



Black cultural capitalists: African-American elites and the organization of the arts in early twentieth century Boston

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Abstract

This study examines the role of an African-American organization, the League of Women for Community Service (incorporated in 1919), in shaping cultural production and developing arenas for black musical and dramatic performance in Boston. We build upon DiMaggio's work on cultural entrepreneurship by demonstrating that the members of the LWCS were cultural capitalists who worked to build an integrated audience for black artistry largely within the framework of Eurocentric norms. Drawing upon data from the League's archival records (including meeting minutes and correspondences), historical documents (including local news coverage) and biographies, we reveal the manner in which Boston's black Brahmins began to incorporate (but also to diverge from) the organizational practices and aesthetic sensibility of Boston's Anglo-American cultural leaders. Concurrently pursuing the goals of cultural stewardship and anti-racism, members of the LWCS valorized both Eurocentric aesthetics and black cultural forms within a context of rigid racial boundaries and during an era of widespread discrimination. Their efforts to promote cultural uplift helped the LWCS bridge racial boundaries, with moderate success, although they may have also reified intra-racial class divisions. By revealing the processes by which the LWCS introduced black art into the mainstream, we contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the range of possible strategies African-American cultural organizers used to counter racism.

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1. Introduction

Boston has long claimed pre-eminence as a city of cultural distinction, having been endowed in the late nineteenth century with museums, concert halls, and theaters rivaling those of Europe. The city's most prestigious cultural institutions—among them, the Boston Symphony Orchestra,

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the Museum of Fine Arts, the Athenaeum, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum¹—were established in the mid-to-late nineteenth century by wealthy Brahmins who had become philanthropists and patrons of the arts. The establishment of a high culture world over which Boston Brahmins exercised control had the effect of excluding non-elites, especially minorities, from the realm of the fine arts—a legacy that endured well into the twenty-first century. It was in the shadows of Boston’s newly formed bastions of high culture—and under the influence of New York’s brilliant New Negro Renaissance—that enterprising black leaders began to build their own organizational presence in the arts. In 1918, when Maria Louise Baldwin, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Florida Ruffin Ridley established a black community service organization in Boston, they were acting in the social reformist spirit instilled in the leading Black women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Moreover, the members of the all-female League were undoubtedly influenced by the earlier black women’s club movement of the “Women’s Era” (1880–1920), an organization in which many of them were active.² Well-respected women, they worked with other members of the black elite (including their husbands) to purchase an elegant brownstone strategically located at 558 Massachusetts Avenue. This particular address lay just south of Huntington Avenue, the invisible demarcation between ethnic diversity and white homogeneity in early twentieth century Boston. On the other side of the avenue stood imposing temples of secular and religious culture: Symphony Hall, the Christian Science Mother Church and Horticultural Hall. The League’s proximity to these venerable white institutions overstepped traditional cultural and social boundaries and signals an integrationist philosophy on the part of the founding members.

A non-profit organization controlled by African-American women, the League of Women for Community Service (LWCS) exercised considerable leadership within black Boston’s civic life. We suggest that the LWCS constitutes one of the most important organizational forces behind black cultural production in Boston during the early part of the 1920s. The League played a prominent role by organizing and overseeing a range of exhibitions, performances and artistic projects at a time when most mainstream organizations excluded blacks. Although the League continues to exist until this day, its early contributions in the realm of the arts have, until now, remained largely forgotten. The group’s efforts—directed at once towards cultural uplift among blacks as well as displays of black creative competence for integrated audiences—took place within a social context of racial discrimination and a rigid cultural hierarchy.

Drawing upon data from the League’s archival records (including meeting minutes and correspondence), newspaper articles and biographies, we reveal the manner in which members of Boston’s black elite helped promote recognition of African-American art (including works that featured black-centered styles and themes) among an integrated audience. Our content analysis has allowed us to identify the types of events the LWCS sponsored, specific organizational decisions and actions, the content of critical reviews by the press as well as the determination of some members’ characteristics (including education, social connections, professional training). We argue that the women of the LWCS drew upon their dual knowledge and familiarity with black cultural forms and Eurocentric tastes in their efforts to create an integrated audience for African-American artists. Their efforts to make room for black art within “legitimate” culture

¹ The Gardner Museum opened in 1903.

² Josephine Ruffin, Florida and Maria Baldwin had founded the Women’s Era Club (WEC) in 1893, which was probably a model for the LWCS’ endorsement of the arts.

were shaped by their own acquisition of Eurocentric tastes and high-culture *as well as* their appreciation of some genres and styles grounded in the African-American experience.³ In the first section of the paper, we present a framework for the concept of cultural capital, highlighting our theoretical contributions. Next we provide a historical overview of the period, focusing on the two cultural developments that helped to frame the aesthetic tastes of the LWCS membership: the institutionalization of high culture by white elites in Boston and the cultural flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance. We then discuss the empirical case by examining the organizing practices of the LWCS.

2. Bourdieu and the concept of cultural capital

First introduced by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, cultural capital generally refers to practices and competencies that confer prestige upon actors within particular social fields and exclude other actors from scarce resources (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). It has taken on a number of quite different meanings, including (1) informal academic standards, (2) preferences and attitudes and (3) familiarity with high-culture (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). In *Reproduction* (1973), Bourdieu describes the processes by which middle-class parents prepare their children for academic success by providing them with the kind of cultural *savoir-faire* valued by schools. By virtue of its validation of middle-class values and tastes, the educational system plays an important role in providing the privileged class with symbolic power. “Even in the classroom,” Bourdieu writes, “the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favors those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines . . .” (1979: 2). Thus, he concludes, working class children become marginalized within the educational system due to their lack of cultural capital.

Members of the *dominant class* are those with the economic and cultural capital necessary to define the limitations of legitimate tastes and practices. Socialized into families rich in cultural (and often economic) capital, they acquire an informal awareness of the language and symbolism of legitimate culture—so much so that they are able to improvise and manipulate the code itself (Bourdieu, 1979). Members of the upper classes attain this familiarity with legitimate culture through the acquisition of a class-specific *habitus*, a ‘structuring structure’ which shapes an individual’s practices and perception. It is in this way that power relations become literally embodied in the form of class-based preferences, tastes and lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1979: 468). Educational credentials function as *titles of cultural nobility* that signal cultural competencies (Bourdieu, 1979: 2). Because working and lower class individuals lack early exposure to high-culture, they are far less likely to develop what Bourdieu terms the *aesthetic disposition*—the ability to interpret and decode cultural artifacts in the manner deemed legitimate by the dominant class.

