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The “Negro Book” of Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall: Photography, Race, and Civil Rights in Early Cold War-Era America

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Abstract: Between 1945–1957 Ansel Adams and his friend and collaborator, Nancy Newhall, worked on a project they referred to in their letters as “The Negro Book.” Although this work never saw the light of day (publishers refused to print it), their letters provide a fascinating glimpse into their concern for the rights of Americans of color, their worry about the changing political climate post-WWII, and their struggle to embrace documentary photography as an art form even as they sought to use it for social good. Prolific and passionate writers, they corresponded frequently, sometimes daily, resulting in a corpus of over one hundred relevant extant letters. Distilling their correspondence to reveal their chief concerns, both political and artistic, and telling their story within the context of the broader social milieu, this article brings to light little-known dimensions of their long and productive careers.

Keywords: History of Photography, Red Scare, Cold War, Racism, Prejudice, Manzanar

We must be certain that, as the rights of the individual are the most sacred elements of our society, we will not allow passion, vengeance, hatred, and racial antagonism to cloud the principles of universal justice and mercy.
—Ansel Adams²

Introduction

While some scholars have noted the social dimension of Ansel Adams’ work,³ he was more passionate about civil rights and eager to fight for the cause of fellow citizens than has been acknowledged. His documentary work, mostly undertaken with Dorothea Lange during WWII, displayed a powerful sensitivity to the humanity and rights of Americans from all walks of life, and he found such work highly meaningful. In fact, he claimed that their documentation of the Richmond Shipyards (1944) was one of the most moving experiences of his life.⁴ His documentation of Japanese Americans in the Manzanar War Relocation Center (1943) similarly drew on his civil rights concerns, and he strove to highlight their humanity, resilience, and creativity. In this same period, Adams proposed a documentary project intended to help combat the racial prejudice faced by African Americans, a never-published project referred to in his letters as the “Negro Book.”

He received a promise of funding for the Negro Book project in 1945 from the presidents of two historically black colleges—David Jones of Bennett College and J.P. Brawley of Clark College (now Clark Atlanta).⁵ He approached them for funding through Garfield Merner, a fellow member of the Sierra Club who served on the Board of Trustees at Bennett College. Merner also was affiliated with the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization that worked to stop lynching and end racial abuse by white southerners. Merner remained a close consultant throughout the Negro Book project’s duration.

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² Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans* (Bishop: Spotted Dog Press, 2002), 118.

³ David Peeler, “The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams,” *Journal of American Studies* 27, no. 3: (1993): 309–34; Jonathan Spaulding, “The Natural Scene and the Social Good: The Artistic Education of Ansel Adams,” *Pacific Historical Review* 60, no. 1 (1991): 15–42.

⁴ Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, December 25, 1944. Ansel Adams Archive (AG31), Series I: Correspondence. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona (hereafter cited as Adams Archive).

⁵ David Jones to Ansel Adams, July 8, 1945. Adams Archive.

When Adams secured funding for the project he was already in the process of writing two technical books on photography. Soon thereafter he received the first of his two Guggenheim Fellowships to document America's National Parks. He thus called upon his friend Nancy Newhall, naming her Executive Editor of the Negro Book project in 1946. Newhall, wife of Art Historian Beaumont Newhall, frequently served as the editor of books by photographers⁶ and thus was well familiar with the details of photographic projects. While Adams remained intimately involved in the Negro Book project after appointing Newhall to this role, the bulk of the work ultimately fell to her.

Despite the longevity of the Negro Book project, which spanned twelve years, it has received scant attention from researchers. It is mentioned only in one paragraph in one Adams biography,⁷ most likely because it was never published and perhaps also because Adams made few photographs for it. However, the letters associated with this project reveal little-examined dimensions of Adams' character and work, particularly as pertains to his social justice visions for a healthy democracy. This article seeks to illuminate these through the story of the Negro Book project as gleaned from relevant extant letters between Adams, Newhall, and Merner from the years of 1945 to 1957, as well as through archived materials related to the project. There is considerable mystery concerning the Negro Book: who initiated the idea and was there ever a completed manuscript and, if so, what happened to it? The letters do not yield answers; further research is needed. Despite unanswered questions, though, the correspondence between Adams and Newhall in particular provides a fascinating glimpse into their struggles with the increasing conservatism of the early Cold War-era political scene and their efforts to uphold the highest ideals of democracy while ensnared in the second Red Scare. Two white, egalitarian-minded artists who, despite limited awareness of their social and racial privilege, devoted many years to finding a means to artistically address racial inequities, they also debated the merits of journalistic images and social documentary, a genre that was rapidly changing, even as they sought to engage it.

