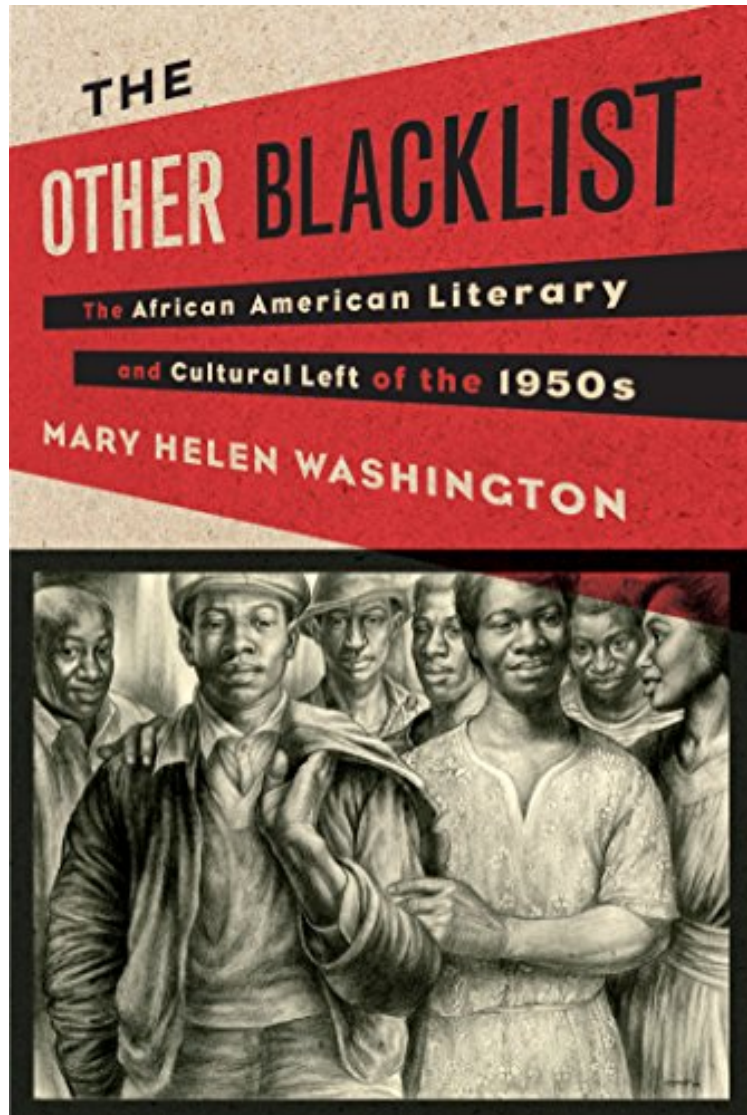


[Free download] The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s

## The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s

Mary Helen Washington

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**Mary Helen Washington : The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Excellent Reexamination of American Cultural History By Chilly Mary Helen Washington's; The Other Blacklist explores the influence of communist ideology and activism in the work of mid-Twentieth Century African American artists. The book is written in a concise, accessible style. The

introduction contextualizes Washington's coming-of-age during the 1950s, the era about which she writes. As a bright, black Catholic schoolgirl, she experienced the Red Scare as fully as any American living through the Cold War era. Her experience represents that of black America writ large: She was made fully aware of the evils of communism while the struggles for civil rights, social equality, and economic justice were largely ignored and lumped with communism as threats to the American Way. In six cogent chapters, Washington discusses five left-leaning or openly communist black artists: Lloyd L. Brown, Charles White, Alice Childress, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Frank London Brown. Each chapter is supported by well-documented research and interesting illustrations, including photographs of the artists, relevant activities and occasions involving them and others; paintings; and fascinating photocopied pages of FBI files on the artists. The nearly universal fear of communism, she explains, impacted most aspects of national life and— to her point—the views of critics, who embraced a “new criticism” that valorized the internal forms of individual works, rather than social contexts and themes. Subsequent scholarship, she surmises, has tended to follow this line— leading readers away from the social and political contexts and contents of communist-influenced work by black artists of that time. Washington examines African American affiliations with the Communist Party and the embrace of leftist ideas within black communities South and North, tracing the Party's influences on the civil rights movement. These connections, she posits, are represented in the work of black artists, in general, and the five artists she discusses, in particular. She argues that, in addition to the well-documented blacklisting of white literati and left-leaning individuals, U.S. authorities—including the FBI—and the intellectual establishment have ignored, misinterpreted, and worked to silence these artists. Hence, she writes, this book. *The Other Blacklist* presents an instructive revision of artistic and social history. Washington's exploration of the cultural significance of black leftist writers and other artists during the Forties, Fifties, and beyond valuably expands our understanding of this period of American arts and letters and some of the inspired artists who contributed to it. *Blacklist* is worthy reading for everyone interested in 20th Century cultural, social, and political studies.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful. I had always thought of myself as a nice, left-leaning. By Peter Clothier I'm reading *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s*, by Mary Helen Washington with special interest because of the work I did back in the early 1980s on a study of the artist, Charles White, who gets a significant chapter in the book. Mine was a two-year project, supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and it whirled me right out of my comfort zone into a world about which I had known absolutely nothing until that time. I had always thought of myself as a nice, left-leaning, transplanted Englishman, entirely without racial prejudice. I made two important discoveries in the course of that work: first, that the art world, as I knew it, was fraught with systemic prejudice against African American artists and the work they produced; and second, that I unknowingly—and shamefully—shared that prejudice. My work, then, was not only to research my subject, but to develop a whole new mind-set about values, traditions and aesthetic conventions I had never previously questioned. And not only that, I very soon came to realize that I'd need a new approach to the work I had set myself. As a well-schooled academic, I had learned that the first place to go, when embarking on a research project, is the library. Not much use there, in Charles White's case. The published material was surprisingly scant. I discovered that there were only two ways to get the information that I needed. One was to go to the ultimate source himself. I did this in a series of extended interviews with both Charlie and his wife. And the second was to go directly to every other living source I could find, which meant a great deal of travel, from New York to Seattle, Washington, from Chicago to Jackson, Mississippi. It was quite a journey. To be embarrassingly honest, it was often a difficult, even a scary one. Laugh at me if you will, but such was my prejudice and ignorance that the prospect of a trip north of Central Park into the depths of Harlem or down to the South Side of Chicago left this nice white guy fearful for life and limb! Until I ventured forth, that is, and encountered nothing but goodwill, generosity and warm welcome. I met with artists and scholars, writers and curators, and began to tap into a vital, genuinely American culture virtually unknown—except for its music and perhaps, by that time, a handful of writers—to the vast majority of American intelligentsia. Mary Helen Washington's book offers a similar enlightenment. She argues, cogently and persuasively, that the socialist thinking embraced in the 1930s not only by African American cultural leaders, but also by a significant number (most?) of their white counterparts, led to a kind of impasse in the 1950s. The famous Hollywood blacklist of that era was but the tip of an iceberg of communist phobia that gripped America at the time; it was paralleled, Washington argues, by that “other blacklist”—the black blacklist—that resulted in the suppression or mis-hearing of many African American voices, Charles White's among them. In the rush to avoid tarring with the brush of Communism, some leading black writers and critics were overly eager to pronounce the demise of racism and the need for a new, post-racial, assimilated culture, devoid of the passionate socialist commitment that had vitalized much African American art and literature until that time. As a result, many of those who chose the route of commitment to avowedly black values, black themes and social protest were marginalized. Washington's task is to bring them back center stage. Her thesis fits right in with voices that I hear today, more than a half century later—voices that seek to remind America that social injustice and, yes, racism, continue to spread their toxins in our social and political infrastructures. We need look no further, in my opinion, than the irrational, fanatical obstructionism that greets every initiative by our first African American President to know that racism remains a powerful, if poorly fig-leaved force in our country's life. Quite aside from her introduction to

