,” c. 1940s, transcript for public address, *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*.

⁴² The scholarship of Sterling Stuckey and Lawrence Levine exemplifies the way in which the spirituals embody an argument for the authenticity of black folk culture. Both Stuckey’s argument that the spirituals represent the wholesale transmission of African culture in the Americas through the form of the ring shout and Levine’s description of the spirituals as a form of creolization, an adaptation of African based cultural forms in an American context, defines the spirituals in terms of their relationship to a notion of an independent and authentic black culture.

in relation to black middle class standards of church behavior. As he explained in the “Apologia” for his volume, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven*, “the final lines of the hymn . . . [are] depicted by richly vested figures moving in the rhythmic ecstasy of a *joyous giving of praise*, for this is the meaning of ‘shout’ in the language of the Spirituals” (italics in original).⁴³ In his personal history of the spirituals, Crite demonstrated the value his family and community placed on respectability, and thus, Crite achieved two goals through his illustrations--honoring his mother and uplifting the spirituals.

Annamae Crite’s recollections of the camp meetings and Crite’s visual interpretation of them in his illustrated spirituals exemplify the way both of them viewed the camp meetings as a “usable past.” First introduced by literary critic, Van Wyck Brooks in his book *America’s Coming of Age* (1915), the concept of a “usable past,” provided a way for Americans to draw from aspects of their history in an effort to revise their present and future.⁴⁴ In the Depression era of the 1930s, when the nation faced a moment of great instability, nostalgic reconstructions of American history were popular subjects among visual artists,

Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.

⁴³ Crite, “Apologia,” *Three Spirituals*.

⁴⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age* (1915; repr., Mattituck, NY: Amereon Ltd., 1992).

particularly the Regionalists.⁴⁵ When critics discuss African American artists' portrayal of a "usable past," they usually refer to Alain Locke's famous imperative to New Negro artists to express their cultural "rootedness" by representing aspects of their African or black American folk heritage.⁴⁶ However, Crite's illustrated spirituals are also a kind of reclamation of African American history, redefining it in terms of middle class values and rehabilitating the popular view of folk culture as undisciplined and exotic. Crite's representation of the spirituals as a "usable past" of black middle class formality and gentility is also part of his unique contribution to the project of American cultural nationalism.

Another aspect of Crite's autobiography that equally affected his visualization of the spirituals was his familiarity with the concert versions of the music. Crite used the concert spirituals as a model for his illustrations as means of identifying the songs with his black middle class and New England Yankee experience rather than with a rural southern folk one. Contemporary historians and musicologists saw the movement of the spirituals from southern plantation fields and rural camp meetings to the concert halls of northern cities as a metaphor for the cultural development of African Americans.⁴⁷ Growing up in

⁴⁵ For a good discussion of the concept of a "usable past" and 1930s American art, see Karl Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 72-75.

⁴⁶ Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Alain Locke, ed. (1925; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1992), 254-270.

⁴⁷ At the same time, as Lawrence Levine points out, the transformation of the spirituals into "concertized and Europeanized art songs" troubled some black intellectuals and musicologists

Boston, Crite and his family heard concert versions of the spirituals on the radio and when they attended performances by African American choral groups, such as Williams Singers and the Hampton Institute Choir.⁴⁸ In particular, the artist cited the musical repertoire of Roland Hayes, the internationally known African American tenor based in Boston, as an important model for his understanding and appreciation of the spirituals.⁴⁹ In addition, Crite said his experience in his teens and twenties performing the spirituals with a community group called the Clef Choir also deepened his understanding of the spirituals. His membership in

who feared that the loss of their original folk essence would also take away from their inherent value and contribution to western music. Levin, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 166-170. The fiction writer and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston commented on this in her essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals, in which she distinguished between the spirituals, as an authentic expression of a raw spirituality linked with black folk identity and neo-spirituals, or concert versions of the spirituals, which she said were overly aestheticized and sophisticated versions created for both black and white middle class audiences. Zora Neale Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," in Nancy Cunard, *Negro: An Anthology* (1933; repr., *New York: Continuum International Publishing Group*, 1996), 223-225.

⁴⁸ Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on my Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

⁴⁹ For Crite, Hayes not only represented the highest expression of the refined qualities of the concert spirituals but his career and character also embodied the sense of racial uplift that was at the heart of Crite's illustrated spirituals project. Born in rural Tennessee, Hayes came to Boston by way of a brief course of study at Fisk University and as a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In the teens and 1920s, Hayes gained international acclaim for his aestheticized interpretations of the spirituals, and according to Crite and many of his contemporaries Hayes was the epitome of refinement and gentility both on stage and in his personal life. In his autobiography, Crite recounted his mother's recollection of hearing the tenor practicing through her kitchen window when the Crites and Hayes were neighbors in Roxbury in the 1920s. Crite also recalled his excitement of attending Hayes' concert programs within the rarified atmosphere of Boston's Symphony Hall, a venue steeped in Brahmin association, and he expressed pride at being invited to Hayes' home in the upper middle class suburb of Brookline for private concerts and lectures on African culture. Crite "Appendix III: An Approach to Non-Western Art and Non-Western Art to Africa--a Pilgrimage," *An Autobiographical Sketch*. For more on Hayes' career, see MacKinley Helm, *Angel Mo' and her Son Roland Hayes* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1943) and Robert C. Hayden, *Singing for All People: Roland Hayes A Biography* (Boston: Corey and Lucas Publication, 1989).

that group gave him first-hand knowledge of the type of discipline needed to perform the spirituals in a classical manner.⁵⁰

Significantly, Crite's recollections of the spirituals do not include singing them in church. Episcopal congregations, such as Crite's parish church of St. Bartholomew's and his neighborhood church of St. Augustine's, followed the traditional liturgical service and used an established canon of church music, which did not include the spirituals. Moreover, many black churches, especially those connected with the formal traditions of the Episcopal denomination openly discouraged any religious expression that displayed an emotionality or effusiveness linked with African and black folk culture, such as hand clapping, foot stomping, call and response, testifying and the spirituals. Both the absence of the spirituals from Crite's religious life and his reliance upon the secularized versions of the concert spirituals as a stylistic model for his imagery were at odds with the artist's stated desire to associate the spirituals with its original meaning and function as sacred music.

The various contradictions embodied in Crite's statements about the spirituals, as well as his visual interpretations of them, are a site of tension in his art that reflects the sense of ambivalence many black middle class people felt towards the spirituals.⁵¹ On the one hand, middle class blacks took pride in the prestige that the spirituals had gained, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, as Afro-America's greatest contribution to American music and an important part of the

⁵⁰ Crite, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," 44.

⁵¹ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 163-170.

country's cultural heritage.⁵² At the same time, many educated and upwardly mobile African Americans who shared the same values as Crite would have wanted to disassociate themselves from the spirituals because they called to mind the history of slavery and an African American past devoid of freedom, education and opportunity.⁵³

The opening illustration from *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* (fig. 47) demonstrates the sense of ambivalence embodied in Crite's spirituals imagery by referring to the rural and southern origins of the spirituals while at the same time identifying the music with black middle class Episcopal experience in the urban north. In this scene, a young black man wearing overalls walks in front of a single file line of eight black singers dressed in liturgical robes. The man's overalls call to mind what Crite described as "the humble origins of the spirituals," for we read the overalls as the attire of a rural southern type, such as a sharecropper.⁵⁴ However, Crite's portrayal of the man's clothing also references black middle class experience in the urban north. Notice that beneath

⁵² Pronouncements of the spirituals cultural significance ranged from the writings of African American intellectuals, such as Du Bois and Locke, to their interpretation by established European classical composers, such as Antonin Dvorak in his symphony, "From the New World (1893), and their performance on national radio programs such as "Wings Over Jordan," which aired in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois used lyrics of the spirituals to frame each of his chapters on black experience and cited them as the foundation of his argument for the African American contribution to a distinctive national culture. Similarly, Alain Locke called the spirituals "the most characteristic example of race genius as yet produced in America." Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 199.

⁵³ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 169-170.

⁵⁴ Crite, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," 45.

the black overalls he wears a white dress shirt with a collar and cuffs and that, rather than being barefoot, he wears black dress shoes. The formal attributes of his clothing complicate our reading of this man as a symbol of the humble origins of the spirituals or as the expression of the economic and social burdens experienced by the black masses for his shirt and shoes are of a type that would have been worn by a black middle class urban professional or churchgoer.

Crite also associates the overall clad figure with the formality and decorum displayed in a black middle class urban church by embellishing the chorus and the background of his drawings with images of liturgical vestments and symbols (see fig. 38). In this way, as Roland Hayes wrote in the “Foreword” to *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven*, Crite’s illustrations convey the contradictory qualities of the spirituals’ “simplicity” and “grandeur:”

There is a simplicity about the Negro Spirituals that is apt to be deceptive to persons not of the race, which produced them, but actually they are filled with grandeur and symbolism. . . . The singer is presented informally in the earthly simplicity of overalls, while the grandeur to which his thoughts ascend is rendered in terms of highly formalized ecclesiastical symbolism.⁵⁵

Crite’s incorporation of these two aspects of the spirituals mirrors the tension embodied in his visualization which simultaneously celebrates and resists the romantic stereotype of the spirituals as the embodiment of southern black folk culture. As we will see, Crite’s efforts to resist a sentimentalized interpretation of the spirituals by rooting them in his black middle class Episcopal community distinguishes his illustrations from the painted versions of his contemporaries.

⁵⁵ Roland Hayes, “Foreword,” in Crite, *Three Spirituals*.

Images of the Spirituals in 1930s American Art: Two Kinds of "Rootedness"

The spirituals were a popular subject in American art, particularly in the interwar period when American artists working in the contexts of the Harlem Renaissance and the American Scene and Regionalist art movements took an interest in portraying aspects of black religion and music.⁵⁶ For both black and white artists, the spirituals offered an opportunity for them to display their "rootedness" in an African American and American folk tradition that was a hallmark of the cultural nationalism of the period's art and literature. Unlike many of Crite's contemporaries who traveled, either figuratively or literally, outside of their own class and regional identities to connect with a racially distinctive, and distinctively American, subject matter like the spirituals, Crite rooted his interpretation in his own black middle class community and black Episcopal congregation. Crite's refusal to engage with the popular stereotypes of the spirituals as expressive of a black folk religiosity resulted in an interpretation that differed dramatically from the format, iconography and artistic used by his fellow American artists in their versions.

A comparison of Crite's series of fourteen brush and ink illustrations of the spiritual *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* with the contemporary paintings of the

⁵⁶ In addition to Crite, some of the African American artists who portrayed the spirituals in their oeuvre included Aaron Douglas, Malvin Gray Johnson and William H. Johnson. The subject of the spirituals was even more popular among white American artists as indicated by the versions of *Swing Low* and other spirituals by John McCrady, Coulton Waugh and Ruth Star Rose as well as more generalized interpretations of the spirituals by painters Franklin Watkins and Charles Shannon and by the photographer Doris Ulmann in her collaborative project with writer Julia Peterkin, *Roll Jordan Roll* (1929). For more on these artists and the popularity of the spirituals as a subject of early twentieth century American art see, Robert L. Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America, 1915-1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 102-178.

same spiritual by the white American regionalist, John McCrady and the African American modernist, William H. Johnson, demonstrates the unique aspects of Crite's interpretation. In all three renditions of this popular spiritual, each artist translated the main refrain of the lyrics, which describes the protagonist's desire for salvation:

*Swing low sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home (twice)
I look'd over Jordan an' what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.*⁵⁷

In contrast to Crite's black middle class and northern urban versions of the spirituals, the images by McCrady and Johnson defined the spirituals as the product of a black folk experience located in a remote and timeless setting. Moreover, both McCrady and Johnson created their paintings at a considerable physical and psychological distance from their subject matter: McCrady completed his image set in rural Mississippi in his New Orleans studio, and Johnson produced his visionary interpretation of a South Carolina landscape in New York City.⁵⁸

In Crite's version of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, created in 1937 (figs. 48 and 49) we see the same overall clad black figure featured in his illustrations of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* (fig. 47), but here the man is older and portrayed

⁵⁷ See James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson, eds., *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, vol. 2, 62-63.

⁵⁸ Gambone, *Art and Religion in Evangelical America*, 102-103.

with gray hair, a long beard and a wooden walking stick.⁵⁹ Although Crite does not situate this narrative in an urban setting as he did in *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, he does connect his subject matter with a black middle class Episcopal sensibility with his portrayal of the figure's collared shirt and black dress shoes, as well as his insertion of "high church" ecclesiastical symbols, including the elaborately decorated liturgical garments of the black angels and an altar in the background adored with liturgical objects that the artist said represents heaven (fig. 49).⁶⁰ Furthermore, as part of his formalizing approach to representing the spirituals, Crite presented the lyrics in the captions for his drawings in the standard form of English rather than in the vernacular speech recorded in traditional versions, such as the one quoted above from *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926) edited by James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson.