Before the Negro Book: Manzanar

To understand the impetus for the Negro Book and the complexity of issues surrounding its production, it is helpful to first look at Adams' experience with the Manzanar War Relocation Center photo series. As other scholars have discussed, the Manzanar project gave Adams, who could not serve in the armed forces during WWII, an avenue for making a contribution to the war effort on the Home Front.⁸ Perhaps not as well known, though, is that although he officially was hired by the Office of War Information to document the camp, Adams took the assignment because he felt a deep sense of urgency to photograph those interred there. He was irked and offended that US citizens who should have been protected under the United States Constitution were held captive despite the fact that by this point the government had established their loyalty to America. He feared for their safety upon release, writing to Newhall: "there is great opposition out here to all Japanese, citizens or not, loyal or otherwise, chiefly coming from reactionary groups with racial phobias and commercial interests."⁹ Adams saw the individuals held in Manzanar as "loyal American citizens who are anxious to get back into the stream of life and contribute to our victory"¹⁰ as evidenced by the many Nisei serving in the US armed forces.

⁶ Merry Foresta, Erin O'Toole, and MaLin Wilson Powell, *Nancy Newhall: A Literacy of Images* (San Diego: Museum of Photographic Arts, 2008).

⁷ Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁸ Anne Hammond, "Ansel Adams at Manzanar War Relocation Center, 1943-1944," *History of Photography* 30, no. 3 (2006): 145-57; Spaulding, "The Natural Scene," 15-42; Gina Wenger, "Documentary Photography: Three Photographers' Standpoints on the Japanese-American Internment," *Art Education* 60, no. 5 (2007): 33-38.

⁹ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, 1943 (no month or day). Adams Archive.

¹⁰ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, 1943 (no month or day). Adams Archive.

In an effort to raise awareness and change public perception about Japanese Americans, Adams asked to exhibit the images at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) where Newhall was serving as the acting curator of photographic exhibitions in place of her husband, who was serving in the war. This resulted in the exhibit, *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal Japanese American Relocation Center*.¹¹ Newhall shared Adams’ wish for the Manzanar photographs to positively sway the American public in favor of not only tolerance for but, even more so, respect and humane treatment of Japanese Americans. They both saw this as their patriotic duty, as Adams’ letter to Newhall in advance of the exhibit indicates:

You can understand how important it is to have everything completely in hand—to allow no opportunity for anyone to accuse us of a production detrimental to the war effort. Hence, the distinction between the loyal and dis-loyal [sic] elements must be made crystal-clear, and the emphasis on the Constitutional rights of loyal minorities placed thereon to support one of the things for which this war is all about.... In effect these pictures imply a test of true Americanism, and suggest an approach to the treatment of other minority groups.¹²

As more fully articulated in subsequent letters, “True Americanism” for Adams demanded adherence to the highest ideals of democracy, such as the fair, just, and equal treatment of all Americans regardless of race or place of origin, since all had a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Adams was the descendent of the two United States presidents bearing his name. Both his political and spiritual beliefs reflected a Whitmanian appreciation of diverse expressions of life as well as a sincere trust in the imperfect but vital democratic experiment of people working together to support one another and affirm our mutual humanity. With democracy, he felt, came a responsibility to cultivate and affirm the best in human nature. Newhall shared this belief.

After receiving clearance from museum administrators to curate Adams’ photographs, Newhall, under Adams’ direction, set about collecting quotes on democracy, citizenship, human dignity, etc. from a variety of sources, including Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and the Thirteenth Amendment. She interspersed these quotes with his photographs throughout the exhibit. To her dismay, although not at all surprising given that the United States was still fighting Japan, their efforts to humanize those interred at Manzanar upset museum administrators, who threatened to cancel the show. They only relented when Newhall agreed to remove most of the quotes. Later, Newhall told Adams she believed the museum had intentionally under-promoted the exhibit because several employees and patrons of the museum felt the work was supportive of the enemy.¹³ Adams then surmised that his corresponding book, *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans*,¹⁴ which along with images included text by Adams that highlighted the humanity and rights of those interred there, was poorly distributed for this very reason.¹⁵ He was incensed by the whole scene and deeply frustrated that the museum and publisher bowed to public pressure when the images and text, he felt, were so vital to changing the attitudes of this very same public.

¹¹ *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal Japanese-American Relocation Center* [MoMA Exhibit #265, November 10, 1944–December 24, 1944]. The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1929–1959, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹² Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, 1943 (no month). Adams Archive.

¹³ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, December 28, 1944. Adams Archive.

¹⁴ *Born Free and Equal* was originally published in 1944 by U.S. Camera and was recently republished with a new forward in 2002 by Spotted Dog Press.

¹⁵ Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, March 1, 1945. Adams Archive.

Ambivalence about Documentary Photography

Adams was also frustrated by criticism his Manzanar images received from some members of the photographic community, including Roy Stryker, former head of the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), who led efforts to document the rural poor during the Great Depression. As Newhall reported, Stryker and his associates were unimpressed with Adams' imagery, pointing out the limitations of a focus on the positive to adequately sway the emotions of viewers in support of a maligned and marginalized group.¹⁶ Adams did not agree. As was the case with his landscape images, he wanted his work to be affirmational, believing that such work would better inspire an audience to change their opinions than would images of suffering. His desire to affirm the positive went hand in hand with his idealized view of the positive potentials of the American democratic experiment.