Bourdieu’s assumption in this regard is that familiarity with high-culture is particularly important for access into the upper echelons of society and that the social world is characterized by an over-arching field of distinction. Critics suggest, however, that Bourdieu’s presuppositions are more reflective of the dynamics of French society than general characteristics of status hierarchies (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). In her examination of symbolic boundaries—the lines of

³ Our historical data is consistent with contemporary studies showing that middle-class African American adults are ‘bicultural’, in the sense that their aesthetic tastes encompass both black artistic forms and Euro-American high culture (see, for example, DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990).

demarcation that people use to identify valued identities, categories and groups—Lamont (1992) demonstrates that the most salient status signals among upper-middle class Americans relate to socioeconomic position and power, whereas boundaries in France are more closely linked to cultural erudition and refined tastes.

Even so, empirical evidence suggests that American elites do use the arts for social exclusion, but not exactly in the manner Bourdieu described. Ostrower (1998) shows that dominant groups exclude the lower classes through their privileged relationships to the arts. Rather than emphasizing refined knowledge and tastes, she finds that mere affiliation with and contributions to artistic organizations confer status upon American elites. They are able to practice social exclusion through the arts because their central activities—serving on non-profit boards and engaging in philanthropy—require both wealth and leisure time. We suggest that members of the LWCS were able to play a leading role in organizing black cultural life, in part, because they were members of a relatively privileged group of African-Americans whose status afforded them the opportunity to dedicate their time and energy towards cultural uplift and antiracism.

2.1. *Alternative cultural resources*

While Bourdieu's early work asserts that the cultural tastes and practices of the dominant class are pervasive and fully hegemonic, sociologists have since acknowledged the relatively 'autonomous' nature of high status cultural signals belonging to non-dominant groups (Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979; Horowitz, 1983; Grignon and Passeron, 1985; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Lamont and Lareau suggest that marginalized groups have their own "high status cultural signals" that are also used as mechanisms of social exclusion (1988: 157). Hall (1992) uses the term "ethnic cultural capital" to refer to practices and tastes that confer status within ethnic subcultures. Hall theorizes that ethnic minorities might utilize one form of cultural capital to gain status within their subgroup while adopting the practices of the "dominant class" to gain status outside the group (1992: 270–271). In her discussion of distinctively 'black' cultural capital, Carter (2003) empirically demonstrates how some African-Americans utilize dominant cultural capital when interacting with whites and affect alternative tastes, practices and styles in order to attain status among their peers.⁴ These conceptualizations of alternative cultural resources emphasize the extent to which members of marginalized groups 'code-switch', using different kinds of status indicators depending on the social context in which they are interacting. But when social fields overlap or when individuals target more than one audience, social actors might be required to *simultaneously* draw upon several different repertoires of evaluation.⁵ Indeed, it is this kind of synthesis and syncretism that generates cultural innovation. Sewell (1992) has argued that structural transformations can take place when individuals or groups apply schemas from one cultural field to another. Moreover, Stark (2006) suggests that *heterarchies*—organizational forms characterized by distinct, co-existing evaluative criteria—promote "cross-fertilization."

⁴ Carter uses the term *non-dominant cultural capital* to describe the tastes, practices and expressive styles of non-dominant groups. For the sake of clarity, however, we restrict the term 'cultural capital' to widely diffused high-status cultural signals. However, we are sensitive to the likelihood that conventional use of the term 'cultural capital' reinforces an ethnocentric bias. That is, social scientists should beware of uncritically conflating "cultural capital" with the practices and tastes of a single "dominant" group (which, quite often, is identified as middle and/or upper-middle class individuals of European descent).

⁵ Sociological interest in alternative repertoires of evaluation can be traced to Weber's (1978) *Economy and Society* and has been developed extensively in both pragmatic and cultural sociology (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Lamont, 1992; Thevenot and Lamont, 2001; Silber, 2003; Benson and Saguy, 2005).

In urging white elites to valorize black artistry, the League attempted to facilitate cultural “cross-fertilization”. As cultural straddlers who moved between segregated social worlds, the women of the LWCS were able to draw from distinct cultural traditions. On the one hand, their education (often obtained in predominately white institutions) allowed them to acquire familiarity with dominant cultural capital. At the same time, they promoted black cultural traditions and expressive forms. It was this multiplicity of cultural knowledge, tastes and styles that placed the women in a unique position to create an audience for black art within a context of cultural hierarchy and racial exclusion. As we will demonstrate, LWCS members explicitly tailored their performances and art exhibits to what they envisioned as an “integrated” crowd of elite Bostonians, as well as others from the broader community who may have attended.

The organizational strategies employed by the women of the LWCS demonstrate that actors not only make use of alternative high-status signals in order to gain prestige in different contexts, but they may also invoke both dominant and non-dominant evaluative criteria when targeting more than one audience. Their familiarity with distinct cultural traditions allowed the League’s artistic events to garner the attention of black and white elites, often excluding, perhaps unintentionally, working and lower class Bostonians. We wish to signal early on that these black cultural ‘capitalists’ faced formidable challenges in their attempts to both promote cultural refinement among African-Americans and push for the social recognition of black artistry among white cultural gatekeepers. While they were largely unable to create *durable* cultural programs, they nonetheless actively sought—with some degree of success—to create an audience for black art in an era of overt (and institutionalized) racism and widespread discrimination.⁶

2.2. Cultural production

In revealing how the League structured opportunities for the promotion of black art in Boston, we contribute to the literature on cultural production. Scholars in this vein have worked to uncover the contextual elements that influence the production, evaluation, distribution and reception of cultural goods (Peterson, 1994). In order for cultural life to flourish in any setting, there must exist a reasonably favorable environment as well as resources that can be mustered in its support and sustenance. Crane (1992: 60–61) offers a framework for conceptualizing the construction of urban cultural production by naming specific criteria: (1) the presence of culture creators; (2) a shared understanding of “what cultural products should be like”; (3) arbiters who evaluate cultural products; (4) organizations “within or around” which cultural activities take place; and (5) audiences “whose characteristics can be a major force in determining what type of cultural products can be displayed, performed, or sold in a particular environment.” Although the presence of cultural creators is crucial to the realm of the arts in early twentieth century black Boston, particularly germane here is the fourth of Crane’s criteria: organizational support and, given the prevalence of segregated cultural spaces, the availability of appropriate performance venues.

Crane’s description of urban cultural production also problematizes the singular situation of specific ethnoracial subgroups⁷ that are often denied access to organizational resources and critical attention from mainstream cultural gatekeepers. Although it focuses primarily on the 1940–1970 period, Crane’s model is relevant and can be used profitably as a lens for viewing the black culture scene in Boston during the early decades of the twentieth century. To the extent that

⁶ As noted earlier, the LWCS continues to exist, but the organization ceased playing a leading role in organizing black art in the 1930s.