In McCrady's canvas, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, also produced in 1937 (fig. 50), the artist uses an approach typical of many Regionalist artists, who wished to portray the characteristics of American life in different areas of the country with a particular focus on rural lifestyles. McCrady gave his sentimental genre scene a regional setting by basing his imagery on his first-hand studies of the Mississippi countryside and a modest wooden cabin belonging to an African

⁵⁹ Crite clearly conceived of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* and *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* as related for in addition to being produced in the same year, 1937, he juxtaposed the two spirituals in his volume, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven*.

⁶⁰ As Crite wrote in the "Apologia" to *Three Spirituals*, "Heaven . . . is indicated by the altars, for in the Church the altar in the sanctuary represents the Church Triumphant, the Church in Heaven."

American man, whom he interviewed as part of his research.⁶¹ The focus of the scene takes place inside the cabin where a figure lies on a death bed presided over by, one assumes, relatives while a third person, a curious neighbor perhaps, watches the scene from the doorway. Within the same narrative space, McCrady presents a visionary image in which a golden chariot pulled by two white horses and a band of black angels, one of whom battles the devil, descend upon the cabin from an opening in the clouds. As art historian Robert Gambone explained, McCrady based this portion of his scene on the period's most popular visual interpretation of black religious imagery, the 1936 film version of Marc Connolly's musical *The Green Pastures*.⁶² Unlike Crite's illustrations, in which the scene is envisioned from the point of view of the protagonists to mirror the first person narrative of the lyrics, McCrady situates the figures and action in his painting at a physical and emotional distance defining the viewer not as participant observer but as a voyeur.

Johnson's expressionistically colored canvas depicting *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* from c. 1944 (fig. 51) also emphasizes the folk quality of the spirituals, but here the artist achieves his effect as much with his painting style as with his

⁶¹ Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America*, 114-115.

⁶² Connolly's 1930 Pulitzer Prize winning play was adapted for the screen in 1936. In both versions, African Americans portrayed biblical figures and angles and reenacted stories from the Old Testament with contemporary costumes and settings. For an incisive discussion of Connolly's play and motion picture and its relationship to the social and theatrical history of the 1930s, see Thomas Cripps, ed., *The Green Pastures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979). Crite stated that he had seen both the play and film, and he illustrated a scene from the film in a 1936 pencil drawing illustrated in Edmund B. Gaither, *Our Elders: Crite and Dames: An Exhibition of Works by Allan R. Crite and Chester A. Dames* (Boston: Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 1971).

interpretation of the subject matter. In this scene, Johnson reduces the narrative to an image of an elderly black man, naked except for bright yellow trunks, stretching his arms and legs at a ninety-degree angle to his body and framing a bright orange chariot pulled by a white horse with electric blue accents. Johnson defines the background in a similarly reduced manner using several bands of color to indicate a barren landscape, the River Jordan, mountains and a broad pink sky. The most striking element of the composition is Johnson's portrayal of eleven black angels with bright magenta wings, whom he portrays as contemporary African American women dressed in knee-length party dresses, bobby socks and black patent leather shoes. As art historian Richard Powell has noted, Johnson's religious paintings were intentionally rendered in a neo-folk or naïve style, which the artist consciously developed out of his experience with modernism to express a form of "rootedness" based on an "internalized primitivism," or his self-identification with the perceived black folk essence that became the *raison d'être* of his later art.⁶³ As we have seen, Crite rooted his illustrations of the spirituals on his internalization of his black middle class Episcopal values and aesthetic preferences.

Crite's visualization of the spirituals with a serial format, in which he created between fourteen and forty drawings for each spiritual and interpreted the narrative in the lyrics phrase by phrase, also differed from the approach of

⁶³ As Powell describes in his essay on Johnson's Crucifixion paintings, the artist stated "All that which in time has been saved up in my family of primitiveness and tradition, and which is concentrated in me." Richard J. Powell, "'In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition': William H. Johnson's 'Jesus and the Three Marys,'" *American Art* 5, No. 4 (Autumn, 1991): 21.

his contemporaries, all of whom encapsulated the narrative of the lyrics into a single image.⁶⁴ The sense of a timeless existence that McCrady and Johnson conveyed in their paintings is enhanced by the way they collapsed the narrative and music of the spiritual into a single frame. Crite's serial presentation allowed him to approximate the progression of the narrative as well as the experience of the music's duration with its transitions from solemnity to exuberance. Crite's use of a serial format also furthered his goals for his illustrated spirituals, and his use of repeated imagery contributes to the performative nature of his interpretation. Like his series of portraits and neighborhood genre scenes, the multiple images in the illustrated spirituals produce a black middle class Episcopal identity through the repetition of gestures representing formality, gentility and decorum.⁶⁵

While Crite and his contemporaries may have had similar ambitions to portray the spirituals as a significant African American contribution to American culture, his fellow artists' images of black folk types reinforced stereotypes of blackness and a type of sentimentalism that Crite vehemently opposed. As art

⁶⁴ Crite's approach to interpreting the spirituals was similar to his serialization of other biblical and liturgical texts into large format brush and ink drawings he was creating in the 1930s, such as his illustrations of the Passion and the Beatitudes, as well as his later work, *All Glory: Brush Drawing Meditations on the Prayer of Consecration* (Cambridge: Society of Saint John the Evangelist, 1947).

⁶⁵ As discussed in the Introduction, the notion of repetition is central to Judith Butler's theory of the performative nature of identity. According to Butler, "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" refers to "the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Feminist Theory and Phenomenology," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

historian Jacqueline Francis has argued, many artists consciously and unconsciously represented the spirituals in ways that were familiar to the general public when they associated the music with romantic and cliché notions of the “Old South.”⁶⁶ According to Francis:

Artists who turned to what I call “the clapboard aesthetic” traded upon the popular conception of the South as charming, picturesque and timeless. For African-Americans the South may have been reclamation of a rich, cultural heritage and a history of survival and resistance to oppression; nonetheless, an assessment of such images must also measure the degree of agency accorded to their pictured black subjects . . . in this framework, religious blacks are not seen as creators of and participants in empowering rituals, but instead as children who rely upon a patriarchal god for deliverance.⁶⁷

In contrast, Crite’s use of references to black middle class and black urban experience connects the spirituals with modernity, economic mobility and freedom. Furthermore, Crite’s serialization of his spiritual imagery sets the black figures in motion giving them a greater sense of agency as authors and performers of the music rather than as passive subjects.

In taking on the theme of the spirituals in his oeuvre, Crite had to contend with the expectations that critics and audiences had for black artists who chose to portray a culturally-loaded subject like the spirituals. As Mary Ann Calo notes in her study of the critical reception of African American art during the interwar period:

Mainstream critics looking for racial qualities in the work of African American artists were especially pleased when they discovered evidence

⁶⁶ Jacqueline Francis, “Modern Art, ‘Racial Art’: The Work of Malvin Gray Johnson and the Challenges of Painting, 1928-1934” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2000), 54-56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

of an emotional sensibility rooted in black folk culture and religion. They were in fact looking for the visual equivalents of the Negro spiritual.⁶⁸

Despite the fact that Crite worked hard to dispel the stereotypes associated with the spirituals and black identity, nearly every review of his illustrations described the imagery as an expression of a “deep sense of religious fervor” and “peculiarly moving religious sincerity.”⁶⁹ Although many critics noted the inventiveness of Crite’s imagery and his technical achievement with the medium of brush and ink, none connected his project with the larger art historical tradition, including portrayals of the spirituals by contemporary American Regionalists and the interest in religious subjects among Boston’s contemporary figural expressionists, such as Jack Levine, Hyman Bloom and David Aronson.⁷⁰ Likewise, writers rarely mentioned the artist’s unique approach to representing the spirituals with a visual vocabulary of ecclesiastical symbols and instead favored describing the racial aspects of his images, their black figures and “urban tenement” settings.⁷¹ None of Crite’s reviewers commented on the relationship

⁶⁸ Mary Ann Calo, “African American Art and Critical Discourse Between the World Wars,” *American Quarterly*, 595.

⁶⁹ Local critics made these comments in their reviews of Crite’s one-man show of the illustrated spirituals, *Go Down Moses* and *Steal Away* at Boston’s Grace Horne Gallery from December 1937 through January 1938. Alice Lawton, “Spirituals Illustrated by Allan Crite,” *Boston Sunday Post* (December 12, 1937) and Irma Whitney, “At Grace Horne’s,” *The Boston Herald* (Sunday, December 19, 1937).

⁷⁰ Likewise, African American art historians did not connect Crite’s illustrated spirituals with a tradition of African American religious art, namely the biblical paintings created by Henry Ossawa Tanner.

⁷¹ Lawton, “Spirituals Illustrated by Allan Crite,” *Boston Sunday Post* and Whitney, “At Grace Horne’s,” *The Boston Herald*.

between his use of liturgical imagery in the illustrated spirituals and the contemporary works of the Boston Liturgical Art Guild artists, with whom Crite was associated.⁷² Critics did not acknowledge the artist's larger goals for his illustrations to translate the musical structure of the spirituals and, more importantly, to reproduce his brush and ink drawings in a published format as a means of distributing his black middle class and Episcopal version of the spirituals to a broad audience.⁷³

The Means for the Message: Crite's Use of the Brush and Ink Medium and the Relationship of Form and Content in the Illustrated Spirituals

The medium of brush and ink offered Crite a particular range of visual possibilities that allowed him to create a dramatically different interpretation of the spirituals than his fellow artists created in their painted versions.⁷⁴ With a stark graphic sensibility that is in part a function of a restricted palette of black

⁷² Beginning in the 1930s with his participation in the refurbishment of the interior of Boston's Trinity Church in Copley Square, Crite engaged in the production of large-scale liturgical art commissions. While employed by the Ranbush decorating company in the late 1940s and early 1950s Crite completed a large church mural for St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, New York (destroyed by fire 1972) created a painted the Baldachin at the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C. and a set of stations of the Cross for a Catholic convent in Detroit, Michigan. Allan Rohan Crite, "Religious Art of the 1950s," Allan Rohan Crite Vertical File, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

⁷³ Interestingly, reviews of the published versions of the drawings were more balanced and focused on the artist's stated goals for the imagery rather than stereotyped assumptions, a situation that was perhaps a function of availability in these volumes of the artist's own writings on the subject of the spirituals. S.M.N., "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord by Allan Rohan Crite," *Phylon* 6, no. 1. (January-March, 1945): 98-99 and Lillian Mitchell Allen, "Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven by Allan Rohan Crite," *The Journal of Negro Education* 19, no. 1 (Winter, 1950): 58-59.

⁷⁴ Each artistic medium with its specific physical characteristic and technical properties offers a range of possibilities for the artist to create imagery and develop a unique style.

and white, Crite's brush and ink drawings resisted the kind of folksy, romanticized and expressionistic renditions of the spirituals evidenced in the paintings of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* by John McCrady and William H. Johnson. As we have seen, Crite portrayed a range of emotions in his illustrated spirituals through the gestures and demeanor of the figures, the serial format and a visual vocabulary of ecclesiastical symbols rather than through color, dramatic lighting or other painterly effects.

Crite used the qualities of the brush and ink technique to its full advantage in his illustrated spirituals creating bold compositions that rely on line more than color to describe details and to articulate the contours of the figures, forms and surrounding space. In contrast to his use of perspective and modeling in his painted portraits and genre scenes, while working in the medium of brush and ink Crite applied an Early Renaissance and Byzantine style that he also used in his altarpieces and linocut prints of the Stations of the Cross of the same period (see figs. 34 and 54). By overlapping and stacking figures and forms to create a sense of depth, Crite's illustrations of the spirituals appear flatter than his painted imagery, which results in the majority of these compositions reading up the picture plane rather than back into it.

Crite learned the technique of brush and ink during his studies at the Museum School, but he had gained an appreciation of it as a teenager while exploring the Asian art galleries at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.⁷⁵ According to the artist, the curator of the Asian collection gave him a few Japanese brush

⁷⁵ Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

drawings and prints, which Crite used as models when he developed own his illustration technique.⁷⁶ Although he made a number of brush and ink drawings as part of his neighborhood series, the artist seems to have preferred the technique for his religious works. According to Crite, his earliest efforts in the medium created between 1933 and 1935 consisted of a series of liturgical drawings illustrating incidents from the life of Christ. Works such as *Ascension* (1935) (fig. 52) became the prototypes for the artist's illustrated spirituals.⁷⁷

Crite's decision to use the brush and ink technique to illustrate the spirituals evolved over time, and the degree to which this medium affected his unique interpretation of the spirituals is evident when one looks at the artist's first visualizations created in the medium of wash drawings. In an illustration included in the artist's autobiography, which he titled "My first attempt to illustrate a spiritual" and dated to the early 1930s (fig. 53), Crite represents a muscular black man standing with clenched fists raised to his chest and looking down at a barren landscape, defined by the suggestion of a mountain and large

⁷⁶ Crite apparently kept these drawings throughout his career. He illustrated three of them in "Appendix III: An Approach to Non-Western Art and Non-Western Art to Africa--a Pilgrimage," *An Autobiographical Sketch*. In his autobiography, Crite also described how his early interest in Asian art was the beginning of his conscious "move out of the confines of a Greco-Roman-Euro-American outlook." Crite's later works, including a series of ink drawings and watercolors, *Reflections on the Afro, Asian and American Cultural History of Peoples of Color* (1985) and many of his religious works of art that portrayed Christian subjects in relation to non-Western cultures, also reflect this shift in outlook.