Adams was ambivalent about social documentary even as he sought to embrace it. He worried that those with specific political and social agendas risked dehumanizing individuals by turning them solely into subjects for sociological research or data for statistical analysis. He referred to this as a "sociological" approach to photography, and he wished to avoid it. He also worried that an overemphasis on the illustrative properties of a photograph to reveal a problem or serve as an historical document would lead to a loss of the pursuit of photography as a fine art, something he, Nancy and Beaumont Newhall, and others had fought hard to preserve during the 1930s. In their efforts to secure a place for art photography, they had seriously grappled with documentary. Where was the line between art, historical documentation, and journalism? Adams mused in letters that what distinguished art photography from simply documentation was the photographer's intention. With art, the photographer strove to communicate his or her internal, felt response while also seeking to illuminate the essence or vital spirit of the subject. This artistic intent, he felt, contrasted with images made for sociological purposes, which aimed at impersonal objectivity. His attitudes about documentary, shared by Newhall, later complicated their decisions regarding images for the Negro Book, as each felt the photographs must meet standards of art and fit well with what Adams labeled as a "photo-literary"¹⁷ project.

Despite their concerns about the genre, Adams and both Newhalls became members of the New York Photo League, which was primarily comprised of second-generation Jewish immigrants who considered documentary photography to be a social responsibility.¹⁸ The League had a close relationship with the local black community and the NAACP given that League photographers frequently documented Harlem and other neighborhoods. The League also provided photographic instruction to any who wished to join and Adams was among some of the more prominent photographers who lectured there.

The National Scene: Fighting Racial Intolerance

Although it is not clear in the letters who or what exactly inspired Adams to propose the Negro Book project, he seems to have been highly motivated by the response of the MOMA Exhibitions Committee to his Manzanar exhibit proposal. The committee said they would prefer a show that dealt more broadly with racial intolerance, particularly as faced by African Americans. Adams, not wanting to minimize the experience of Japanese Americans, discounted the idea. As a compromise, he proposed a series of annual exhibitions, each of which would focus on a particular group facing prejudice.

The MOMA committee was not alone in its desire to broadly tackle racism. Well-intentioned white liberals throughout the country, especially those in elite circles, sought opportunities to

¹⁶ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, December 28, 1944. Adams Archive.

¹⁷ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, October 12, 1945. Adams Archive.

¹⁸ Anne Wilkes Tucker, Claire Cass, and Stephen Daiter, *This Was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery and John Cleary Gallery, 2001).

sway the public in favor of social harmony at a time when tensions were being further fueled by the inequitable policies and racially motivated hate crimes faced by black servicemen, and other men of color, returning home from war. Many of the elite in art circles were born in the Progressive Era and had been young adults during the Great Depression; they were highly influenced by grassroots organizing, labor movements, and New Deal socialist-inspired policies meant to address suffering and inequities in society.

Efforts to educate less sympathetic white audiences and to fight bigotry took place across multiple sectors of the art world, including filmmaking, television, and publishing. Museums such as MOMA and The Metropolitan Museum of Art featured a number of exhibits of various artistic genres meant to inspire sympathetic responses in white audiences toward people of color. However, as would become the case with the Negro Book, the exhibits predominantly featured the work of white artists¹⁹ despite the fact that black artists and authors were actively working to raise awareness about white intolerance, end segregation, and draw attention to systemic racism and oppression. Nevertheless, during this period, and four years prior to Adams’ proposal for the Negro Book, Richard Wright published *Twelve Million Black Voices*,²⁰ which along with a powerful text presented documentary images made in the mid-thirties by the Farm Security Administration of the poorest segment of the African American population who were most impacted by the Great Depression and the Great Migration. Wright referred to them as “feudal folk,” and he sought to highlight their particular struggles:

This text assumes that those few Negroes who have lifted themselves, through personal strength, talent, or luck, above the lives of their fellow blacks—like single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea—are but fleeting exceptions to this vast, tragic school that swims below the depths, against the current, silently and heavily, struggling against the waves of vicissitudes that spell a common fate.²¹

Wright was one of the first to use the term “black” instead of “Negro,” intentionally drawing strength and courage from civil resistance and decolonization movements in Africa.²² Later, while undertaking research for the Negro Book, Newhall read Wright’s works, which she found illuminating. She quoted him in the manuscript, ignoring advice to remove reference to him by Merner, who was perturbed by Wright’s radicalism and potential ties with communism.

African American photographer Gordon Parks also worked during this period to subvert racial stereotypes and to raise awareness about social inequalities. Inspired by the photographers who worked for the Farm Security Administration, he began to use his camera to raise awareness about inequities after first photographing the fashion world. He describes his work in the early 1940s this way:

The photographs that I made there [Chicago], aside from fashion, were things that I was trying to express in a social conscious way. I’d become sort of involved in things that were happening to people. No matter what color they be, whether they be Indians, or Negroes, the poor white person or anyone who was I thought more or less getting a bad shake, I, you know, thought I had the instinct toward championing the cause.²³

¹⁹ Bridget Cook, “Black Artists and Activism: Harlem on My Mind (1969).” *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2007): 5–39.