⁷ Crane studies a group of young black graffiti artists in contemporary New York City.

black cultural creators worked on their own, unsupported by patronage, they match Crane's category of grass-roots artists, grounded in a local culture, whose work is "thoroughly unauthorized by the high culture establishment" (1992, pp. 60–61). In the absence of outside attention and patronage the "authorization" of their projects had to come from self-endorsement and largely through the social institutions they established in their community of affinity. The members of the LWCS, principally under the leadership of one of its foremost members, Maud Cuney Hare, worked to extricate their artistic efforts from critical inattention by building an integrated audience for black cultural production.

3. Historical context

Three historical factors are especially relevant for our examination of black cultural entrepreneurship: (1) the socioeconomic position of African-Americans in Boston during the interwar period, (2) the cultural outpouring of creativity galvanized by the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance and (3) the establishment of high-culture distinctions by wealthy white Brahmins some decades before the founding of the LWCS.

3.1. Boston's Black population

The black population of Boston during the early twentieth century, a small minority,⁸ was unique, tracing its origins back for over three and a half centuries, to the arrival in 1638 of the first enslaved Africans. Massachusetts was also the first state to record "no slaves" in the first federal census, conducted in 1790 (Daniels, 1914; Greene, 1942). Boston had an established reputation as the place where, in interracial alliance with white abolitionists, the cohesive black community had waged their ultimately successful struggle for freedom and civil rights. In realms such as the anti-slavery movement (David Walker⁹), scientific invention (Lewis Howard Latimer¹⁰), literature (authors Susan Paul¹¹ and Pauline E. Hopkins¹²), drama (William Wells Brown¹³) and the arts (sculptor Edmonia Lewis¹⁴ and painter Edward Bannister¹⁵), African-Americans looked back on a remarkably distinguished New England history. More than likely, this legacy

⁸ In 1920 there were 16,350 (approximately 2% of the city's total population). In absolute numbers, growth continued to be slow, although not entirely flat, until the late 1940s, when a new influx began.

⁹ David Walker (c. 1796–1830) was an African American abolitionist and civil rights activist best known for his "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World", one of the most influential black political documents of the nineteenth century.

¹⁰ African American inventor and innovator in the electric lighting industry Lewis H. Latimer (1848–1928) drafted the diagrams for Alexander Graham Bell's telephone patent application.

¹¹ Susan Paul (c. 1837–?), the daughter of Rev. Thomas Paul, founder and pastor of the old Joy Street Church (on Beacon Hill), wrote an extraordinary biography of one of her students who died before reaching the age of seven. See Lois Brown, ed. *Memoir of James Jackson, the attentive and obedient scholar, who died in Boston, October 31, 1833, aged six years and eleven months*. Cambridge, Mass.: 2000 [1835].

¹² Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859–1930) was a pioneering author in her use of traditional romance novels as a medium for exploring racial and social themes.

¹³ William Wells Brown (c. 1814–1884): Wrote the first novel produced by a black American, its plot loosely based on the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress, Sally Hemings; the first drama published by a black American, and the first travel narrative as well.

¹⁴ Edmonia Lewis (c. 1845–1911?) was a sculptor specializing in Abolitionists and Civil War heroes. Her sculpture of "The Death of Cleopatra" is now in the collection of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Edward Mitchell Bannister (1826–1901), an Afro-Canadian who moved to Boston to become an artist. He was one of the first blacks to receive recognition as a painter in the United States.

emboldened them to develop a cultural life of their own in the early twentieth century. In their community, centered in the South End and Roxbury largely due to residential segregation, black leaders found fertile ground on which to grow cultural capital of their own. While the ethnically and racially segregated Boston of the early twentieth century offered “no crystal stair” to aspiring blacks, upwardly mobile African-Americans sought to create avenues for their own advancement, as they had done in the previous century.

In Boston, as elsewhere in the United States in the post Civil War era and extending into the mid-twentieth century, the systematic and legal subordination of black Americans did not favor the accumulation of wealth, except among a few of the most privileged. Furthermore, “Jim Crow” segregation northern style reified social boundaries between leading black citizens and the white Brahmin social set. About two percent of the African-American population in Boston belonged to an upper crust with refined tastes (Cromwell [1954] 1994; Gatewood, 1990)—a fact often indicative of advanced education, European training and/or frequent exposure to newly established distinctions between high and low art. The social and civic initiatives of black Bostonians were generally inwardly directed, focused on community development and the creation of particularistic spaces and institutions, ranging from churches and women’s clubs to civil rights chapters of national organizations. These grassroots networks, established primarily by certain surviving members of Boston’s black upper crust (e.g. Josephine Ruffin and Maria Baldwin) and the next generation of women belonging to a slightly less exclusive status group, functioned to provide arenas of social space and creative expression for those so inclined. With women in the position of determining good taste and distinction, the construction of cultural capital became a gendered phenomenon. The League members, as was true to the vast majority of African-American women of their time, were acutely conscious of the need to maintain a genteel appearance and uphold an image of themselves as proper Victorian ladies. They were well aware (it was a major issue for the National Association of Colored Women) that their detractors, in print and graphically, depicted black women as immoral. As a result, the clubwomen were particularly concerned with dress codes and genteel behavior. In sum, gender dynamics played a part in defining both their ethics and their aesthetic philosophy. Leading black men were to be found in professional and social clubs in Boston. The genders occupied separate spheres, as was the case in the general culture among whites as well.

3.2. *The ideological influence of the Harlem renaissance*

It is important to note that the LWCS took shape during the cultural foment and innovation of the New Negro Movement, whose epicenter was New York City. During the era of the 1920s, Alain Locke hailed the advent of “The New Negro” and sought to showcase young black intellectuals in order to achieve social justice for blacks. W.E.B. Du Bois, likewise, framed black artistic expression as a means of demonstrating racial parity. In sociological terms, the movement constituted nothing less than a systematic and widespread anti-racist strategy (Lamont and Fleming, 2005) in which black cultural leaders (often underwritten by white patrons) showcased the competency, creativity and genius of African-American artistry in a time when blacks were routinely defined as non-human by white racist ideology. Locke, the venerable architect of the movement, identified three major objectives for this cultural rebirth of authentic black expression: “the encouragement of the Negro artists . . . the development of Negro Art . . . [and] the promotion of the Negro theme and subject as a vital phase of the artistic expression of American life” (1994: 134). In New York, this flourishing of African-American culture was aided by liberal white patrons, foundations, and

institutions. Black Bostonians, however, were largely responsible for providing their own organizational support in order to promote African-American art within the city.

