

NONFICTION

Three Books Trace a History of Race Relations in America, Through Art

By Nicole Herrington

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HENRY TAYLOR

The Only Portrait I Ever Painted of My Momma Was Stolen

By Sarah Lewis, Charles Gaines, Zadie Smith and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah
Illustrated. 320 pp. Rizzoli/Electa and Blum & Poe. \$65.

THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE

By Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes
Illustrated. 98 pp. First Print Press. \$45.

I TOO SING AMERICA

The Harlem Renaissance at 100

By Wil Haygood
Illustrated. 247 pp. Rizzoli/Electa. \$55.

Truth radiates almost triumphantly from the depictions of black life in three new art books, each from a different era. Whether presented with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s; or the 1950s, when “separate but equal” was deemed unconstitutional; or contemporary America, with its own set of wins and setbacks in the realm of racial justice; we readers are reminded of the myriad ways artists have used their mediums to counter — if not always shake loose — narratives of bias.

“One of the things that got to me was that I felt that black people were not being portrayed in a serious and in an artistic way,” the photographer Roy DeCarava (1919-2009) told The Times in 1982, reflecting on his motivations for producing the 1955 monograph “The Sweet Flypaper of Life,” which is now being reissued on the eve of his centenary. He felt compelled to “show black people in a human way.”

Originally released shortly after the landmark Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the book pairs DeCarava’s visual depictions of black life in Harlem with Langston Hughes’s poetic, fictional account of Sister Mary Bradley and the rich cast of characters in her family and neighborhood. (She’s been ill and the Lord wants her to “come home,” but she isn’t ready to leave Earth. She wants to “see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like.”)

“The Sweet Flypaper of Life” is an incredible wonder that is so compact you can almost cradle it in your palm. A sense of humanity permeates the black-and-white photographs: young boys and girls at play, being groomed or whispering to a parent; couples in animated conversation or holding each other close at a house party; pedestrians heading to work, to school or to the park. And DeCarava’s narrow range of deep tones breathes beautiful life into the black faces of the young and old.



A sense of humanity permeates the black-and-white photographs in “The Sweet Flypaper of Life.” Roy DeCarava

DeCarava’s desire to show black people as art-worthy subjects isn’t so different from what the painter Henry Taylor is trying to accomplish today, as we see in “Henry Taylor: The Only Portrait I Ever Painted of My Momma Was Stolen.” In her opening essay for this hulking survey of over 200 of his works, Zadie Smith writes that Taylor shows “black history the way many black people *actually experience it*: as simultaneously change and stasis, revolution and stagnation, one step forward, two steps back.”

Among his most powerful images here are portraits of individuals from all walks of life: his relatives, random strangers he met near his loft studio in downtown Los Angeles, Olympic athletes, Jay-Z. Over all, Taylor’s subjects “reveal a kind of truth, a story that has to be told,” as the artist Charles Gaines says in an extensive interview with Taylor published in the book. Taylor’s 2017 painting “THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!” included in last year’s Whitney Biennial, stops you in your tracks. It pulls you into the car where a 32-year-old black man, Philando Castile, is dying after having been fatally shot by a police officer in Minnesota in 2016 — and challenges you, as Smith writes, “to see how it feels to be shot.”

One could draw a line from Taylor to DeCarava and straight back to the Harlem Renaissance, when artists of all disciplines were pushing to evoke the kind of punch-in-the-gut assessment that Hughes so poetically delivers in his 1926 poem “I, Too”: “They’ll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed — / I, too, am America.”



Sargent Claude Johnson, "Mask of a Young Girl," 1925, from "I, Too Sing America."
Newark Museum

The biographer Wil Haygood appropriates the poem's opening line for the title of his new book, "I Too Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100," which accompanies a current exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio. Among the first works in this comprehensive survey — interweaving art with short biographies and thematic essays — are Malvin Gray Johnson's portraits of a weary-looking "Negro Soldier" (1934) and "Sailor" (1933). The paintings are accompanied by an essay detailing the history of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1917, when America entered World War I, W. E. B. Du Bois encouraged black men and women to show their patriotism through service, in the hopes that it would gain them, in Du Bois's words, "the right to vote and the right to work and the right to live without insult." History knows better, of course: A decade and a half later, Johnson's dispirited men in uniform seem to be wondering, "What course do you suggest now?"

There are also portraits by Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis (the sumptuous "Girl With Yellow Hat," from 1936), Lois Mailou Jones; sculptures by Augusta Savage and Richmond Barthé; and amateur, often anonymous snapshots of families and individuals. (These last echo a recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "African American Portraits: Photographs From the 1940s and 1950s.")

Haygood's essays detail the emergence of what Alain Locke called "the New Negro," and the literary scene (with publications like *Survey Graphic* and *Survey Midmonthly*, *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*) that gave writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen and Hughes a platform. It was the beginning of a movement — that extends to this day — to render black people truly visible.

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