²⁰ Dan Schiffman, “Richard Wright’s ‘12 Million Black Voices’ and World War II-era Civic Nationalism.” *African American Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 443–58.

²¹ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 5.

²² Benjamin Balthasar, “Killing the Documentarian: Richard Wright and Documentary Modernity.” *Criticism* 55, no. 3 (2013): 357–90.

²³ Richard Doud, “Interview with Gordon Parks, 30 December 1964,” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gordon-parks-11480oral-history-interview-gordon-parks-11480#transcript>.

While segregationist laws and corresponding social practices often kept racial groups in their own spheres, many black and white artists, authors, and researchers also worked together. One example is the Committee for Mass Education in Race Relations, which was codirected by sociologist Charles S. Johnson, the first African American president of Fisk University, and sociologist Donald Slesinger, a white man who served as Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. In 1944 they wrote to Adams asking him to serve as a consultant to the American Film Center which, under their guidance, planned to produce a series of television programs and films meant to “combine entertainment and purposeful mass education in race relations.”²⁴ Their letter may have contributed to Adams’ decision to propose the Negro Book project, for he replied, “My interests indicate sympathy with any endeavor to clarify and improve Race relationships, however I have not accomplished much of what I would like to do.”²⁵

The Negro Book Project Takes Shape

From the beginning, Adams and Merner had divergent ideas about the purpose and scope of the Negro Book. Merner, a white upper class businessman, wished to focus solely on educated African Americans, the very group Wright had intentionally left out of his work. He urged Adams to photograph the Bennett and Clark College campuses, since their presidents were funding the project. He also advised Adams to make portraits of middle to upper class blacks—doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers—effectively conceiving of the book as a way not simply to demonstrate the achievements of African Americans, but also to serve as promotional material for the recently established United Negro College Fund.

Merner clearly admired African Americans in the “Talented Tenth,” and his letters suggest he strongly agreed with W.E.B. Du Bois’ assertion at the turn of the twentieth century that, “the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”²⁶ However, by this point even Du Bois had moved away from such a position, having become increasingly discouraged by the barriers of systemic racism. In fact, in 1948 when Adams met with Du Bois to share a draft of the Negro Book manuscript, Du Bois advised him to focus even more intently on oppressive laws and inequitable economic practices.

Adams agreed with Merner that the book should educate white audiences about African American achievements, but he also understood that swaying the minds of a recalcitrant white audience would require much more than highlighting the achievements of the Talented Tenth. Even more important, he saw this project as an important vehicle for nothing less than ending segregation and discrimination, as the statement of purpose in the 1948 project prospectus makes clear:

To stir all Americans toward the realization that the end of segregation and discrimination, and the integration of the Negroes, together with all other races, in American life, concerns the entire nation, North, South, East, West, and Middle West, and that the democratic process is essential to achieving the America we all dream of, through which all nations of the earth shall benefit.²⁷

Newhall shared Adams’ vision. Both believed the project had to be a comprehensive photographic study of communities of color across the nation with the goal of bringing to light the experiences of African Americans across all socioeconomic sectors. In his thank you letter for the initial promise of funds, Adams wrote to Jones that he needed new tires to traverse the

²⁴ Charles S. Johnson and Donald Slesinger to Ansel Adams, ca. October 1944. Adams Archive.

²⁵ Ansel Adams to Donald Slesinger, October 27, 1944. Adams Archive.

²⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day* (New York: James Pott & Company, 1903), 3.

²⁷ Adams and Newhall to Garfield Merner and David Jones, March 1, 1948. Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Papers, 1843–1993, Series III: Correspondence. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA (hereafter cited as Newhall Papers).

country as well as extensive time because he wanted to conduct research on the “Negro Problem,” a moniker in use ever since Du Bois and others had published a book by that name in 1903. An idealist, he believed he could fight racism with countervailing warm-hearted imagery.

Of the \$1,500 originally promised to the project by Jones and Brawley, Adams initially requested a \$250 advance to pay a secretary to handle project correspondence and records. This advance is all that was ever received despite years of work and countless hours spent on the project, particularly by Newhall. Adams hired Lee Benedict as secretary, who was a member of the Los Angeles Photo League, a group affiliated with the New York Photo League and similarly comprised of socially conscious, activist-oriented photographers dedicated to exposing social inequities.

Benedict sent a letter and survey in 1946 to 500 black and white artists and scholars asking for their advice on how Adams should approach the project. The survey set the stage for ongoing efforts by both Adams and Newhall to secure opinions from people across the nation. They widely shared drafts throughout the project’s duration and continuously asked for input. They both were eager to incorporate the advice and wisdom of those more familiar than they with the African American community and, in addition to Du Bois, they reached out to Booker T. Washington and other black leaders. Five years later, in 1951, when publishers rejected the manuscript, Adams surmised that their propensity to incorporate feedback from so many different people had made the book unviable, as the scope had grown so far beyond its original intent that it was considerably more costly to produce than originally planned. Within five years, the proposed budget had grown tenfold, which included purchasing extant images as well as hiring twenty photographers for field assignments across the nation.