The Harvard-educated Du Bois, a pre-eminent figure of the Renaissance—was at one time engaged to Maud Cuney Hare, the arts director of the LWCS. Invited to speak at the LWCS in October of 1918, Du Bois' ideological convictions and his refined tastes would have exercised considerable influence on Boston's burgeoning black cultural production. Not only did blacks during this period seek to fashion a uniquely African-American aesthetic, but they also used artistic expression as a means of obtaining human recognition by showing the distinctive value of black art. It was within this larger ideological context that Boston's black Brahmins began to build cultural organizations.

3.3. *White Brahmins and the high-culture model*

DiMaggio's insightful work on cultural institutions demonstrates that the boundaries separating popular culture from high culture in America were nearly nonexistent during the mid 1800s. It was only the deliberate attempts of the Anglo-American upper class that led to the creation of a privileged sphere of cultural production and consumption (1994, p. 456). High-culture distinctions in America were first established between 1870 and 1900, and DiMaggio locates the epicenter of this movement in Boston. During this time, "cultural capitalists" used profits garnered from industrial and commercial enterprises to pursue three interrelated projects: cultural entrepreneurship (the establishment of cultural institutions over which elites monopolized control), classification (distinguishing high culture from popular culture) and framing (the introduction of new social norms regulating the consumption of fine art).

In order to institutionalize their aesthetic tastes and preferences, Boston's white elites utilized what DiMaggio terms the 'high-culture model' most prominently seen in the governing structure of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) and the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA). In both cases, these private organizations were founded and controlled by elites centrally positioned within Boston's power structure. Moreover, these influential and wealthy individuals were holders of elite educational credentials and/or artistic accomplishments. Most importantly, the BSO and MFA were both established on a corporate model and relied upon philanthropic support. Such organizational tactics essentially insulated the MFA and the BSO from commercial interests and established an elite taste culture (1994, p. 471). It was in this way that Boston's white elite were able to transform the relatively undifferentiated cultural fields of the nineteenth century into an aesthetic hierarchy of distinction from which the working class and poor were essentially excluded.

4. African-American cultural entrepreneurship in Boston

By 1918, the founding year of the LWCS, Boston's wealthy white Brahmins had successfully established high-culture institutions and had long begun to define a classical (and Eurocentric) canon of legitimate culture. The cultural hierarchy established by white Brahmins undoubtedly influenced the ideological and symbolic context of the League's activities. Adelaide Cromwell ([1954] 1994), who began research on Boston's black upper class in the late 1940s, classifies the LWCS as "a charitable-social, local, non clique limited club."¹⁶ Indeed, in the early years of the organization, its express purpose was to provide support services to black troops departing for Europe, as well as to those returning from the battlefronts. However, during the interwar period,

¹⁶ Cromwell, 1994.

the LWCS expanded its projects, becoming central to community life and the promotion of civic, social, educational, charitable as well as cultural work in black Boston. Above all, it was indigenous to the city and not a chapter of any organization founded elsewhere. Demonstrating its centrality within the community of black elites, the League regularly played host to meetings for such organizations as black sororities and fraternities, the NAACP Youth Council and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.¹⁷ As a privileged organization, the LWCS placed a premium both on long-term residence in the city and on education. These two factors were proxies for social class and functioned to create boundaries between black elites and the black working and lower classes. As white cultural capitalists exercised their influence on the construction of high-cultural practices and tastes, so too were elite blacks able to define and structure the content of high-culture for their own status group (albeit on a much smaller scale). While Cromwell's study does not focus on the organization's connections with the arts, it makes the point that clubs in black society have long served to cement social ties and provide a venue for common intellectual interests.¹⁸ Essentially a charitable organization, the League became over time a hybrid, in which the promotion of culture co-existed with fund-raising and charitable efforts. The fact that the LWCS supported an array of social, political, educational and cultural activities is suggestive of fluidity, rather than a categorization strictly separating service and racial progress from cultural production.¹⁹

Building upon DiMaggio's description of cultural entrepreneurship in Boston, we suggest that the League members can be regarded as cultural capitalists. While these black women could hardly be considered 'capitalists' in the strict economic sense of the term, they were members of a privileged African-American elite who used their status and their modest financial resources to encourage the cultivation and professionalization of black artistic expression. Like white cultural capitalists, leading African-Americans were able to create a non-profit, charitable organization that contributed to the construction of aesthetic distinctions between high-culture and popular culture. Moreover, in ways that mirror the work of the founders of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the women of the LWCS also shared a broad, ambiguous commitment to communitarian outreach that made it possible to both express a commitment to public service *and* to define 'good' black 'culture' in ways that excluded many working class and poor African-Americans.²⁰

There are, however, obvious differences between the two groups of cultural entrepreneurs. African-American cultural capitalists were not nearly as financially advantaged, socially connected or influential as their Anglo-American counterparts. White elites were centrally located at the center of Boston's power structure while black elites were, by and large, relegated to the periphery. As such, they were much more constrained in their ability to redefine the cultural field. Whereas white Brahmins successfully institutionalized their aesthetic sensibilities, black Brahmins were

¹⁷ "League of Women for Community Service", a flyer distributed by the LWCS, n.d.

¹⁸ Cromwell, 75.

¹⁹ Politics is another arena of interest. However, little research has been conducted on this aspect of the black women's organizations. It is a matter of public record that during her seventeen-year presidency, Melnea Cass placed political activism high on the club's agenda. Cass, known as the "First Lady of Roxbury", encouraged women to vote in the 1920s, and in the 1930s she successfully pressured department stores and hospitals to hire African Americans. Additionally, international journalist and black Bostonian William Worthy, in a memoir piece published in the Boston *Globe*, noted that during the 1940s black women organized many a demonstration on social issues of concern to the black community. (William Worthy, "South End Memories", Boston Sunday Globe, December 5, 1971, 10.)

²⁰ According to DiMaggio, the MFA first legitimated its existence through educational programs for non-elites, an effort that slowly eroded over the years (p. 471).

limited in the symbolic and material resources they had at their disposal. While white elites were able to convert economic and social capital into durable cultural institutions, non-dominant groups like African-Americans were more likely to bring about change through coalition building and, more infrequently, strategic partnerships with dominant elites. Given social and economic constraints, the League was unable to establish endowed funds or patronage.

4.1. *Organizing practices of the LWCS*

Bringing black art closer to the mainstream—a goal of the artistic organizers of the LWCS—would require a crafty combination of African-American and Euro-American aesthetic sensibilities—and a careful eye toward forging instrumental ties with wealthy whites. As art chairman, Maude Cuney Hare was uniquely qualified for the task. Of mixed heritage (black and white), she enjoyed the upbringing befitting the daughter of prominent black politician Norris Cuney, of Galveston, Texas. These advantages helped her form important relationships with powerful Euro-Americans. Light-skinned, well educated and wealthy, Cuney Hare gained admission to the social circles of black Boston's upper crust. Moreover, her professional training as a musicologist at the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music and her personal passion for black art instilled her with a cultural knowledge of Eurocentric aesthetic norms as well as African and African-American cultural forms (Hales, 2003).