⁷⁷ In particular, the artist noted that his images of the "Beatitudes," Christ's teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, and the Passion were the prototypes for his conception of the spirituals. Crite, "Appendix II: A Commentary on My Religious Drawings," *An Autobiographical Sketch*. A large group of Crite's early liturgical drawings are in the collection of the Museum of the Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston.

open sky.⁷⁸ Next to image the artist wrote the first few lines of the spiritual: “It’s me, It’s me, O Lord, standing in de need O prayer.” This image is an intriguing document: much about Crite’s interpretation—from the working class attire of the figure, to the timeless rural setting, and the use of vernacular English in the caption—draws upon stereotypes of black folk culture and thus differs dramatically from the more formal and abstract conceptions of the spirituals in his brush and ink drawings.

Crite adapted his drawing style in his illustrated spirituals to utilize the design elements of the medium. In particular, brush and ink illustrators use the relationship of positive and negative space to create imagery that is often two-dimensional and design oriented. In fact, there are some formal similarities between Crite’s brush and ink drawings of the spirituals and his linocut prints of the Stations of the Cross, which were created during the same period (fig. 54).⁷⁹ In the brush and ink technique, the artist arranges the composition as a network of alternating areas of positive to negative space created with the medium’s limited palette of black and white. For example, in *Were You There When They*

⁷⁸ Crite, “1930-1939,” *An Autobiographical Sketch*.

⁷⁹ Crite began producing sets of three by five inch linoleum block prints of Stations of the Cross in 1935 and examples of these works are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Public Library, and the Museum of the Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston. Another set of larger linoleum block Stations, in which the artist created two panels—one representing the main narrative of each Station and one situated like a predella that focused on the feet of Christ and other biblical figures—is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, purchased during the artist’s early career in 1947. Crite also produced pen and ink drawings of the Stations of the Cross during the mid-1930s, such as *Last Station: Suggestion for the Station of the Cross* (1935; Collection of David C. Driskell). For a discussion of Crite’s serial religious drawings see Edmund B. Gaither, “Revelation,” *Reunion: The New England Connection* 3, no. 9 (July 1995): 4-5; 11.

Crucified My Lord, the faces of the black figures often read as silhouettes against the white of their haloes, headscarves or vestments (see figs. 35 - 37). In some of the images in *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, which also represent the Stations, the artist reverses the traditional use of black and white, making the areas of black function as the positive space and the areas of white function as the negative space. Moreover, in many of the drawings for *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, nearly the entire frame is composed of black, another symbolic means by which Crite reorients his biblical images to read in terms of a black sensibility (fig. 55).

In describing his visual approach in the illustrated spirituals, Crite explained repeatedly that his use of black figures was a feature of the work's iconography as well as a compositional device. The artist's statements about this aspect of his drawings' iconography are often contradictory, expressing an ambivalence about their meaning that he also expressed visually through the medium of brush and ink. On one hand, Crite stated that he used black figures to illustrate the spirituals because he wanted to emphasize the fact that the spirituals are a musical form and cultural tradition created by African Americans.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the artist described the universal nature of his imagery when he said, "My use of the black figure was not only in a limited racial sense, because I am black, but [in the spirituals] I was trying to tell the

⁸⁰ Allan Rohan Crite, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 18, 1998.

story of Man in terms of the black figure.”⁸¹ And, Crite often evaded the question as to why he used black figures in his religious drawings with the retort, “Black made a good composition.”⁸² This last statement is significant because it points to the importance with which Crite, like all visual artists, placed upon the formal characteristics of his art and to the ways in which his artistic style contributed to the ambivalence embodied in his interpretation of the spirituals.

I argue that Crite’s use of the medium of brush and ink contributed greatly to his humanistic interpretation of the spirituals. Without the ability to suggest a range of brown skin tones, as he did in his early wash drawings of the spirituals and in his painted portraits and genre scenes, Crite’s use of black ink to describe the identity of the figures in his brush illustrations is literal as well as symbolic. In fact, the black figures in Crite’s drawings can be read on several levels, and he used them as another element in his visual vocabulary. Like his use of familiar elements from Christian iconography—haloes, altars, vestments and rituals—Crite used black figures as emblematic of the spirituals’ relationship to both African American and mainstream white culture. Crite’s use of black ink to describe the complexion of the figures encourages the viewer to read these figures as African American or as people of African descent. At the same time, other aspects of the black figure’s physical appearance, including their Semitic

⁸¹ Crite, quoted in Robert Brown, “Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite,” Archives of American Art, 74.

⁸² Ibid.

facial features and European hair, which he depicted as having a straight or slightly wavy texture, encourage the viewer to read these figures as white, or more ambiguously, as a universal image of humanity.⁸³ Our ability to read the figures in Crite's illustrated spirituals as black, white and "racially-unspecific" symbols of humanity is not only a function of the artist's intention to create open-ended images that would appeal and inspire a broad audience, but also a formal characteristic of his chosen medium, giving additional resonance the artist's comment "Black made a good composition."

*Translation II. Reproducibility: From Musical to Visual Form
and from Original Drawings to Published Versions*

Reproducibility, the act of making a close imitation or the production of multiple versions to create a new expression, is another important aspect of Crite's role as a translator of the spirituals.⁸⁴ As the artist stated, he wanted his illustrations to reproduce in visual form the narrative of the spirituals' lyrics as well as the structure and emotional content of the music. Likewise, when the artist published four of his illustrated spirituals in the volumes, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* and *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven*, he reproduced the drawings in a new size, medium, and format, which provided the possibility for new aesthetic and spiritual responses from a wide audience.

⁸³ In some illustrated spirituals, such as *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See*, Crite's representation of the overall clad protagonist is a black figure with short hair that looks more textured than the longer wavy hair of the angels and Christ.

⁸⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2005), s.vv "Reproduce," "Reproduction" "Reproducibility."

In the essay “Why I Illustrate the Spirituals,” Crite explained his intention to use human figures as symbols for the musical structure of the spirituals by stating “A single figure is used to set forth the melody, groups of figures, to suggest the accompaniment” (see figs. 35, 44, 45 and 47).⁸⁵ The artist’s use of a serial format also contributed significantly to his translation of the musical qualities of the spirituals. As Kenneth Conant pointed out in the Introduction to the volume, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*:

Where the sung Spiritual creates cumulative dramatic tension by repeated variations of a music phrase, the artist lays increasing stress on the central idea of a pictorial sequence. And just as no single phrase in music has real meaning apart from its context, so here the great story carries its full weight only in the interdependence of one picture upon the preceding and succeeding ones.⁸⁶

Unlike the versions of the spirituals by his artist contemporaries in which each spiritual is represented by a single image, Crite’s use of a sequence of related images allowed him to translate into visual terms the gradual swelling in the music’s volume and emotional content from the beginning to the end of the song. The illustrations for *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* demonstrate the way the artist used this technique. In the final series of images the artist increases the number of choir members and the amount of visual detail in each image, especially the

⁸⁵ Crite, “Why I Illustrate the Spirituals,” 45. Crite used this formula in all thirteen of his illustrated spirituals.

⁸⁶ Kenneth J. Conant, “Introduction,” *Were You There*. According to Crite it was Conant facilitated the publication of the illustrated spirituals with Harvard University Press. Conant, a Harvard University professor of religion, knew Crite through the artist’s studies at the Harvard Extension School and became acquainted with the illustrations after attending the artist’s lectures on the spirituals at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. Allan Rohan Crite, interview by author, August 17, 2000.

degree of elaborate decoration on the figures' liturgical robes (compare figs. 47 and 38).

The reproducibility of the spirituals' musical qualities in Crite's illustrations was also indebted to his knowledge of the spirituals as concert music because, as described above, the concert versions of the spiritual influenced his dignified and universalizing interpretation. In his essay about the cross over career of concert singer, actor and activist, Paul Robeson, film historian, Richard Dyer, describes the technical process of "concertizing" the spirituals that soloists like Robeson, as well as composers and choir directors, used to make the spirituals appeal to a mainstream, middle-class audience.⁸⁷ Dyer's description of Robeson's singing style can be applied to Crite's visualization of the classical refinement embodied in the concert spirituals:

[H]e sings the melody straight through with little adornment whether the classical singers trills, slides and other decorations or the jazz use of syncopation . . . his voice always stays within the strict tonal system of Western harmony, not using any of the 'dirty' notes of black blues, gospel and soul music.⁸⁸

Crite's reliance upon his formal art training and knowledge of ecclesiastical symbols and liturgical rituals to organize and translate the lyrics of the spirituals

⁸⁷ Richard Dyer, "Paul Robeson: Crossing Over," *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986; repr., New York: Routledge, 2004), 78-79. Dyer's discussion also applies to the musical interpretations of Robeson's equally famous contemporary, Roland Hayes, with whom Crite was familiar. According to Dyer, the concertizing approach to interpreting the spirituals can be traced to the late nineteenth century and to the efforts of choirmaster, George L. White of the African American traveling choir, the Jubilee singers. White's efforts to popularize the spirituals for a mainstream audience required his singers to perform with, in White's words, a degree of "finish, precision and sincerity." George L. White quoted in Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 81.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

into visual imagery, paralleled the ways in which concert singers, like Robeson, reproduced aspects of their classical music training in their performance of the spirituals.⁸⁹

Crite also reproduced the classically-trained singer's interpretation of the concert spirituals in his illustrations when he purged the vernacular English from the lyrics in the captions of his drawings and, in the case of his published version of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, when he chose a Gothic typestyle for the captioned lyrics.⁹⁰ With these adjustments to the sound and look of the lyrics, Crite associated the spirituals with the formality of literary language as well as the western religious traditions of illuminated manuscripts. Furthermore, as described above, by standardizing the language used in his captions, the artist negated the idea that spirituals embody the distinctive attributes of black folk culture and connected the spirituals with the middle class values of attaining a high level of education and refinement.

⁸⁹ Further, the artist explained the importance that his understanding of classical music had on his illustrated spirituals because his early experiments for this body of work included making drawings of symphonic music while attending concerts at Symphony Hall in Boston. Crite recorded this recollection in a transcript for the lecture, "Negro Spirituals," which the artist presented on numerous occasions in the 1940s. The transcript for this and many other lectures the artist delivered on the spirituals and liturgical art are included in *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*.

⁹⁰ For example, Crite translated the popular spiritual, "All God's Chillun' Got Wings" in to his illustrated spiritual, *Heaven*, completed in 1937 and published in 1948. In transposing the lyrics as the captions of his drawings, Crite replaced vernacular language of the original with the standard form of English. For example, one of the artist's captions read, "Everybody's talking about Heaven, aren't you going there?" instead of "Everybody's talking 'bout Heaven ain't going there," a version used in most contemporary collections of spirituals, such as James Weldon Johnson's *Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, 71-73.

Reproducibility is another important issue related to the publication of Crite's illustrated spirituals because the translation of Crite's brush and ink drawings to mechanically reproduced images not only altered their appearance but also enhanced the artist's original intent for his illustrations to refute the folk identity of the spirituals. Through the publication process, Crite's individual folio drawings executed in brush and India ink and measuring twelve by twenty inches were transformed into small-scale printed images measuring six by ten inches and bound in hardcover volumes.⁹¹ The original drawings read as individual works of art and resemble paintings, liturgical objects or manuscript illuminations.⁹² More importantly, in their original form, the artist's brush and ink medium is more apparent than in the published versions. Critics who viewed the originals when they were exhibited at the Grace Horne Gallery in 1937 and at the Boston Athenaeum in 1948 noted the sense of immediacy in Crite's handling of the medium observing the fluidity of his brush line and the tactile nature of the surfaces' "luminous, jewel-like texture" and "metallic" character.⁹³ In contrast, the imagery in the published drawings is more uniform and condensed and the pictorial surface is flatter both in terms of the texture of the ink medium on the paper and the overall sense of space within each

⁹¹ Crite grouped the illustrated spirituals with his body of liturgical art drawings. In viewing the original works one understands the relationship, for they are executed in the same format and style as the artist's drawings depicting the life of Christ, the Beatitudes, and the prayer of the Eucharist.

⁹² Whitney, "At Grace Horne's," *The Boston Herald*.