The Second Red Scare

Publishers were worried about more than production cost, though, for the second Red Scare was well underway and Adams and Newhall had both been ensnared in the drama. As early as 1947 the New York Photo League was added to Attorney General Clarke’s list of organizations suspected of being Fascist, Communist, or Subversive. When Newhall conveyed the news to Adams, she feared it was “part of the ever spreading persecution of progressive thought in all fields,” which, she added, was “a very disturbing thing indeed.”²⁸ While Newhall, greatly distressed, wondered if they should cancel their memberships, Adams instead jumped to the League’s defense, not in support of their purported Communist political ideas, which he did not believe was true of them and which he emphatically stated he detested, but rather to defend the League’s right of free speech and the critical importance of political debate. He was infuriated that the democratic ideal was in danger and that free thought was under attack. “Mere protest is not enough,” he cried. “It demands action. It demands that we reaffirm the principal of American Democracy.”²⁹ He urged the League to organize an exhibition, suggesting:

The theme must be America—the land, the people, the power of Democracy, the human promise of a free society.... [we must] photograph the truth of America—the majesty of the Natural scene, and the majesty of our people and their accomplishments. Show the unity of all people and that people can live together in peace. The constant, dynamic affirmation of the camera must be devoted to the support of the democratic potential.³⁰

Despite this initial support of the League, Adams and Newhall both withdrew their membership in 1949 when one of the League members testified before Congress that it was a Communist front. Two years later the League formally disbanded. When she and Adams

²⁸ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, December 9, 1947. Adams Archive.

²⁹ Ansel Adams to Walter Rosenblum, December 10, 1947. Newhall Papers. Rosenblum was serving as the President of the New York Photo League at the time.

³⁰ Ansel Adams to Walter Rosenblum, December 10, 1947. Newhall Papers.

resigned, Newhall lamented, “There has got to be a place for Americans. Between the Reds and the Red-baiters where do we of good will go?”³¹

Adams had been worried about the fate of Roosevelt-era liberals well before that point. In 1944, as he and Newhall were planning the Manzanar exhibit, he had written the following:

I just wonder how many people who are liberals really know the trouble it will take to remain liberals? and do things which are of liberal consequence? The other guys are business men—people who count every penny, every hour. We take a deep breath and look at the Milky Way and say “it will all come out OK in the long run.” If that is all we do, it won’t!³²

His letter then encouraged Newhall to keep up the good fight and to rely upon constructive force, inspiration, and love, qualities he believed best allied with the larger creation in which humankind is embedded and which best reflected the democratic ideal:

That peculiar resonance of creation—the thing that seems to permeate all kinds of people, things, events, and productions—it’s not anything that can be formulated and explained. It’s just the sweet acrid play of constructive force against force, of inspiration against cool thought, of love against disturbance. The sum total seems to be something pretty swell.³³

Despite this philosophy, they both remained anxious about the changing political tide and Newhall, in particular, became even more so when the Mundt-Nixon Bill was proposed in 1948, a bill that sought to give Congress the power to identify purported Communist fronts and shut down their sources of communication. She declared:

The bill will also hit you and me and anybody on the Negro book or Negro associations—even NAACP. Also Zionists, people campaigning for better housing, lower prices, world peace, third party, anything liberal and worth fighting for.... We got Fascism, I fear...this is aimed at the people who like Roosevelt. In other words, us.³⁴

Although that bill did not pass, Congress enacted the *Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950* two years later, despite a veto from Truman. Using intentionally vague language, the bill allowed Congress to cast a wide net. Many black and white creative thinkers and scholars fighting for social justice, and even those simply sympathetic to the cause were either accused of being subversive and un-American or else were worried they soon would be.

This brought to a halt much of the interracial cooperation that many were striving to achieve and very few publishers now were willing to risk their reputations and livelihoods on anything remotely controversial, such as the *Negro Book*. When Newhall sent the manuscript to publishers in 1951, she reported the rejections to Adams: “all but one with the highest praise...and hopes we may *find a more daring firm* [emphasis added].”³⁵ The changing political tide and foul mood of the nation thwarted the efforts of many others, including Owen Dodson, one of the black filmmakers trying to produce films for the Committee for Mass Education in Race Relations. Despite extensive lobbying he was unable to secure funds or get Hollywood writers to work on projects addressing racism.³⁶

³¹ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, June 12, 1949. Adams Archive.

³² Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, July 6, 1944. Adams Archive.

³³ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, July 6, 1944. Adams Archive.

³⁴ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, May 7, 1948. Adams Archive.

³⁵ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, January 2, 1951. Adams Archive.