What was new—and distinctive—about the LWCS was its deliberate transgressing of racial and cultural divides. The League's Allied Arts Center was located just two blocks west of Symphony Hall at 295 Huntington Avenue. That their choice of location was a conscious strategy is consonant with sentiments expressed by Maud Cuney Hare. In a 1927 letter written to African educator Adelaide Casely Hayford, Cuney Hare spoke of the new branch she was about to found for the organization: “[I]f I am fortunate in securing this place,” she wrote, “it will mean that I can put our young folks' talent and wares in a section that will be in the regular stream irrespective of race. I abhor the segregated districts.”²¹ Since World War I, African-American residents of the North Slope of Beacon Hill and the nearby West End had begun streaming into the South End. When developers began buying up the old wooden tenement buildings where they had been renters, converting them into apartment buildings for immigrants, many blacks took the opportunity to move to the less crowded South End, an area in parts working-class and in parts still quite elegant.²² The time when these African-Americans settled into the ethnically and racially mixed South End coincides with the emergence of a distinctive black organizational presence.

The members of the LWCS maintained a two-fold commitment to cultural uplift among African-Americans as well as artistic efforts to bridge the color line. The organization's project of cultivation and enlightenment is evidenced through its efforts to promote artistic appreciation among Boston's 'colored' population. Like white cultural capitalists, the women of the League were interested in exposing the wider community to art—although not necessarily 'high' culture.²³

²¹ Cuney Hare, letter to Adelaide Smith Casely Hayford, September 25, 1927, qtd. in Adelaide Cromwell, *An African Victorian Feminist: The Life and Times of Adelaide Smith Casely Hayford, 1868–1960*. London and Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1986, 131.

²² The South End district bears no relation to the predominately Irish “South Boston”.

²³ The willingness of the LWCS members to embrace a broader range of Black art than “high” culture reflected broader cultural projects in which members of the elite distinguished between good and bad culture at the middlebrow level. For example, Storey (2003) traces how members of the dominant class in England sought to valorize ‘folk culture’ while denigrating popular cultural production. Cultural distinctions at this middlebrow level were seen as ways of “civilizing” the masses of the working and lower class.

References to music and performance appeared often in the LWCS' vocabulary. *Record books from the early years*, when the organization was still referred to as "The Soldier's Comfort Unit," reveal a cultural dimension in art and music. At first, these efforts were focused on the Unit's primary audience: black soldiers. For example, the group's membership discussed efforts to organize a permanent band at Camp (or Fort) Devens and to aid the band in purchasing instruments.²⁴

The cultural events produced under League auspices were staged both as an end in themselves and as part of a fund-raising strategy in service of the organization's goals. For example, on September 12, 1918, an operetta was performed at the Dudley Opera House, with proceeds benefiting the mortgage fund. Other events are mentioned in the organization's minutes as well, for instance, on April 5, 1920, a reception was held to greet the eminent Afro-Canadian composer Mr. Nathaniel Dett and his mother who arrived from Symphony Hall where the Cecilia Society performed his "Chariot Jubilee." In later years there appear entries regarding performances by less renowned artists such as Malcolm Lang and his Quartette (April 17, 1924) and the Carlo White Serenaders (September 23, 1926). By framing the arts as important and valuable pursuits, the women of the LWCS contributed to the construction of cultural capital in the African-American community. Such efforts were in line with dominant norms regarding arts appreciation and participation.

On March 13, 1919, the Unit organized and held a major event for returning soldiers: a performance by James Reese Europe's New York-based band. It was the celebrated Europe who, on February 17, 1919, had led the all-black military band and the victorious WWI soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Hellfighters, in a celebratory parade up Fifth Avenue in New York City. Under his leadership the sixty musicians, including his drum major, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, had been applauded throughout the Continent for its lively syncopation.²⁵ For the Boston appearance of the band the Unit sent invitations to the state governor, the mayor, Cardinal O'Connor, and the French Ambassador to the United States—clear evidence of their desire to bring black and white elites across the color line.²⁶ Shortly afterwards, on April 21, the Sedalia Quartette from North Carolina held a concert for which the League members would "dispose of as many tickets" as it could.²⁷ That same week the third of a series of "Musicales" was given at the Harriet Tubman House, a settlement house founded in 1904 by six black women.²⁸

In addition to creating a space for music, the League, sometimes in cooperation with other elite associations, such as black sororities, became a venue for pictorial art. On October 24, 1918, Maud Cuney Hare proposed another fund-raising idea: holding an exhibition of art works by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, the eminent Philadelphia-born sculptor who resided in nearby Framingham and was an active member of the club. Fuller had already established herself as a prominent black artist whose work often touched upon black-centered themes.²⁹ Hare later reported the success of the exhibition and announced that Mr. E.H. Clement of the *Boston Transcript*, a white newspaper, would "make mention" of the exhibition in its Wednesday evening edition. At a club meeting held on November 21, 1918, President Maria Baldwin read

²⁴ LWCS Minutes, October 24, 1918.

²⁵ Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African American Culture, 1920–1930*. New York: Pantheon, 1995, 12–14.

²⁶ LWCS Minutes, March 6, 1919.

²⁷ LWCS Minutes, Mar 27, 1919.

²⁸ *Ibid.* The Tubman house was located at 25–27 Holyoke Street In Boston's South End neighborhood; today it stands on the corner of Columbus and Massachusetts Avenue, not far from the LWCS and the Women's Service Club (Hayden, 20).

²⁹ For example, Fuller's 1913 sculpture "Emancipation" was conceived in order to recognize the semi-centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation (Ater, 2003).

Clement's article aloud, remarking on the high tribute paid to Meta Fuller (who also contributed half of the proceeds to the League). Garnering reviews of art exhibits in the mainstream newspapers was an important mechanism for gaining recognition for black art. Other art exhibits by Meta Vaux Warwick Fuller were held by the League as well. The minutes of April 21, 1921 contain a note about "the social success of the reception tendered Mrs. Meta Warrick Fuller, the noted sculptress." In the 1930s, too, exhibitions of work by both Fuller and Lois Mailou Jones, another major black artist, were held at the League headquarters. Maude Thomas Jenkins, a grand-niece of Josephine Ruffin and a founding member of the Junior League, has reminisced about attending exhibits of Lois Mailou Jones' paintings and of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's sculpture.