⁹³ Lawton, "Spirituals Illustrated by Allan Crite," *Boston Sunday Post*.

composition. In addition, the published images appear more standardized due to the fact that the artist's handwritten captions have been replaced by typesetting.

Despite the loss of a measure of the original drawings' expressiveness and artfulness, the published versions, as James Porter explained in his review of Crite's volume *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, convey to an even greater degree the sense of formality and finish that was at the heart of the artist's project to detach the spirituals from their association with the folk qualities of spontaneity, naïveté and emotionality. The addition of small symbolic images printed on the facing page of each drawing in the volumes *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* and *Three Spirituals from Earth Heaven* further enhanced the relationship between Crite's spirituals imagery and the Episcopal and Catholic liturgy. The published versions also fulfilled the artist's overall goal to make this body of work accessible to a large audience. Finally, the smaller format of the published versions as well as their portability facilitated their function as contemplative works of art, which as we will see, was an important aspect of Crite's intention to translate the spirituals into liturgical artworks.

Translation III: From Religious Images to Liturgical Works of Art

Crite's desire to interpret the spirituals in terms of their liturgical function, or what he called their "meaningful place of service" is another way in which this body of work enacted and preserved the black middle class Episcopal

identity of his community and congregation.⁹⁴ In addition to his arguments against the spirituals' folk identity and their use as a form of secular entertainment, Crite insisted that the spirituals be considered as another aspect of the Church liturgy.⁹⁵ As the artist explained in an essay entitled, "The Meaning of the Spirituals," the liturgical arts of the church, like the spirituals, "have as their function, the teaching of the faith. . . . to lead the children of men to the throne of God, and . . . to be the means of communion with God, in a very special and intimate sense."⁹⁶ In addition to their narrative content, the serial format of Crite's illustrations parallel the repetitive quality of the liturgy, as in

⁹⁴ Crite has written extensively on the subject of religion and art, and the artist's statements were important for my understanding of the relationship between his middle class, Episcopal and artistic identities. In addition to his three published articles, "Why I Illustrate the Spirituals," *World Horizons: A Magazine for Young People* 1, no. 3 (May 1938), "The Incarnation and the Arts," *The Living Church* (December 25, 1949) and "The Meaning of the Spirituals," *Catholic Arts Quarterly* 17 (1953), I consulted *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*, which include a number of transcripts of his early lectures on religion and art.

⁹⁵ Crite's arguments in this regard are labored and his reasoning is somewhat circular. For example, in the lecture "The Spirituals, Liturgy and Art" his argument that the spirituals as a form of liturgical art music rests on his definition of the liturgy as "the tradition of prayer recorded in the service books and in the social memory of a community." According to Crite, communal worship is "liturgical in character, as liturgy binds the community into a unit." He explained that the rituals of the church are enactments of the liturgy and these performances are aided by the use of liturgical objects, artworks, and vestments. Music used for the purpose of communal worship therefore is also liturgical in character. Turning to the spirituals, Crite defines the music as the product of African American's African heritage as well as their adoption of Christianity. He explains, that because African religion and music were the products of a communal life, they can also be understood as liturgical. Therefore, Crite concludes the spirituals are liturgical music. Allan Rohan Crite, "Spirituals, Liturgy and Art," transcript in *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*.

⁹⁶ In this essay, Crite summarized his arguments from a series of lectures he delivered in the 1940s on the spirituals and liturgical art. Crite, "The Meaning of the Spirituals," *Catholic Arts Quarterly* 17 (1953): 69-70.

the cycle of prayers performed during a Mass or a Stations of the Cross service.⁹⁷ As Crite argued, the worshipper is brought into contact with the divine through the rituals of the liturgy, which he defined as repeated acts of prayer.⁹⁸ Thus, for Crite the act of viewing his illustrations, especially in their published format, was akin to an act of prayer.⁹⁹

However, while Crite says that his aim was to represent the spirituals in terms of their liturgical role of bringing the faithful closer to God, I contend that he also wanted his imagery to serve a didactic role to instruct viewers in the genteel performance or, in other words, in a way of being that would facilitate their acts of worship and uphold their personal and communal dignity. In this way, Crite's illustrated spirituals express a desire to use his art for racial uplift, to demonstrate black respectability to whites in order to argue for the potential of the race for full citizenship rights, and to model proper behavior for lower class blacks to inspire them to improve themselves and in turn help elevate the race.

An illustration from *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, depicting Veronica wiping the face of Jesus (fig. 56), demonstrates how the artist's representation of the spirituals as liturgical art also addressed the idea of racial uplift, for his imagery emphasizes the role of the liturgy to instruct and

⁹⁷ Crite illustrates this connection in his set of brush drawings, *All Glory: Brush Meditations on the Prayer of Consecration* (Cambridge: Society of Saint John the Evangelist, 1948).

⁹⁸ Crite, "Spirituals, Liturgy and Art," unedited transcript in *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*.

⁹⁹ In the artist's writings and interviews, he described his original intention to publish all thirteen of his brush and ink illustrations in five bound volumes, each of which would relate to a particular biblical theme. Robert Brown, "Oral History Interview with Allan Rohan Crite, 80-81 and Crite, "Negro Spirituals," unedited transcript, *The Allan Rohan Crite Papers*.

inspire the faithful in their relationship with God as well as their fellow human beings. In the scene, which is also a translation of the sixth Station of the Cross, Crite depicts St. Veronica as a contemporary African American woman dressed in middle class church attire. According to the artist:

The figures of Simon of Cyrene and St. Veronica . . . were made in ordinary modern dress because these two characters stepped out of the crowd to render assistance to Christ and there have always been men and women like Simon and Veronica in all ages, even down to today.¹⁰⁰

Linking the biblical figure of Veronica to the present moment and, more specifically, to the members of the artist's community and congregation is a form of translation of the liturgical meaning of the spirituals to contemplate one's own responsibility for Christ's sacrifice. As Crite explained, "the entire spiritual although narrative in character is at the same time contemplative. It continually asks the question 'Were You There?'" Crite's representation of Veronica also enacts the ideal of racial uplift because she represents the role of middle class black women, like Crite's mother, whose charity work at organizations, such as the Settlement House, helped less fortunate members of their community assimilate into American society. Through his illustrated spirituals, Crite fulfilled his moral and social obligation as a "race" man to model proper social and spiritual behavior for the edification of both blacks and whites.

Finally, Crite's argument for understanding the spirituals in terms of their liturgical function relates to his self-identification as a liturgical artist. As we saw in the artist's *Self-Portrait* of 1938 (fig. 9), the role of liturgical artist embodied his

¹⁰⁰ Crite, "Apologia," *Were You There*.

middle class and Episcopal sensibility for it signified an artistic approach based on serious religious convictions and a disciplined study of biblical and church iconography derived from his own research. Unlike the role of “artist reporter,” which he assumed for his portraits and neighborhood paintings, Crite’s role as liturgical artist broadened the basis of his source material from personal knowledge drawn from his black middle class community and Episcopal congregation to knowledge acquired through study and research. Likewise, in his role as liturgical artist of the spirituals, Crite broadened his black middle class vision by bringing the larger story of humankind to his neighborhood.

By performing the role of liturgical artist in his illustrated spirituals, Crite was following the dictums of the Liturgical Art Movement, of which he was a part.¹⁰¹ Begun in England in the late nineteenth century, the Liturgical Art Movement became popular in the U.S. from the 1920s to the 1950s within the Episcopal and Catholic denominations, and there was a particularly strong chapter of affiliated artists working in Boston.¹⁰² The Liturgical Art Movement’s focus on bringing high quality and tasteful religious objects into church sanctuaries paralleled the goals of the Arts and Crafts Movement to create objects

¹⁰¹ In his autobiography Crite mentioned his involvement with *Ars Instaurare*, a group of Boston artists founded in 1941 that produced artworks in various media based on the liturgy of the Catholic Church. During the late 1930s, Crite participated in the restoration and renovation of the artworks inside Boston’s Trinity Church, and in the late 1940s, he worked with the Rambush Decorating Company creating large scale liturgical art works—murals and a painted baldachin—for churches in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Detroit. Allan Rohan Crite, “Religious Art of the 1950s,” Allan Rohan Crite Vertical File, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰² Keith F. Pecklers, *The Unread Vision: The Liturgical Art Movement in the United States of America: 1926-1955* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 213-234.

for the home that displayed a high level of craftsmanship, refined aesthetics and functionality.¹⁰³ As his writings and works of art demonstrate, Crite applied these goals to his altarpieces and Stations of the Cross created for display in Episcopal and Catholic sanctuaries and also to his illustrations of the spirituals. Many contemporary critics remarked upon the studied nature of Crite's images noting the "painstaking research" evident in his portrayal of the costumes of the biblical figures as well as his depiction of ecclesiastical symbols and musical instruments.¹⁰⁴ For example, in a series of drawings in *Heaven* (fig. 57), Crite performs the role of liturgical artist and music historian when he includes a brief visual history of the harp as part of his translation of the spiritual's second verse:

*I got a harp
You got a harp,
All God's children got harps
When we get to heaven
We're going to take up our harps
And play all over God's heaven.*¹⁰⁵

In addition, by embellishing many of the harps with the same frontally posed figures of black saints and angels that he represents on the liturgical garments of the figures, Crite depicts the black presence in the history and hierarchy of the church. The artist's desire to have his elevated and dignified versions of the spirituals reach a wide audience—through their publication as well as through

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Whitney, "At Grace Horne's," *The Boston Herald*.

¹⁰⁵ For complete lyrics, see Johnson, *The Book of Negro Spirituals*, vol. 1, 71-73. As Crite explained in the "Apologia" to his volume *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven*, his illustrations for the verse "I got a harp" included a visual history of the harp "from the simple trigon to the seven-pedal modern instrument."

his articles and public addresses on the relationship of the spirituals to the liturgy—demonstrate that he viewed his role as a liturgical artist and visual interpreter of the spirituals as part of his work for the cause of racial uplift.

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By rooting his interpretation of the spirituals within his own racial, religious and class identities, Crite's brush and ink illustrations, like his portraits and neighborhood paintings, gave voice to the experiences and sensibilities of his fellow community and congregation members in Boston and affirmed their outlook and values as part of a broad spectrum of black experience. Different from his other early works, however, Crite's published essays and lectures on the subject of the spirituals helped constitute his black middle class and Episcopal identity through the process of taking on the additional roles of liturgist, music historian and author. In the Conclusion that follows, I explore further some of the ways in which Crite inhabited the persona of a black middle class artist-historian within the performative space he created in his Allan Rohan Crite House Museum.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined how Allan Rohan Crite's early artworks exemplify an African American artistic "rootedness" that was tied to the artist's sense of place within his black middle class community in Boston. Crite maintained his connection to Boston throughout his life, for he continued to reside in the city's African American neighborhood and to use the local scene as the backdrop for many of his artworks. Moreover, Crite's artistic goals continued to be guided by the middle class and New England values of formality and respectability that he had learned in Boston as a young man. Even in his late career, in the 1990s, Crite continued his performance of a black middle class Bostonian identity. I conclude this study by reflecting on how that performance was visible in my personal interactions with the artist.

My recollections of Crite are intimately tied to the Allan Rohan Crite House Museum, the artist's residence and art studio located in a lofty four-storey brownstone at 410 Columbus Avenue in Boston's South End district.¹ Crite maintained his residence as a museum from the early 1970s until his death in 2007, and through this endeavor, Crite found additional ways to record his memory and experience of the black middle class way of life he had known

¹ According to Representative Byron Rushing and art historian Edmund B. Gaither, both of whom began visiting Crite in the 1970s, the artist began treating his residence on Columbus Avenue as a space dedicated to the public display of his art after he and his mother moved there in 1971. According to Rushing, Crite originally intended to bequeath his house and its contents to either Harvard University or the African American History Museum in Boston. However, after the artist married Jacqueline Cox-Crite in 1993, the couple decided to maintain the house and the artist's estate as the Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute.

during his early life. More than an act of recollection, the Crite House Museum was a significant expression of the artist's agency and authority to assert his identity and insert himself and his art into the historical record.