³⁶ James Hatch, *Sorrow Is the Only Faithful One: The Life of Owen Dodson* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

Publishers likely found the Negro Book particularly risky because of Newhall’s text. She was as devoted to research as she was to liberal thought. The volumes of notes she collected for the Negro Book testify to her thoroughness and acuity. She pored over texts written by African Americans, fiction and nonfiction, including slave narratives, autobiographies, biographies, poetry, novels, histories, sociological studies, and philosophical works. She consulted numerous books written by black and white authors about black suffrage, the institution of slavery, the slave trade, and so on. She also regularly clipped articles out of magazines and newspapers, trying to stay abreast of the quickly changing scene as increasing numbers of black leaders were calling for an end to segregation and as newspapers reported scenes of violence towards African Americans, including ongoing lynching. Newhall noted how challenging it was to integrate and contextualize current events within the broader historical narrative, but she nevertheless tried her best. She became increasingly aware of structural oppression and could not pretend otherwise. This naturally found expression in the text she crafted to accompany the images.

Based on reports from Adams to Newhall, Merner grew restive with Newhall’s increasingly politicized stance. He kept trying to steer the project back to his tame and safe vision of the benefits of education. While Adams supported Newhall’s direction, he nevertheless found himself in the position of middleman, often muddying the waters given that he wanted the thrust of the work to stay positive and affirmative. He likely agreed with Merner when in 1948 he communicated to Newhall that Merner “desires a certain dispassionate interpretation of violence, etc. stressing rather the positive side...He was also pleased that we had avoided actual scenes of violence”³⁷ and again, in 1950, that Merner wanted “more accentuation of the positive, retaining just enough of the tragedy to make valid the continuance of the Negro’s desire for improvement. He feels that continuously reiterating the past evil stirs up thoughts which are not constructive, although they do give a tragic weight to the book as a whole.”³⁸ Merner, and perhaps Adams to some extent, seemed unwilling to concede that the past was also the present.

Newhall may very well have been beside herself with frustration over these comments, for, as she said of the manuscript, “this is the most profound plea I can make against prejudice.”³⁹ Nevertheless, she considered complying with Merner’s suggestions, but just before she changed the final manuscript Beaumont stepped in to her defense, writing to Adams:

I think that what she has done is so constructive that it would be a mistake to scrap it.... I don’t know Merner, but I gather that he would rather have seen a somewhat milder book. To my mind the value of such a book as Nancy has envisaged is that it drives straight to the whole problem of segregation, lays bare the reasons for white prejudices and shows how such prejudices warp the Negro. Against this background the Negro accomplishments stand out in a positive and dramatic way. The problem of the Negro education is certainly important; white education is perhaps even more important and that is what Nancy’s text should contribute to.... This book is really done! All we need are some photographs and a final editorial revision.⁴⁰

This seems to have emboldened both Newhall and Adams to ignore Merner’s advice. They sent the manuscript to five publishers not long after, only to have it rejected by every one of them.

Unexamined Prejudice

Despite Newhall’s ever-expanding awareness of racism, neither she nor Adams seem to have fully understood how they were unintentionally perpetuating some of the segregationist attitudes they hoped to help end, especially in the early years of the project. Neither seemed to be aware of

³⁷ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, March 4, 1948. Newhall Papers.

³⁸ Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, December 19, 1950. Adams Archive.

³⁹ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, February 28, 1951. Adams Archive.

⁴⁰ Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, April 2, 1949. Adams Archive.

the ways their preference for white colleagues foreclosed opportunities for people of color. When David Jones lamented in 1948 that few black photographers were acknowledged in the photography world and wondered why Adams and Newhall had not commissioned the few who had managed to have their work featured in magazines, newspapers, and museums to make images for the *Negro Book*, they persisted with their list of white photographers.

This stubbornness continued even as their manuscript was critiqued. After showing a draft of the manuscript to a number of people, which was laced with quotes from African American authors, Adams relayed the following comment in a postscript to Newhall, “A local lady said ‘the photographs are not as strong as the text.’ I have gotten that idea from quite a few people. Hence, in the final dummy we should try for more excitement in that direction.”⁴¹ Neither Adams nor Newhall seem to have wondered if the text might be more compelling because it directly conveyed the voice of black writers and therefore that the photographs might similarly be more compelling if they were taken by black photographers. To a fault, both Adams and Newhall were so passionately committed to their own particular vision of art photography and to their friends who practiced it, such as Paul Strand and Edward Weston, that they were reluctant to expand the roster beyond their circle.

Reflecting the attitude of many whites at the time, both Adams and Newhall also could be patronizing and paternalistic despite their best intentions. Adams’ reply to Jones’ query about adding black photographers suggests as much:

I have an idea there are quite a few Negro photographers that would probably “come through” in a grand way with proper stimulus. We have a Negro in our class who has a very fine feeling, but not good mechanics; but I have no doubts that he could do something swell if given a boost.⁴²

The man to whom Adams referred was David Johnson, Adams’ first black student at the California School of Fine Arts, who had served in WWII and then moved across the country to use his GI Bill funds to study with Adams. After being trained by Adams, Johnson went on to document social change, mostly in black communities, in the San Francisco Bay Area during the Civil Rights Era and beyond.⁴³ Despite having been trained by Adams, he was not added to the list of photographers for the *Negro Book* project.