The most ambitious project of cultivation spearheaded by members of the League was aimed at expanding the cultural repertoires of whites. Through an exhibition of art mounted in 1922 at the main branch of the Boston Public Library, the nation's first such institution in majestic Copley Square, the League members attempted to increase awareness of African-American artistry among Boston's white elite population. The exhibition was originally conceived as means of directing public awareness toward the history of abolitionist activism and black artistic achievements. Black writer and distinguished statesman James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), an integral figure in the Harlem Renaissance, was invited to give the opening address on the subject of "The Creative Genius of the American Negro."³⁰

In targeting an integrated audience, the women of the League were required to synthesize aspects of dominant and alternative cultural resources through displaying an aesthetic sensibility that was compatible with Euro-American conceptions of art, even as they showcased African-American works. But in 1922, the League organizers faced overt resistance from white elites, as exemplified by a letter sent to Florida Ruffin Ridley (daughter of Josephine Ruffin) by Reverend Alexander Mann, the Rector of Trinity Church, the venerable Episcopalian Church located in Copley Square. In the letter, dated May 16, 1922, Reverend Mann wrote:

Dear Mrs. Ripley [sic]:

I have your letter of May 15 telling me of the Exhibition of Negro Achievement and Abolition Memorials that you propose to hold next September in the Boston Public Library in the interest of the Maria Baldwin Room. It seems to be a capital idea, and I shall be glad to be of any service I can. So if you wish to make use of my name on your letter heads all right [sic]. I do not quite know what you mean by 'abolition memorials.' The abolition movement of course was a movement of white people, and just how you are going to correlate that with an exhibition of negro [sic] achievement, I don't understand. . ."

Yours sincerely,
Alexander Mann³¹

Either through lack of awareness or willful ignorance, Reverend Mann failed to recognize the legacy of prominent black abolitionists (Lewis Hayden, Maria Stewart, David Walker, etc.)."³²

³⁰ By this time Johnson had published *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). It was the first novel published by a member of the newly founded NAACP. By the time of his address for the League, Johnson was renowned, having published *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), *Self-Determining Haiti* (1920), and *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), the latter constituting a major contribution to the history of American literature.

³¹ Correspondence from Alexander Mann to Florida Ruffin Ridley, League of Women for Community Service files. Mann was rector at Trinity from 1905 to 1922. Source: JWilson@trinitychurchboston.org.

³² Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

His confusion reflects the fact that he did not possess the same cultural knowledge of African-American history that the women of the LWCS (and other members of the black elite) had worked hard to disseminate. The LWCS' black achievement exhibition, launched on October 8, 1922, was, in the end, focused wholly on artistic achievement: painting, literature, and music. The abolitionist segment was abandoned—probably due to lack of support from white elites such as Mann.

In the realm of the arts, the exhibition successfully incorporated dominant and non-dominant cultural resources—a fact that helped to garner critical attention from the white press. F.W. Coburn, the critic for the mainstream *Boston Herald*, relayed that “[t]he immediate occasion for display of these outflowerings of negro creativeness is to illustrate James Weldon Johnson’s lecture on “The Creative Genius of the American Negro.”³³ The critic then singles out two artists whose works are featured in the LWCS exhibition and who “have palpably absorbed more thoroughly than the others what France has to give to the present day artistic practitioner”: Henry Ossawa Tanner³⁴ and Meta Warrick Fuller—indeed, these two artists now occupy canonical places in the annals of American art and in national museums.

It is no mistake that the exhibition featured black artists whose work could be accepted by whites as representative of high achievement. The elite women of the LWCS were, as noted earlier, bi-cultural. Their embrace of certain kinds of ‘good’ black expression allowed their cultural projects to appeal to an integrated audience of elite Bostonians. Coburn’s glowing evaluation in the *Boston Herald* reveals as much: he noted that Tanner’s “Flight Into Egypt,” exhibited earlier that year at the Vose Gallery on Newbury Street in Boston, was included in the exhibition. The biblical painting, which features Mary and Joseph ushering Jesus to safety (Matthew 2:12–14), also resonates with the struggle of African-Americans to escape oppression. Coburn praises this work for a “quiet lyric beauty of painting that is conceived within a narrow range of color values by an artist of much sensibility and *good taste*.”³⁵ Coburn’s critical reaction is indicative of the extent to which Tanner and other featured artists were successful in producing work consistent with the aesthetic standards of Euro-American elites. Tanner’s acquisition of dominant cultural capital emerged, in part, from his artistic training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under Thomas Eakins as well as the time he spent living abroad and painting in France. Moreover, Tanner creatively transformed prevailing artistic norms by infusing his paintings with themes and imagery drawn from both his personal experience as an African-American as well as his religious background in the African Methodist Episcopal church.

Coburn’s review notwithstanding, the relative paucity of media coverage offered at the time of the exhibition provide clues of the extent to which black Boston’s artistic organizers and producers were constrained in their ability to garner the support and patronage of white gatekeepers of high culture. In his description of works by Meta Vaux Fuller, Coburn further elucidated the nature of the social constraints black artists faced in their efforts to both appropriate and transform dominant aesthetic tastes. Fuller was represented in the exhibition by five small sculptures including “Future,” “Maud, Come Home,” and “Awakening Ethiopia”, a sculpture that explicitly drew upon African symbolism. Coburn wrote that “[Fuller] has a flair for symbolic sculpture, delicately conceived”, adding: “With so many negroes [sic] acquiring

³³ F.W. Coburn, “In the World of Art”, *The Sunday Herald*, Boston, October 8, 1922, Section C, 5. Clipping from the files of the League of Women for Community Service.

³⁴ From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Tanner studied with Thomas Eakins and was the first African American painter to reach international acclaim. He spent more than half of his life in France.

³⁵ Emphasis added.

wealth among us it might seem that such a sculptor would find opportunity to do some big things for public places in the United States—if our . . . Ku Kluxers would allow them to stand.”³⁶

While the women of the LWCS did evince an appreciation for Eurocentric aesthetic sensibilities, their embrace of black art that confronted themes and symbolism related to discrimination and racism constituted noteworthy challenge to conventional conceptions of high-culture. Florida Ruffin Ridley correctly signaled that the black achievement exhibition was a historic event and a great success for the League. Averring that the organization had “prospered” owing to the hard work, sacrifice and devotion of its founders, Ridley added:

In this connection one of its greatest achievements was the carrying of an “Exhibition of Negro Achievement” for a month in the Boston Public Library; this was a big undertaking, the biggest and most important thing of its kind ever undertaken in Boston. Not only was it undertaken but successfully and triumphantly carried through—an achievement of colored women that will go down into history.³⁷

Ironically, not only the exhibit but the cultural work done by these women of the female “Talented Tenth”³⁸ have been largely unknown. Their obscured legacy can likely be explained, in part, by the organization’s undercapitalization,³⁹ its lack of a strong infrastructure, and its reliance on a small number of highly active and charismatic women. We suggest that these organizational and institutional weaknesses were in large part due to the relative exclusion of even relatively privileged African Americans from the social and economic resources enjoyed by white Brahmins.