From my first visit to the Crite House Museum, I recognized that the artist's arrangement of imagery and personal objects in his home studio was a kind of portrait or autobiographical statement (see fig. 1). More recently I have come to understand this visual display and the rhetorical narratives the artist constructed about it during our visits as performances of his black middle class Bostonian identity. For example, the oil portraits of family members and friends, watercolors and drawings of neighborhood scenes from the 1930s and 1940s, large painted altarpieces and other liturgical objects, framed diplomas from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Harvard Extension School and Harvard alumni chairs all functioned as visual indicators of the artist's investment in the middle class values of family, community, religion, education, and professional achievement.² Although Crite's residence lacked the material comforts one expects to find in a middle class home, the ascetic living

² Crite's autobiographical writings, produced during the same period he set up his house museum, constituted another stage for him to perform his identity. Within the text of his memoir, *An Autobiographical Sketch*, Crite inhabited a number of rhetorical personae, including that of artist-historian, philosopher and theologian. In addition, Crite's formal writing style, and prodigious use of verbal embellishments aided his enactment of the sense of Yankee gentility he performed in his early artworks through the visual conventions of formal attire and a reserved and serious demeanor. Crite also performed these aspects of his personality during his house tours, the narratives of which closely resembled the text of his autobiography. Given that the two projects were undertaken simultaneously, it would seem that Crite's arrangement of his artworks within the physical space of his house museum aided his organization of his life events and artworks within the series of chronologically arranged chapters that formed his autobiography. I plan to explore the performative aspect of Crite's autobiography and house museum further in a future project.

environment was also part of his performance of his middle class identity, especially his religious identity as an Episcopal. For example, the predominance of religious artworks, many of which appeared to be in use as liturgical objects, did not seem to function as material objects, but rather their presence transformed the rooms of the house into sacred spaces. I began to understand these visual elements within Crite's house museum as similar enactments of his serious nature and religious devotion that I observed in his *Self-Portrait* of 1938 (fig. 9). In retrospect, the austerity of Crite's living spaces also confirmed my assertion that his black middle class outlook was not tied to his economic status, but rather to his identification with a set of values shared by members of the upper and middle class.

As art historian Wanda Corn points out, an artist's home and studio can serve as a spatial text for scholars to glean biographical information and gain new insights into an artist's style and working process.³ In addition, the home and studio of an artist differs from other types of archives, because its insights can be derived from its contents and from the experience of inhabiting the space and experiencing its aura.⁴ Indeed, the dense arrangement of artworks and personal effects in Crite's house museum seemed to mirror the artist's preference for creating imagery that was layered with visual details, historical references and autobiographical experiences. Crite's house also had an abundance of aura that not only originated from the eccentric arrangement of its contents, but from

³ Wanda M. Corn, "Artists' Homes and Studios: A Special Kind of Archive," *American Art* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 2-11.

⁴ Ibid.

the physical presence of the artist himself. It is on this final point that the Crite House Museum was unique, because more than a showcase of his artwork, the house functioned as a stage on which he enacted his identity and inhabited the additional persona of artist-historian.

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It is August of 2000, and I have just arrived for my third or fourth visit to the Crite House Museum since my initial meeting with the artist in 1996. Upon entering I am still overwhelmed by the startling manner in which Crite has transformed his home into a three-dimensional collage of art and life. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with canvases, watercolors, pencil drawings, and block prints as well as framed photographs, citations, diplomas and honorary degrees. The rooms are cluttered with filing cabinets, tables and shelves all laden with stacks of books, pamphlets, sketchpads, and diaries. As I recall, Crite had the ability to ignore the visual cacophony of his surroundings and focus on a single object as he recited what seemed to be a well-rehearsed monologue, a combination of artist's talk, civics lesson and church sermon that covered a diverse range of topics from his biography and urban renewal in Boston to the Bible, colonialism in Africa and abortion.

On this day, Crite began our museum tour by drawing my attention to a framed poster hanging in the first floor hallway immediately to the right of the front door. I remember thinking the work was an odd choice for a museum dedicated to Crite's oeuvre, for it was a reproduction of an 1885 oil painting titled *Rainy Day, Columbus Avenue* (fig. 57) by the Boston-born, American

Impressionist, Childe Hassam (1879-1935). At the time, I understood the painting's depiction of Crite's neighborhood and current residence on Columbus Avenue as a parallel visual document related to both the artist's biography and his neighborhood paintings of the 1930s and 1940s. What I could not have known then was that Crite was using this painting to perform his identity as a black middle class Bostonian.

When Crite and I viewed the Hassam print together, we focused on its subject matter and only upon viewing it again do I notice parallels between the two artists visualization of the Bostonian character of their neighborhoods. The scene depicts a broad view of two wide thoroughfares in the South End—Columbus Avenue on the left and Appleton Street on the right. The composition is typical of Hassam's early Impressionist cityscapes and features a modern, wide-angle view of the streets, loose brushwork and attentiveness to capturing the atmospheric effects of light and color reflecting off wet asphalt and sidewalk. Hassam's depiction of the empty space in the foreground of the composition, his use of a plunging perspective, and the detailed renderings of the South End's distinctive bow-front brick architecture remind me of the way Crite portrayed his neighborhood's well-cared-for apartment buildings situated in a believable and inviting open space to indicate the middle class status of his community. In addition, the figures in the foreground of Hassam's composition--a well-dressed white woman and child walking casually along an elegant street--possess the same qualities of Yankee reserve and respectability evident in Crite's Depression-era images of black middle class Bostonians.

As an enactment of Bostonian gentility, the Hassam painting served as the first scene in Crite's one-man play about his life and artistic career, a dramatic show he performed during his house tour and during our interviews. More than a prop to facilitate his recollection of his early life and career, *Rainy Day Columbus Avenue* enabled the artist to demonstrate his achievement and maintenance of middle class status and his rootedness to Boston because as he pointed out, it documented the nineteenth-century history of his South End brownstone. Crite also used the image to solidify his position within Boston's art historical tradition by emphasizing his relationship to Hassam who, he reminded me, was a prominent American artist with strong ties to the Boston School of Painters. As Crite explained, Hassam was also a resident of the South End, and they shared the same artistic goal to document their neighborhood. More importantly, Crite used the connection to Hassam to establish his artistic lineage in the city extending back to the Boston School of Painters through his association with Charles Woodbury, Philip Hale and the Museum School.

Crite also used the Hassam painting to perform the role of an artist-historian for the image served as prologue to the central theme of Crite's house tour and established the preservationist value of his work. It depicted the neighborhood before the effects of urban renewal would devastate Boston's black neighborhoods. In contrast to the identical rows of single-family brownstones pictured on both sides of Columbus Avenue in Hassam's 1885 view, Crite's home stood across the street from one of the many modern-styled

housing projects that embodied the destruction of a black middle class way of life in Boston's post urban renewal neighborhoods.

*

As I have argued, Crite's sense of place in Boston also became a source of anxiety for him because as he celebrated his city's black neighborhood and community, he also mourned the gradual loss of its black middle class character. As in the 1930s, the traumas Crite experienced in the 1970s motivated him to use his art to document a black middle class Bostonian way of a life as a means of preserving it for himself, his family and his community. In addition to losing his home of fifty years at Two Dilworth Street in Roxbury, when the entire city block was removed as part of an urban renewal project in 1971, Crite lost the stability of full-time employment when he retired from a thirty-year career as draftsman at the Boston Naval Shipyard in 1970. And, most significantly, Crite experienced the loss of his life-long companion and the most ardent supporter of his art when his mother died in 1977.⁵ The Crite House Museum was one among a series of autobiographical and reflective projects the artist undertook in the 1970s that reflect his heightened sense of his own mortality and a need to ensure his artistic legacy. In fact, Crite spent much of the decade compiling and finding a

⁵ In the 1970s, Crite also witnessed new threats to the black middle class in Boston and in the nation. The city's black population, now numbering well over 60,000 and more diverse in terms of class and nationality, was spread out among many neighborhoods beyond the South End, and Roxbury and had completely lost its small and coherent character Crite had known in the 1930s. In addition, the city's now infamous "busing crisis" over the desegregation of its public schools sparked racial violence that shattered Boston's reputation as the birthplace of the abolitionism and as a genteel society. On a national scale, the Black Power and Black Art Movements challenged the legitimacy of the black middle class's identification with American values by proclaiming a brand of cultural nationalism based in an African and black folk cultural heritage.

repository for his personal papers, giving interviews with reporters and art historians and gifting major works from his early career to local public collections, including the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, Harvard University and the Episcopal Divinity School on Cambridge.⁶ Perhaps motivated by the increased precariousness of his own situation and that of his middle class community, Crite created his own cultural institution to preserve his art and simultaneously developed an historical voice with which to describe and evaluate his artistic contributions.

Crite's personal experience with the effects of urban renewal motivated him to emphasize the documentary function of his early paintings over their original function to challenge negative stereotypes of African Americans.⁷ Another important motivation for Crite to revisit and restage the events and goals of his early career was the increased attention on his art from scholars outside his immediate community. Crite responded by taking on the role of artist-historian and actively contributing to the documentation and interpretation

⁶ Throughout his career, Crite had cultivated relationships with these institutions, all of which had strong ties to Boston's Brahmin society, and through his bequests, he assured his legacy within the cultural and religious history of Boston.

⁷ The following excerpt from one of Crite's house tour monologues demonstrates the way in which Crite inserted his commentary on urban renewal into his account of his early life in Boston: "At the time I was doing my neighborhood paintings I didn't realize I was doing history. . . . I'll give you an example. There's a lithograph print there right over the light, *Number Two Dilworth Street*. Now Dilworth Street . . . was three blocks long, twenty-two address, thirty-three families, about two hundred some odd people. Well somebody in his wisdom decided that they needed to do some redevelopment, so all of us had to move against our will, so we became what you might call development refugees, In other words, neighborhoods were destroyed people were uprooted." Allan Rohan Crite, "A Tour of My House Museum," 1982, untranscribed audio recording, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.

his artistic career. In addition to his self-appointed posts as director, curator and tour guide of his house museum, Crite assumed responsibility for providing a narrative to accompany the examples of his early artworks in other public art collections. For example, shortly after the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) purchased an early neighborhood painting from Crite in 1971, the artist sent a letter to the museum's director Joshua Taylor that described his early artistic goals and emphasized the personal and historical value of his work to the larger community. As Crite stated:

[In the 1930s] I was busy recording the life of black people all about me as I saw them. . . . a life which I was involved as a participant, and yet somehow a bit removed as an observer. . . . [There] were tiny intimate streets that ran between the larger ones and, all in all, formed the background, the setting as it were for neighborhoods in which the lives of people are structured into a community of shared experiences. . . . All of this was shattered into splintered wood and cascades of bricks beneath the crunch of the wrecking crane.⁸

Crite's description reframed the painting not just as a representation of his community's black middle class identity but also as a record of the losses that community has sustained through urban renewal.⁹

The historical voice Crite crafted for this early career proved challenging for my own project to contextualize and analyze Crite's early works. By the time I met the artist in the late 1990s, he had been giving tours of his house for more

⁸ Allan Rohan Crite, letter to Joshua C. Taylor, March 18, 1971. The part of the text quoted here was published in "The National Collection of Fine Arts Renwick Gallery, September 1971 Calendar," Allan Rohan Crite Vertical File, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

⁹ Crite provided similar statements to other art museums that held examples of his early works, including the Boston Athenaeum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C.

than three decades. He was infinitely more skilled in the art of the interview than I was and able to resist my many attempts to move him away from his well-rehearsed narrative. In addition, my experience of having known the artist made the process of writing the present text difficult at times, and I struggled to turn down the volume of Crite's voice as I endeavored to find my own.

Crite's revisionist history has also complicated the historiography of his early career. In my research I discovered that nearly all of the scholarship on Crite's early career draws from the artist's post-urban renewal statements. By privileging his identity as an "artist reporter," these accounts obscure the artist's original stated aim to depict black middle class Bostonians as a means of challenging exoticist and primitivist stereotypes of African Americans. By contextualizing the formation of Crite's artistic goals in the 1930s and 1940s in relation to his black middle class and Bostonian outlook, I hope this study will provide scholars with a firm grounding for understanding the artist's early career as well as the works he produced after 1950.

*

From the beginning of my research, I recognized that Crite did not fit the models of black identity and representation I was familiar with through my previous coursework and independent research on African American art. I knew I needed to find a conceptual framework that would allow me to describe and evaluate his particular art approach. Thinking about Crite's identity and artwork in relation to performance and Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of identity helped me to explain Crite's unique perspective and presentation of

African American subject matter, and it also allowed me to address larger issues within the discourse on racial identity in art. Butler's notion that identity is not fixed, essential or inherent enabled me to challenge the notion of authentic blackness and carve out a space for Crite and his artwork within the art historical record.

As I began to analyze Crite's individual canvases and drawings as performances, enactments, or, to put it differently, single instances of the performative nature of identity, the works suddenly came alive with new meanings. An important breakthrough in my research was the realization that the theory of performativity was compatible with the sociological description of black middle class identity embodied in the concepts of the "front" and the "genteel performance." The preoccupation of the black middle class with the display of respectability through public appearance and behavior was the key to understanding Crite's portraits, genre scenes and illustrated spirituals as performances of his class identity as well as his identity as an Episcopal and Bostonian.