The only other photographer on the list with intimate experience of the African American community was Helen Levitt, who, although white, was dating a black man with whom she had worked on *The Quiet One*, a film about disadvantaged children, both black and white, who discover peace and self-awareness in a bucolic sanctuary. Newhall evidenced some of her own white paternalism when, after meeting Levitt’s boyfriend, whom she did not name in the letter but simply referred to as “a really wonderful Negro boy,” she described him as:

one of the few to whom “Negro” just is silly. Born in the South, educated at Hampton, a Booker T. Washington-dominated place, veteran from Italy, counselor at Wiltwyck, where the *Quiet One* was laid, now studying for his Master’s or Doctor’s at Columbia—and without prejudice of any kind, clear and simple and swell and the kind one wants for a friend forever, just to have around and talk to and have fun with and bat around with. He wants to write and I think he really can.⁴⁴

Other factors hint at their unexamined racial biases, which though very mild in comparison to the bigotry and violence they hoped to combat were nevertheless problematic. Adams granted

⁴¹ Adams to Newhall, March 16, 1948. Adams Archive.

⁴² Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, March 27, 1948. Newhall Papers.

⁴³ Jacqueline Annette Sue, *A Dream Begun So Long Ago: The Story of David Johnson, Ansel Adams’ First African American Student* (Corte Madera: KhedCanRon Publishing, 2002).

⁴⁴ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, March 16, 1949. Adams Archive.

more privilege and respect to white men than to black throughout the project. For example, when he received letters signed by both black and white men, such as the letter asking for his advice for the American Film Center from Johnson and Slesinger, he addressed his reply to only the white man. And even though Jones, a white man, and Brawley, a black man, both promised funds for the project, Adams consistently only addressed his letters to Jones, although he did send copies to Brawley. In addition, like Beaumont Newhall and Merner, Adams also persistently used the sociological language of the time, frequently writing *the* Negro when referring to African Americans. While this is not unusual for the time, it does suggest that Adams had not moved beyond thinking of African Americans collectively as a type and a classification. His idealistic notions of democracy and desire to advance brotherhood may well have blinded him to his personal biases.

However, in 1955 Adams and Newhall began to wake up to their privilege and prejudice. Newhall wrote to Adams: “Have also had some enlightening tussles with Jewish pals, including Segals and Dorothy N., who combine to proclaim me an utter innocent—you too—for never in our lives were any of us shut out or insulted or maltreated for something we couldn’t help, like race. But I think I have it all straight now.”⁴⁵ Soon thereafter they added African American photographer Gordon Parks to the roster of project photographers, which suggests they had accepted the Segals’ critique and were beginning to acknowledge their biases.

Evangelism, Environmentalism, and Phase II of the Project

After publishers turned down the manuscript in January of 1951, Adams and Newhall made a substantial effort over an eighteen-month period to find a private foundation to press it. Despite myriad contacts within philanthropic circles, including the Rockefeller Foundation who financially supported the United Negro College Fund and with whom Newhall was working on another project, no foundation would oblige. Adams and Newhall seem to have abandoned this iteration of the Negro Book project at that point, turning their attention elsewhere until late in 1955 when Merner contacted them and asked them to revive it.

Their letters in the intervening years (1951–1955) demonstrate their heightened concern about the fate of America and worry about the demise of a free, democratic society. In addition to the government’s increasing authoritarianism and the ever-mounting racial tensions as the Civil Rights Movement began to solidify, the country also feared mass destruction via nuclear war. Like so many others, Adams and Newhall were convinced the world might soon come to an end and Newhall lamented: “The end of man, beauty, poetry, and all love and promise, destroyed by his own evil-impelled inertia.”⁴⁶ She wanted to take positive action, “if we do not stop our evil inertia we will waste the earth and ourselves. Man has still an immense capacity for faith and action; it is up to us to arouse it.”⁴⁷

Adams was even more motivated to change the mood of the nation by affirming the best of America. As he had written earlier to both Newhalls: “Have been groping for a word which might serve in part to fill out the idea of Affirmation. It isn’t so much the word as its connotations. The word is compassion. Modern art does not have that quality. Modern society certainly doesn’t have it.... The larger view—such as possessed by Whitman—possesses it.”⁴⁸ He was more inspired than ever to wake up the nation to beauty, becoming increasingly convinced that Nature was the only enduring and truthful dimension in a world fraught with anger and strife. Society, he believed, could find its way to peace and harmony by spending more time in the natural world. Newhall agreed: “By god, let’s do something about Affirmations!”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, Jan 11, 1955. Adams Archive.

⁴⁶ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, March 5, 1950. Adams Archive.

⁴⁷ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, March 5, 1950. Adams Archive.

⁴⁸ Ansel Adams to Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, September 10, 1950. Adams Archive.

⁴⁹ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, ca. early December, 1950. Adams Archive.