Our focus on the cultural entrepreneurship of prominent blacks during the early twentieth century has been an attempt to reframe an important period in American history—one that witnessed the nationwide efforts of blacks to establish their equality with whites through refined artistic production. The novel way in which these black cultural capitalists combined both dominant and non-dominant tastes, knowledge, preferences and aesthetic sensibilities in order to generate and sustain an integrated audience of elites merits attention. It was a utopian project, one consonant with the optimism of the period. The 1920s were the high point of the New Negro era, a time when suddenly a critical number of black-authored works began to see publication and receive mainstream acclaim for their work. The LWCS displayed a desire to accumulate black cultural material in the form of recently published books. In April of 1920, League president Maria Baldwin called attention to *Darkwater*, Du Bois’ latest publication and recommended that members purchase copies. By this time the LWCS had established a lending library and their efforts were bolstered by the institutional ties of its members to prestigious white cultural institutions.⁴⁰ After Maria Baldwin’s death and the dedication on December 28, 1923 of the “Memorial Room” Library, the League began expanding its collection.

The establishment of a library was indicative of the women’s taste for the intellectual—clearly reflective of their education, more extensive than that of the average woman, as well as their predilection for dominant cultural practices. By catering to the educated class, their work reinforced class boundaries.⁴¹ But the women also affirmed their non-dominant preferences by

³⁶ Coburn, op. cit.

³⁷ Florida Ruffin Ridley, “Our Women: Women in the News”, unpub. paper, courtesy of Maude T. Jenkins.

³⁸ This was W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept that ten per cent of the young generation of African Americans, intelligent and educated, was poised to lead the race forward.

³⁹ The LWCS had no endowment.

⁴⁰ George[0] W. Forbes, a League husband and a graduate of Amherst College, was a librarian at the Boston Public Library who had secured books for the LWCS.

⁴¹ It is unclear whether or not the women of the LWCS *intended* for their practices to be exclusionary.

collecting and discussing works written by African-American writers. They organized study forums such as the one started by Florence Harmon, Chairman of the Junior League and an aspiring writer, who on May 27, 1927, reported for her Club “. . . many pleasant evenings” spent “. . . in the study of such of our noted leaders as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and William Stanley Braithwaite [sic].⁴²” Additionally, the minutes indicate that “weekly meetings by the [Saturday Evening] Quill Club,” which published black Boston’s sole literary magazine during the 1920s, took place at the League. Self-consciously or not, the League had expanded its identity from largely charitable to cultural in nature.

4.2. *Class, race and aesthetic boundaries*

As the empirical data have illustrated, the aesthetic choices and organizational strategies of the LWCS members reflected both dominant and non-dominant elements. In this context, non-dominant cultural resources have been conceptualized as the inclusion of distinctively black genres, themes, artists and styles. Dominant cultural capital and the high-culture model were also invoked in a variety of ways, among them: the inclusion of artistic work that conformed to Eurocentric aesthetic standards. Well-educated and financially secure, the black women involved in the LWCS were able to use their distinct cultural competencies to assert the legitimacy of African-American artistic production and appeal to an integrated audience of Bostonians. Their unique synthesis of cultural repertoires included (1) valorizing ‘good’ art [attitude], (2) knowing how to consume and evaluate Euro-American art [formal dominant knowledge], (3) awareness of African-American artists, composers and writers [formal non-dominant knowledge], (4) appreciating legitimate works but also asserting the legitimacy of black-centered themes and styles [behavior and attitude, manipulation of the code], (5) maintaining an art collection and library [possession of a cultural commodity] and (6) organizing art exhibits and musical events featuring African-American artists [production of a good, expanding the code].⁴³

Although many black and white elites initially shared an interest in promoting arts appreciation and cultivation within the larger community, the aesthetic project for black Brahmins was quite distinct from that of the wealthy whites. While upper-class Anglo-Americans created aesthetic distinctions that privileged high culture over popular culture, their African-American contemporaries were faced with the prospect of having to prove that they were, in fact, a people of culture in the broadest sense.⁴⁴ In this respect, their cultural outreach can be read as a form of antiracism. Black cultural capitalists in early twentieth century Boston were, of course, influenced by the high-culture model of white elites. This much is indicated, as noted earlier, by the self-conscious appropriation of property near Symphony Hall as a status indicator of high culture.⁴⁵ But members of the League advanced a less hierarchical taste culture that placed value on a range of African-American cultural production. This expansive conception of “good” culture included such diverse forms as Creole music, literature, popular bands, amateur theater, art exhibitions, chorales from black colleges, and classical performances. Thus, the League’s cultural entrepreneurship was both conservative and subversive: they promoted black artists whose work demonstrated a mastery of dominant aesthetic sensibilities and they included

⁴² William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962), Boston-born, was a widely known poet, anthologist, and literary critic.

⁴³ Here, we borrow heavily from Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) framework of cultural capital.

⁴⁴ Such were the aims of Alain Locke, Du Bois, and the New Negro movement.

⁴⁵ It is also evidenced by aspects of the black theater movement, black classical performers, and ideas about changes in the performance style of Negro spirituals to accommodate white audiences.

art that challenged mainstream norms by exploring black-centered themes, styles and symbolism. Their access to alternative cultural resources allowed black Bostonians to transpose schemas from one cultural field (i.e. certain aspects of the New Negro ideology of the Harlem Renaissance) to another (i.e. definitions of legitimate culture).

Even so, the organizers of the LWCS drew boundaries against certain kinds of black artistry. Many of the artists affiliated with the League were European-trained and exceptionally proficient in their craft. For example, Lois Mailou Jones was a highly accomplished painter whose artistic perspective underwent a transformation from Eurocentric to black and African-centered themes only after meeting Alain Locke.⁴⁶ In her book “Negro Musicians and Their Music” (1936) Maud Cuney Hare traced the influence of African rhythms on African-American musical forms. Nonetheless, she clearly articulated her opinions regarding “good” art, often in the high-brow language of elitism. While Cuney Hare celebrated both African and African-American forms of artistry, she remained nonetheless committed to a vision of high-culture that could not suffer ‘common’ forms of jazz and ragtime music. It was because of these emergent forms of black expression, she wrote, “that the musical taste of the youth were being poisoned.” Moreover, jazz and ragtime were incompatible with an “acquirement of taste for good poetry” (Hales, 2003: 132). She believed that education and professional training were of paramount importance for ‘good’ cultural production.