Finally, reading Crite's artworks as performances enabled me to construct a stronger argument about the motivations behind his desire to produce, display and distribute his imagery during his early career. Throughout the text I was careful to describe Crite's artworks as performances rather than portrayals, because I wanted to view them as extensions of his own identity rather than as something removed from it. In particular, I argued that Crite's identification with the middle class persona of the "race" man shaped his desire to use his

artworks as visual didactics for the uplift of the lower classes and visual demonstrations for white audiences to recognize the potential of African Americans for assimilation and full citizenship rights.

My description of a new kind of African American artistic “rootedness” is another important contribution of this study. As I have argued, Crite’s early artworks exemplify his sense of place within his black middle class community and the Episcopal congregation in Boston. My understanding of Crite’s black middle class rootedness developed from scholarly work that describes African American art in terms of artistic “roots” and “routes.”¹⁰ Unlike Crite, the typical New Negro artist embraced his ancestry in Africa, or in the black folk culture of the American south, and he traveled along real or imaginary “routes” that traced back along the lines of the transatlantic slave trade or the Great Migration. As I became aware of Crite’s biography and artistic goals, I realized that his travels during his early career were confined to walking the streets of his neighborhood, which only intensified his rootedness in his hometown of Boston and his community’s middle class and Yankee values. Indeed, my final chapter on Crite’s illustrated spirituals is a test of my theory of black middle class community rootedness. In these works, Crite engaged most directly with a popular form of black folk material, and rather than further essentializing notions about its racial character, he reoriented and reshaped the spirituals

¹⁰ I am grateful to David Brown for first pointing out the connection between roots and routes in African American literature, such as Rudolph Fisher’s short story, *City of Refuge* (1925) and in art historical studies such as Alvia Wardlaw’s *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art* (Dallas, TX and New York: The Dallas Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1989) and Richard Powell’s *Homecoming: The Art of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1991).

according to his own middle class Episcopal and Bostonian sensibilities of formality, dignity and reserve.

It is my hope that this study of Crite's early career will lead to future scholarship on the artist. In a larger context, I hope my work will inspire others to apply performance theory to American painting. Through my efforts to locate Crite within the larger art historical framework of the New Negro art movement, I have also sought to introduce Crite's black middle class rootedness as an alternate form of racial belongingness in African American art which, I hope, will in turn facilitate the inclusion of more artists into the canon.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1 Patrick Whitemore for *The Boston Herald*, "Allan Rohan Crite in the Crite House Museum," c. 1995, photograph.



Figure 2 Allan Rohan Crite, *Portrait of a Bass Violin Player (South End Music School)*, 1941, oil on canvas, Boston Athenaeum.



Figure 3 Joshua Johnson, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, 1805-10, oil on canvas, American Museum in Britain, Bath.



Figure 4 Unknown photographer, "Three African American Girls," ca. 1899. Photograph collected by W.E.B. Du Bois for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 5 Winold Reiss, *The Librarian*, 1925, pastel on board, Fisk University Museum of Art, Nashville, TN.



Figure 6 Allan Rohan Crite, *Portrait of Emma Nixon*, 1933, graphite on paper, Museum of the Center for Afro-American Artists, Boston.



Figure 7 Philip L. Hale, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1917, oil on canvas, National Academy of Design, New York.



Figure 8 Alexandre Iacovleff, *Portrait of African Man*, c. 1920s, conté crayon on paper, location unknown.

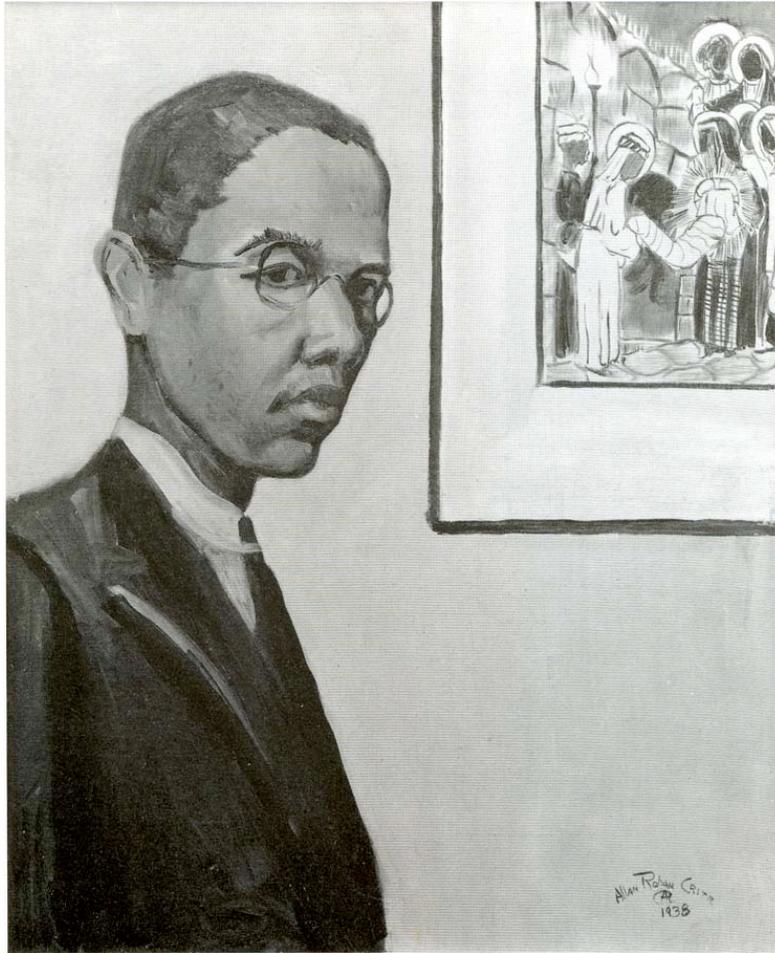


Figure 9 Allan Rohan Crite, *Self-Portrait*, 1938, oil on canvas, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.



Figure 10 Malvin Gray Johnson, *Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)*, 1934, oil on canvas, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

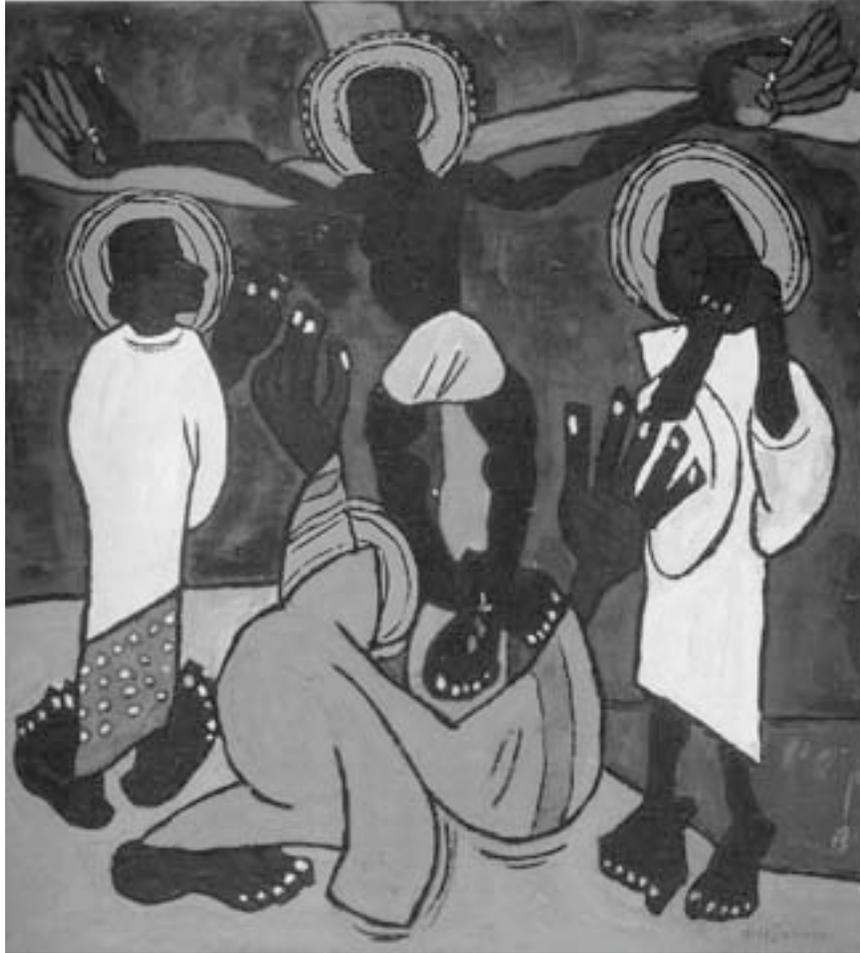


Figure 11 William H. Johnson, *Jesus and the Three Marys*, 1939-40, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



Figure 12 Allan Rohan Crite, *Portrait of My Mother*, 1939, oil on canvas, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.



Figure 13 Allan Rohan Crite, Detail: *Portrait of My Mother*, 1939, oil on canvas, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.



Figure 14 John Wilson, *Portrait of My Brother*, 1942, oil on canvas, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA.

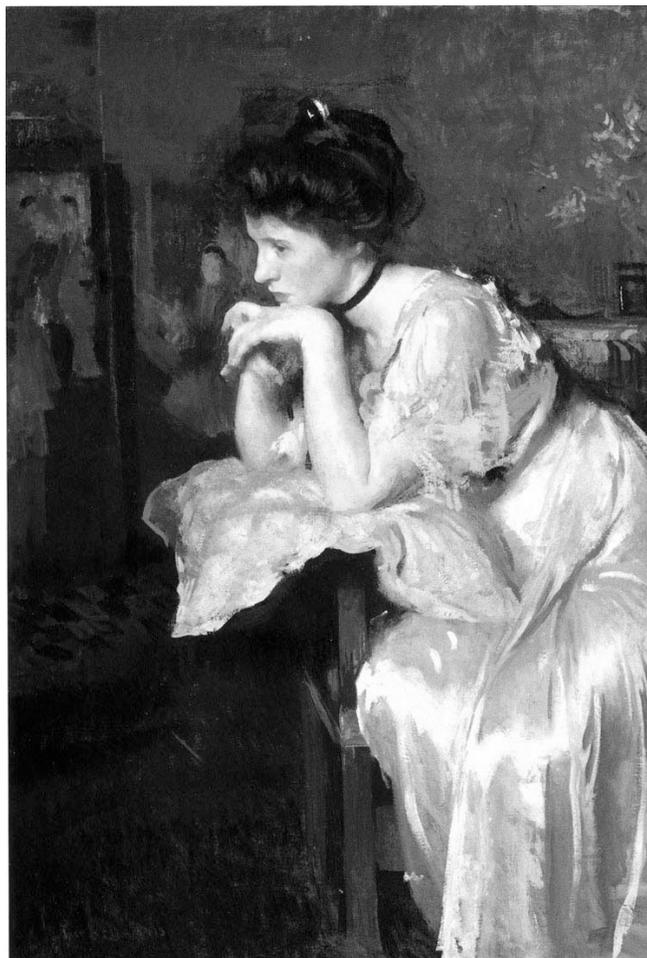


Figure 15 Edmund C. Tarbell, *Reverie (Katherine Finn)*, 1913, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

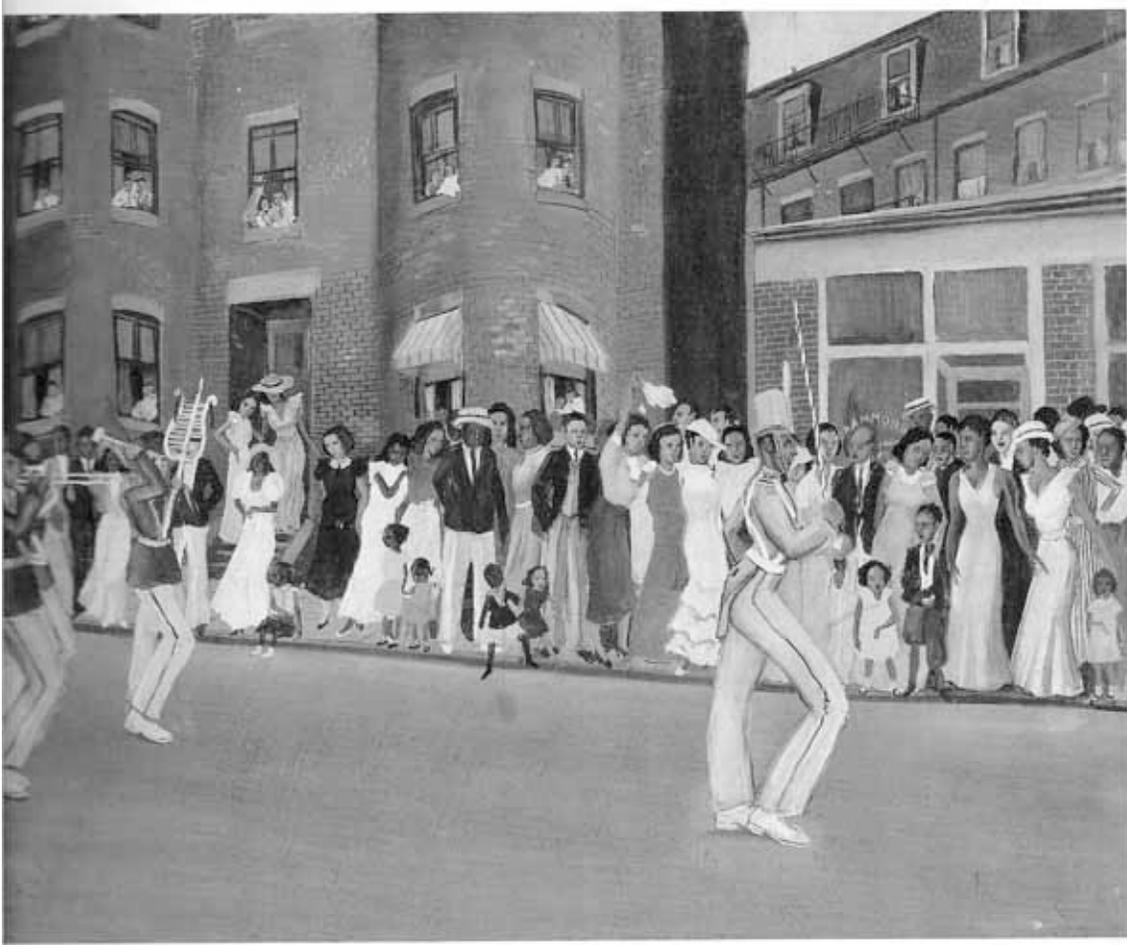


Figure 16 Allan Rohan Crite, *Parade on Hammond Street*, 1935, oil on canvas, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 17 Allan Rohan Crite, *School's Out*, 1936, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