This combined with their mounting worry over increasing development and its impacts on water and land led them to devote much of their creative energy to defense of the environment. They labeled their efforts in those years as “evangelism,” and Newhall later pondered: “I can’t help wondering if we will like in our old age, what we helped create. Maybe we will, if we are good enough. Oh why are we both evangelists? All the best New Englanders have been Evangelists! And you, my dear, are an Adams who has been out in the sun for a couple of generations.”⁵⁰

When Merner saw their exhibit, *This Is the American Earth*, which traveled around the nation and helped catalyze the environmental movement, he urged them to revive the Negro Book manuscript and create a similar traveling exhibit as well as television program. Newhall was happy to return to the Negro Book. She was eager to bring to light the material she had so painstakingly gathered before and to incorporate into the narrative the activism in the African American community over the intervening years. Adams, too, was eager, as he was horrified by the overt racism he was witnessing on the West Coast. Writing to Merner in March of 1956, he lamented: “Some of our friends right here in San Francisco have said, and will say again, ‘The Negro IS inferior; he will never achieve equal status; the whites will not stand for true integration, etc., etc.’”⁵¹

While Adams did not mention a need for tires in his letters this time, in all other respects it was as though they had stepped back a decade and were headed down the same path. In fact, the correspondence between the three, which was quite extensive throughout 1955 and 1956, demonstrates a replay of the very tensions that arose between them before. Newhall strove to capture in words and images the impacts of oppression and the complex beauty of democracy unfolding before her. Merner sought to whitewash the social tensions and downplay history. Adams remained committed to affirming America and advancing universal harmony. He wrote to Merner in 1956:

It seems to me whatever we do now needs to take on a much stronger tone; not of protest but of revelation of human truth. If we set out to shame and confound them [Southern whites] we will fail completely. But if we tell the truth properly the opposition will shame and confound itself. Perhaps we have thought about this project as related to Negroes—thereby admitting the element of difference. Perhaps we should just think of the problem as relating to people—leave out the color difference as much as possible, but combine Negro and White (and perhaps other races as well) in a grand presentation of the progress of our civilization.⁵²

Ultimately, their efforts to revive the project failed, especially when it became clear that the Southern states, given their violent response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, would be unwilling to display an exhibit affirming African Americans. Newhall and Adams both preferred to kill the project than to change the exhibit narrative to appease Southern politicians. Thus, after more than a decade of effort and countless hours of research, the Negro Book project came to an end. Newhall showed some of the work in *The Negro Exhibit* at the George Eastman House in 1956.⁵³ In addition, some of the text and photographs were incorporated into an exhibit sponsored by the United States Information Agency entitled *Nation of Nations*, which toured throughout Europe.⁵⁴ Beyond that, the files were permanently closed.

Adams and Newhall continued to work together on other projects for a number of years, most of them focused on the American West. Newhall died in 1974 due to complications from a rafting accident, which happened eerily near the scene of one of Adams’ photographs, *The*

⁵⁰ Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, August 15, 1953. Adams Archive.

⁵¹ Ansel Adams to Garfield Merner, March 18, 1956. Newhall Papers.

⁵² Ansel Adams to Garfield Merner, March 18, 1956. Newhall Papers.

⁵³ Merry Foresta, Erin O’Toole, and MaLin Wilson Powell. *Nancy Newhall: A Literacy of Images* (San Diego: Museum of Photographic Arts, 2008).

⁵⁴ Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*.

Tetons and the Snake River. Reflecting several years after Newhall’s death, Adams wrote: “When I think of Nancy Newhall, I think of sunlight.... She had a compelling internal luminance which glowed in all her thoughts, her writing and her personality.” He ended the document, “In truth, when I think of Nancy Newhall I think of the ‘morning stars singing together.’”⁵⁵ She clearly perceived the same quality in Adams, naming her biography of him, *The Eloquent Light*.

While their efforts to illuminate the beauty of fellow human beings were not as successful as their efforts to enlighten us about the beauty and fate of the natural world, the Negro Book project demonstrates their belief in the intrinsic value of all human beings and the responsibility they felt to social justice, civil rights, and the democratic experiment. Like many others in elite art circles, they sincerely wanted to unite the nation and quell the rising racial tensions in early Cold War–era America. However unaware they may have been of their social privilege and the ways their own biases reinforced the discriminatory racial practices they wished to help end, they nevertheless strove to combat bigotry as best they knew how. It is possible the Negro Book, the television program, and the traveling exhibit they planned would have made a positive contribution to society. The fact that they were never able to fully realize the project is lamentable. Equally lamentable is that the manuscript submitted to publishers appears to not be in the archives⁵⁶ and it is not clear whether it is in private hands or is gone forever. Still, we are left with project prospectuses, outlines, reports, Newhall’s copious notes, a few extant but unlabeled photographs, and voluminous correspondence, all of which tell the story of Adams and Newhall’s desire to stand on the right side of history during the tumultuous decade after World War II.

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⁵⁵ Ansel Adams, “Untitled,” June 28, 1976. Adams Archive.

⁵⁶ The manuscript was neither in the Ansel Adams archives at the Center for Creative Photography nor the Beaumont and Nancy Newhall archive at The Getty Research Institute, nor does it appear in any research library database. That said, it is possible it is either in private hands or that Newhall never actually produced a final manuscript, but rather sent an outline and prospectus to publishers instead. The letters are not clear on that point.

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