Those composers that conformed to her aesthetic sensibility were “of the school of rising young composers of Negro descent who are creating music as art” (Hales, loc. cit.). In her most definitive expression of dominant cultural tastes, she writes archly: “no seeker after beauty can find inspiration in the common combination of unlovely tones and suggestive lyrics. Music should sound, not screech; Music should cry, not howl . . .” (Hales, 2003). Thus, even as she worked tirelessly, both in Boston and around the country, to bring attention to the artistic achievements of people of African descent, Cuney Hare was not ready to embrace all manifestations of the black aesthetic. Instead, she advanced a complex aesthetic sensibility that combined dominant tastes (stressing education, Victorian values and Eurocentric definitions of beauty) with non-dominant sensibilities (an appreciation for the ‘African’ roots of black expression and the inclusion of certain, but by no means all, black works of art).

5. Conclusion

The League of Women for Community Service, headquartered in the strategic cultural district of Boston’s South End, played a central role in organizing black art in early twentieth century Boston. We have argued that the leading members of the LWCS were cultural capitalists who established a non-profit organization controlled by black elites who exercised considerable control over the major cultural projects taking place within Boston’s African-American community. Not unlike the far more powerful and numerous white cultural capitalists who came before them, members of the LWCS were interested in providing arenas for artistic cultivation and finding ways to institutionalize their high cultural tastes. As a result of their fundraising and ideological dedication to cultivation, the women of the LWCS organized a broad array of concerts, exhibits, performances, lectures, discussions and meetings of literary and intellectual groups.

During its peak years the League distinguished itself by way of high-culture exhibits of the work of two Boston-based artists who eventually attained internationally acclaimed status (Meta

⁴⁶ “Interview with Lois Mailou Jones”, Black Women Oral History Project, January 30, 1977 and August 6, 1977, iii.

Vaux Warrick Fuller and Lois Mailou Jones) and opened a major art exhibit at the Boston Public Library for a decidedly mainstream and interracial public. Their efforts to promote cultural uplift within the black community culminated with the establishment of the Allied Arts Center, where training opportunities in the arts and performance, primarily for a younger generation of blacks, would lead to staging of performances on the white side of the color line on Beacon Hill and at the Fine Arts Theater in downtown Boston.

The artistic activities of the League flourished for roughly a decade. Across the spectrum, the women created an auspicious environment for a climate self-reflective of black culture, and in so doing, they attempted—with a limited degree of success—to broaden the meaning of legitimate culture to include black artistry.⁴⁷ Although the LWCS began as an organization dedicated to black soldiers, for a while it transformed into one of black Boston's most important cultural institutions and can be credited with providing artistic space, bolstering black pride, and taking the first bold steps toward creating a receptive audience for African-American art. Such a role, vital for the cultural creators and contributors who at that time “share[d] an understanding a vision of the desired outcome” was dependent upon their familiarity with both dominant tastes and black cultural forms. With the departure of Lois Mailou Jones, and Maud Cuney Hare's illness and subsequent death in 1936, the organization lost its most active cultural capitalists.

In the absence of New York's patronage-rich mechanisms of publication, publicity, and foundation grants, black Boston's cultural projects hinged on the activism of a small cadre of the female Talented Tenth and the existence of a circle of creative people who received crucial nourishment for their artistic endeavors. Decades later (in the 1950s and 1960s) other venues in downtown Boston would become more welcoming to blacks and the League became less needed as a private space.⁴⁸ By the 1950s, Elma Lewis, another black Bostonian woman, sought to revitalize the black arts scene by founding her own Arts Center in 1954 and the League of Women for Community Service reverted to its original community functions.

In our analysis of cultural production, we have emphasized the extent to which cultural spheres may overlap. As individuals move between cultural worlds, they are able to appropriate a larger repertoire of practices. When black elites crossed racial boundaries (i.e., through their educations in white institutions, travels to Europe and experience with interracial groups), they appropriated Eurocentric cultural capital. In their efforts to push black art into the mainstream, they drew from a combination of Eurocentric cultural capital and alternative cultural resources. On the one hand, members of the League challenged prevailing definitions of legitimate culture by asserting the value of black art. On the other hand, these well-educated and cosmopolitan black Brahmins affirmed some of the distinctions white elites placed upon ‘good’ or ‘refined’ art.

This synthesis of cultural capital is important to the extent that Boston's black Brahmins attempted to bridge cultural boundaries. Examples of such efforts include the organizing of venues for black and white elites to engage the arts and the groundbreaking showcase of black achievement held in the Boston Public Library. Although we have shown that the members of the League were influential in organizing black cultural production in Boston, more work is needed to uncover the practices and tastes of working class and poor blacks at the time. Although we lack class-specific data on exactly who attended the League's events, it is quite possible that their leaders' educational background and refined tastes may have created boundaries against less

⁴⁷ In the absence of detailed documentation about the audiences in attendance, it is difficult to assess how successful the women were in their efforts to build recognition for black art. Apart from playbills and reviews, runs of Boston's black newspapers for the era are missing.

⁴⁸ Flyer issued by the LWCS, n.d., c. 2000.

privileged blacks and/or failed to draw from that population. Their focus on distinction, cultivation and professionalization may have had the effect of alienating working and lower class blacks. Arriving in Boston during the 1940s, Malcolm Little (later Malcolm X) bore witness to class fractures within the African-American community. Of the attractive section of Roxbury known as “the Hill” Malcolm wrote:

...I saw those Roxbury Negroes acting and living differently from any black people I'd ever dreamed of in my life. This was the snooty-black neighborhood; they called themselves the 'Four Hundred', and looked down their noses at the Negroes of the black ghetto, or so-called 'town' section where Mary, my other half-sister, lived.⁴⁹

His observations demonstrate that there was clearly a class divide in black Boston during this era. Malcolm was irked at the sight of people who, in his words, “prided themselves on being incomparably more ‘cultured’, ‘cultivated’, ‘dignified’ and better off than their black brethren down in the ghetto, which was no further away than you could throw a rock” (1990: 42).⁵⁰ While the activities of the LWCS predated Malcolm’s arrival, his first-hand account of black Boston’s class hierarchy helps to illuminate the social dynamics of the era and to suggest what segments of the black community might have attended ‘refined’ events organized by the League.

Simultaneously insiders and outsiders, privileged by their socioeconomic status but marginalized by racial discrimination, Boston’s black cultural capitalists of the interwar period constructed a multidimensional repertoire of aesthetic evaluation oriented towards antiracism and black cultural validation in the context of European-American hegemony. The resulting tensions vividly illustrate the dialectic of class distinctions and ethnic solidarity within the African-American community. Future research might fruitfully explore these dynamics systematically as they relate to black cultural entrepreneurship over the course of the twentieth century.

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⁴⁹ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1990, 42.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* This “ghetto” would have been the area near Tremont and Columbus Streets and west of Massachusetts Avenue, near the site of the present-day Harriet Tubman House, mentioned earlier.

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