Figure 18 Allan Rohan Crite, *Tyre Jumping on My Street*, 1936, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 19 Archibald J. Motley Jr. *Saturday Night Street Scene*, 1936, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 20 Allan Rohan Crite, *Corner of Northampton and Washington Streets*, 1936, oil on canvas, (Federal Art Project, location unknown).



Figure 21 Allan Rohan Crite, *Slade's Barbecue*, 1936, oil on canvas, (Federal Art Project, location unknown).



Figure 22 Allan Rohan Crite, *Roller Skate Derby*, 1939, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 23 Allan Rohan Crite, *The Handy Street Bridge*, 1939, oil on canvas, Boston Athenaeum.



Figure 24 Yvonne Twining Humber, *View of Boston (Commons)*, 1939, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 25 Allan Rohan Crite, *The News (Death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt)*, 1945, oil on canvas, Boston Athenaeum.

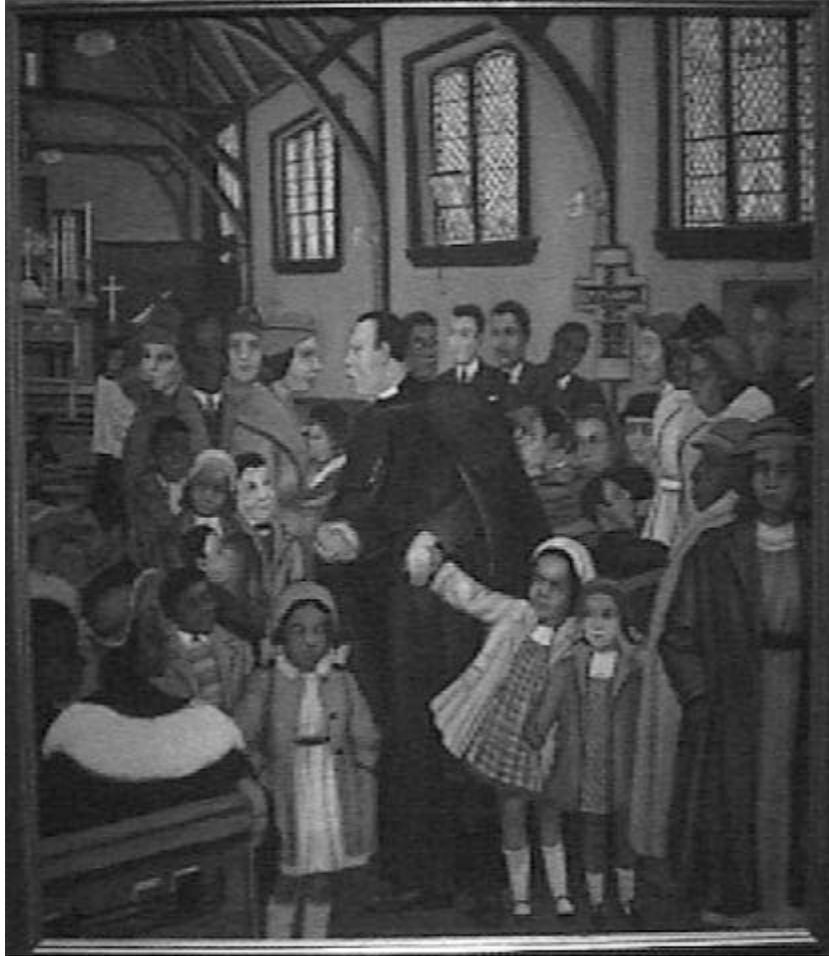


Figure 26 Allan Rohan Crite, *The Rector's Greeting*, 1938, oil on canvas, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Cambridge, MA.



Figure 27 Charles White, *Preacher*, 1940, tempera on board, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Figure 28 Allan Rohan Crite, Detail: *The Rector's Greeting*, 1938, oil on canvas, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Cambridge, MA.



Figure 29 Allan Rohan Crite, *The Children's Pilgrimage*, 1936, oil on canvas, St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Boston.



Figure 30 Allan Rohan Crite, *The Choir Singer*, 1941, oil on canvas, St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Boston.



Figure 31 Allan Rohan Crite, *In the Choir Robing Room, Epiphany Season, 1939*, graphite drawing on paper, Boston Athenaeum.



Figure 32 Prentiss Taylor, *Experience Meeting at Massadony A.M.E.*, 1934, lithograph, photograph: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

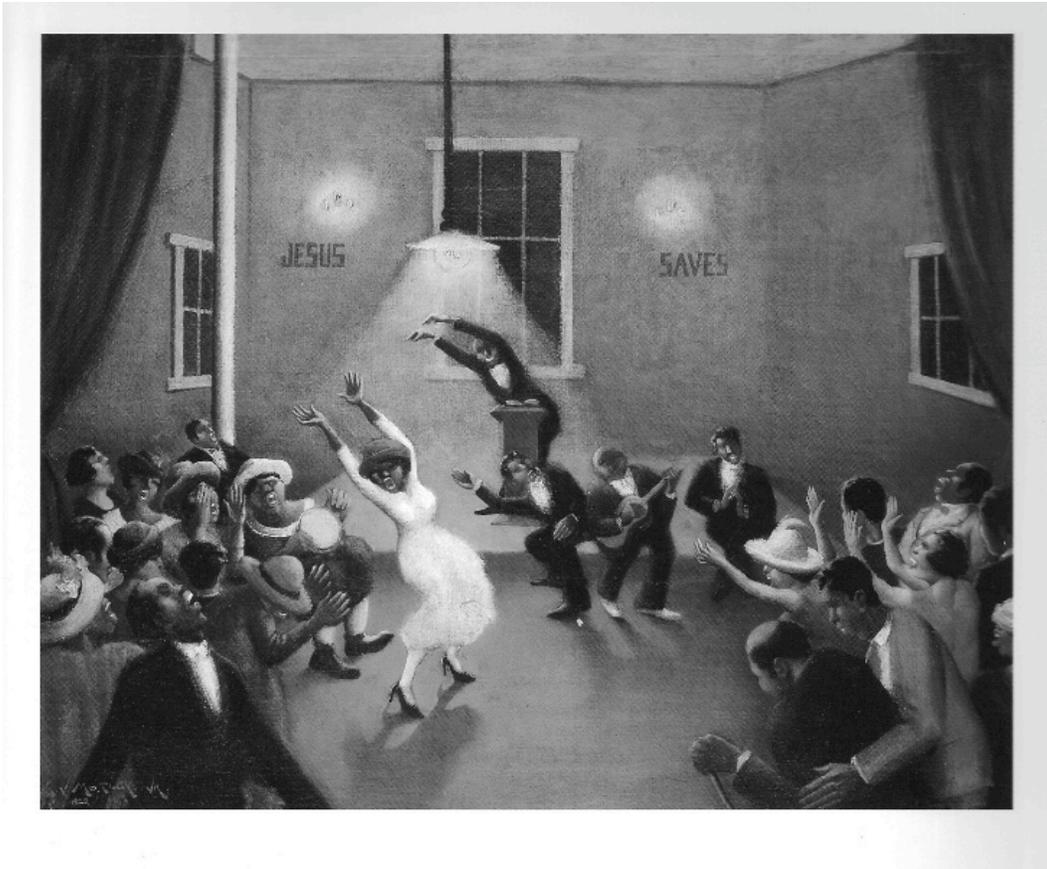


Figure 33 Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Holy Rollers*, 1929, oil on canvas, Archie Motley and Valerie Gerrard Browne Collection.



Figure 34 Allan Rohan Crite, *The Four Joyful Mysteries*, c. 1941, hammered nickel, tempera paint, and gold leaf, St. Augustine's and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Boston.



Figure 35 Allan Rohan Crite, "My Lord.....," *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).



Figure 36 Allan Rohan Crite, "When He ascended on high.....," *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).

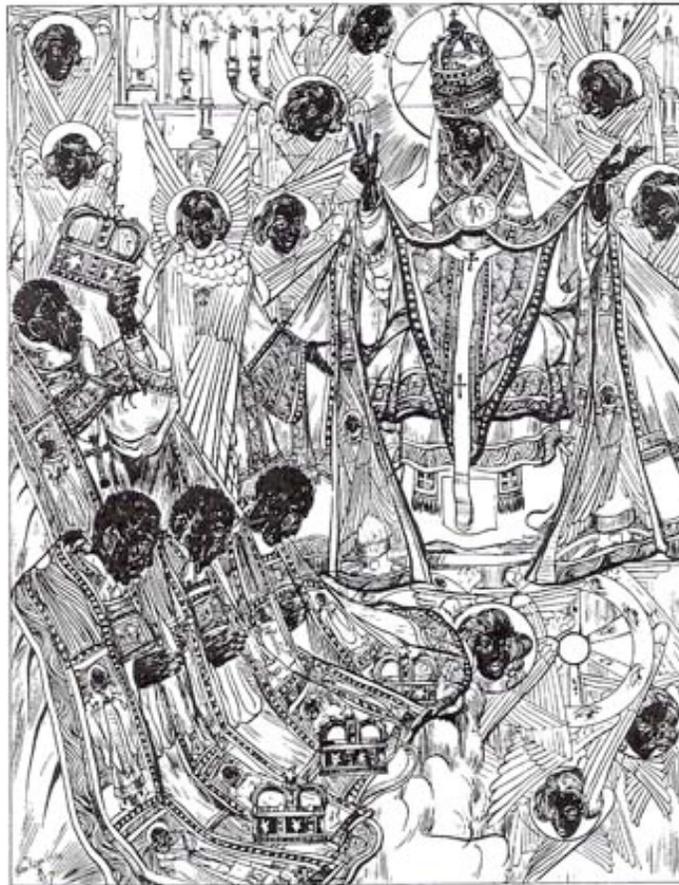


Figure 37 Allan Rohan Crite, "Sometimes it causes me to tremble," *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).



Glory

Figure 38 Allan Rohan Crite, "Glory," *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See*, 1937 brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Heaven!

Figure 39 Allan Rohan Crite, "Heaven!" *Heaven*, 1937-38 brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Figure 40 Allan Rohan Crite, "Were you there when they crucified..." *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).

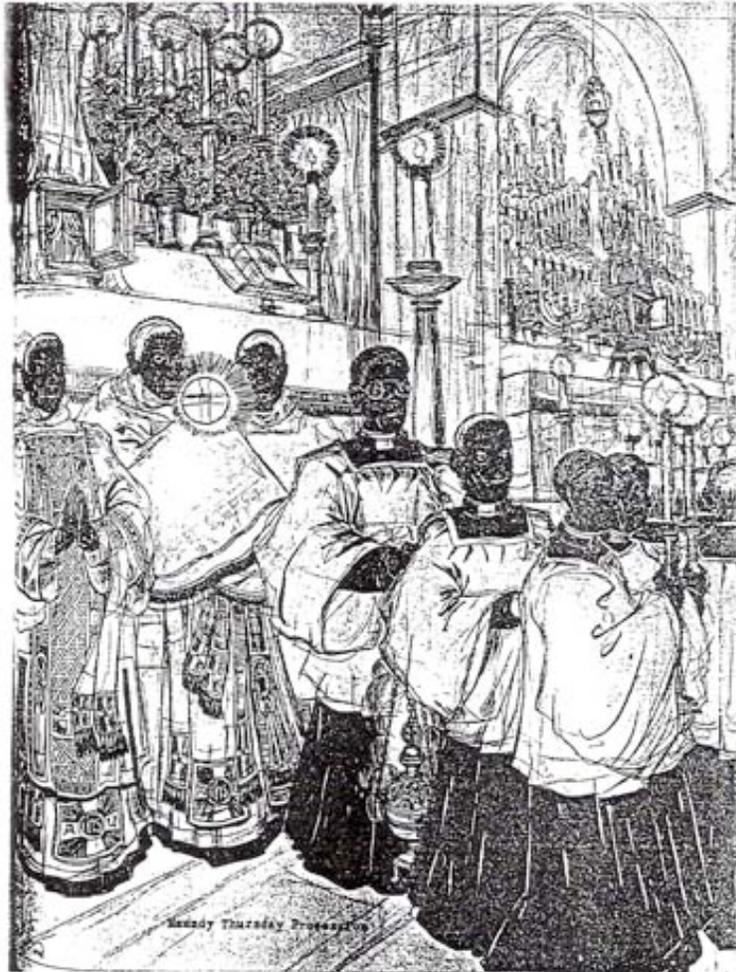


Figure 41 Allan Rohan Crite, *Maundy Thursday Procession*, 1935, brush and ink, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.



God's

Figure 42 Allan Rohan Crite, "God's" *Heaven*, 1937-1938, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Figure 43 Allan Rohan Crite, "Go Down Moses Way down in Egypt's land," *Go Down Moses*, 1937, brush and ink, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute.



Shout all over God's heaven.

Figure 44 Allan Rohan Crite, "Shout all over God's heaven," *Heaven*, 1937-1938, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

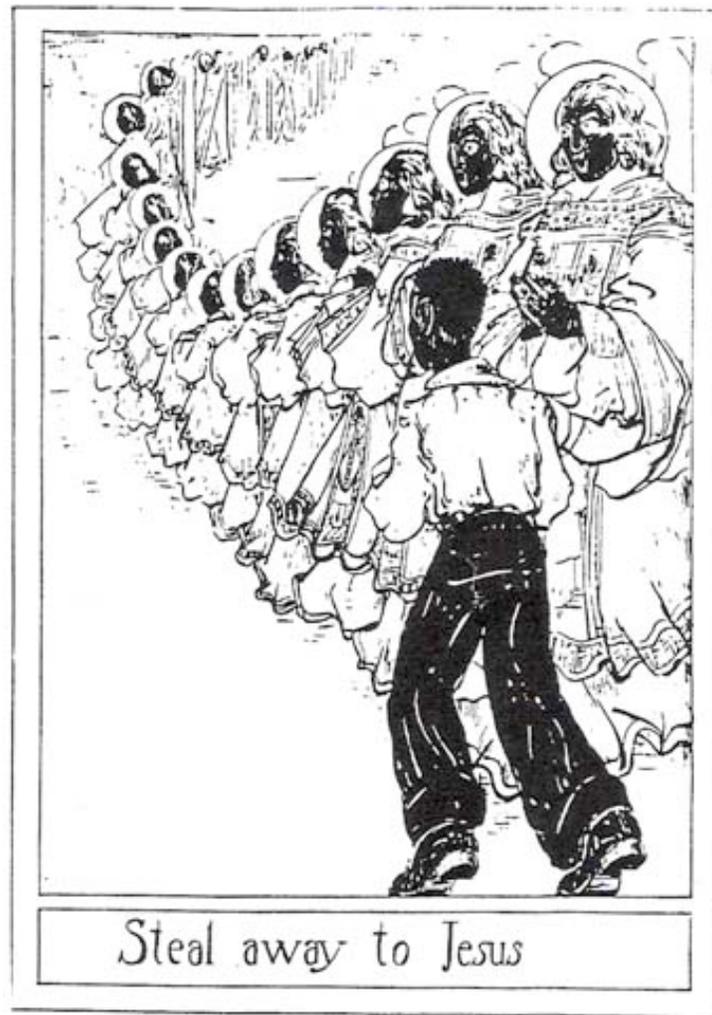
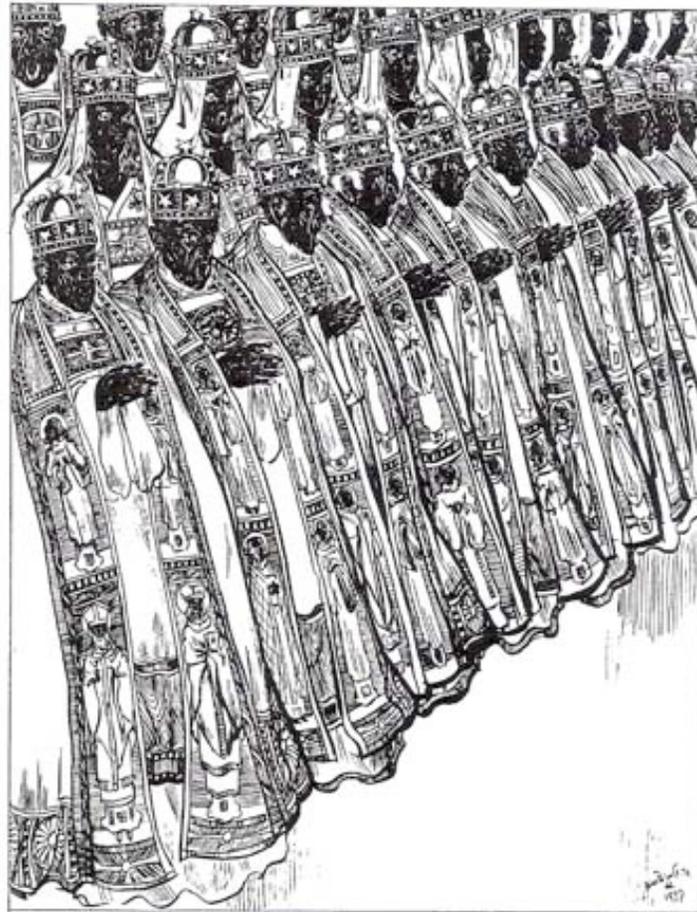
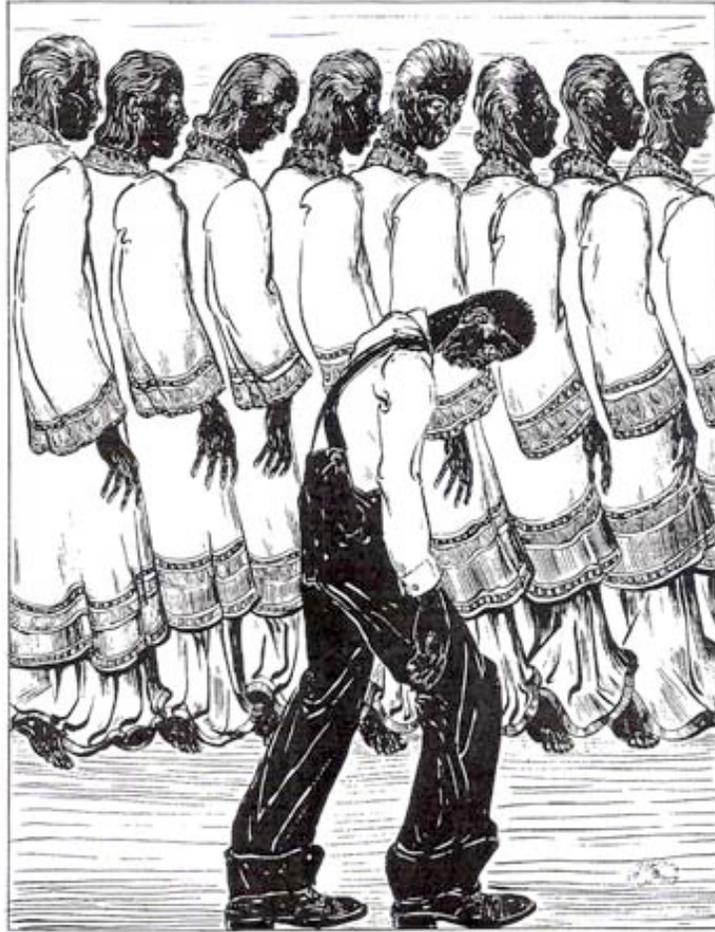


Figure 45 Allan Rohan Crite, "Steal away to Jesus," *Steal Away*, 1937, brush and ink, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute.



All over

Figure 46 Allan Rohan Crite, "All over," *Heaven*, 1937-1938, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Nobody knows the trouble I see

Figure 47 Allan Rohan Crite, "Glory," *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See*, 1937 brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Swing low, Sweet Chariot

Fig. 48

Allan Rohan Crite, "Swing low, Sweet Chariot," *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, 1937, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Coming for to carry me

Fig. 49

Allan Rohan Crite, "Coming for to carry me," *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, 1937, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Figure 50 John McCrady, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, 1937, oil on canvas, The St. Louis Art Museum.

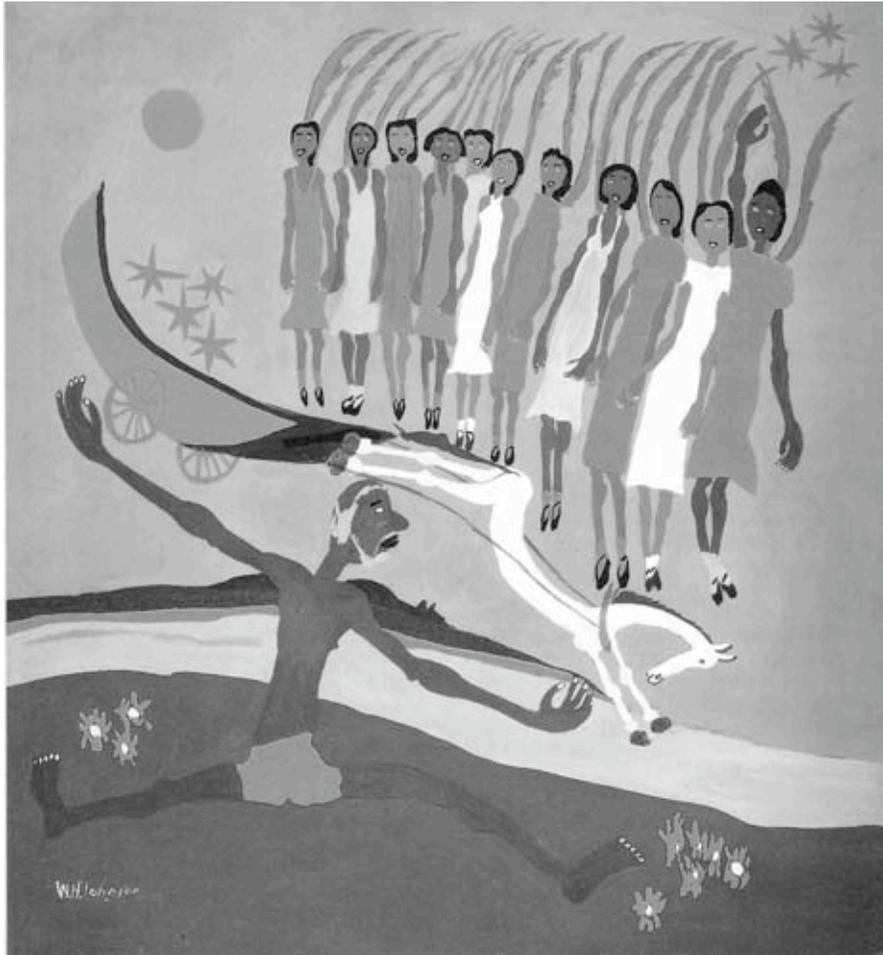


Figure 51 William H. Johnson, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, c. 1944, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



Figure 52 Allan Rohan Crite, *Ascension*, 1935, brush and ink, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 53 Allan Rohan Crite, "My First Attempt to Illustrate a Spiritual," c. 1930s, wash drawing, reproduced in *Allan Rohan Crite: An Autobiographical Sketch*, Allan Rohan Crite Research Institute, Boston.



Figure 54 Allan Rohan Crite, *Station of the Cross (Crucifixion)*, 1935, linoleum block print, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 55 Allan Rohan Crite, "O, sometimes it causes me to tremble," *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).



Figure 56 Allan Rohan Crite, "O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, O, tremble," *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, 1939-1944, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).



God's heaven.

Figure 57 Allan Rohan Crite, "God's heaven," *Heaven*, 1937-1938, brush and ink, reproduced for Allan Rohan Crite, *Three Spirituals from Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).



Figure 58 Childe Hassam, *Rainy Day, Columbus Avenue, Boston*, 1885, oil on canvas, Toledo Museum of Art.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.