forgotten or sidelined cultural heroes, Washington's book reminds us that we still have work to do if we are to achieve the American ideal that "all men are created equal." And finally, in the spirit of disclosure, I'm more than gratified to note that "The Other Blacklist" makes liberal citations from, and references to the work I did so many years ago on Charles White. The book I wrote was never released to the public. The manuscript came back from publishers with properly favorable comments, but regrets: they could see "no market" for a book on an African American artist at the time. Rightly or wrongly, I read their comments as a thinly veiled code. In retrospect, I can only say that it's a huge satisfaction to see the results of my efforts put to the service of a worthy cause. For which, my thanks go out to the author of this well-thought, highly readable and timely book.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.  
Necessary Scholarship  
By Jerry W. Ward Jr.  
Mary Helen Washington has made a superb contribution to the study of American literary politics, African American literature and culture, and the deep structures of critical literacy and black writing. *THE OTHER BLACKLIST* is a much needed alternative to lukewarm genuflections at the altars of the "canonized." Washington's scholarship offers fresh perspectives that enhance the work of constructing literary histories.  
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

Mary Helen Washington recovers the vital role of 1950s leftist politics in the works and lives of modern African American writers and artists. While most histories of McCarthyism focus on the devastation of the blacklist and the intersection of leftist politics and American culture, few include the activities of radical writers and artists from the Black Popular Front. Washington's work incorporates these black intellectuals back into our understanding of mid-twentieth-century African American literature and art and expands our understanding of the creative ferment energizing all of America during this period. Mary Helen Washington reads four representative writers—Lloyd Brown, Frank London Brown, Alice Childress, and Gwendolyn Brooks—and surveys the work of the visual artist Charles White. She traces resonances of leftist ideas and activism in their artistic achievements and follows their balanced critique of the mainstream liberal and conservative political and literary spheres. Her study recounts the targeting of African American as well as white writers during the McCarthy era, reconstructs the events of the 1959 Black Writers' Conference in New York, and argues for the ongoing influence of the Black Popular Front decades after it folded. Defining the contours of a distinctly black modernism and its far-ranging radicalization of American politics and culture, Washington fundamentally reorients scholarship on African American and Cold War literature and life.

From Booklist \*Starred \* Considering that any effort to achieve racial equality was viewed as subversive in the Cold War era, is it any wonder that so many black artists and writers were viewed as Communists? Yet very little has been written about the black artists and writers who were surveilled, investigated, and blacklisted because of their beliefs and their work. Literary scholar Washington remedies that neglect with this engrossing look at six artists. Though some were Communist Party members and others not, they were all drawn to the Left's appreciation of black folk culture and support for the ideal of self-determination, themes that figured prominently in their work. Washington profiles novelist and essayist Lloyd L. Brown, visual artist Charles White, playwright and novelist Alice Childress, poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks, novelist Frank London Brown, and novelist and activist Julian Mayfield. Tapping archival material, biographies, interviews, and FBI files, Washington examines his subjects' aesthetic and relationships with other writers and artists and the black community as well as their frustrations with and ambivalent feelings about the Left. Photographs of the artists and their works and pages from FBI files enhance this compelling look at artists and writers who became part of the vanguard of the progressive politics and civil rights movement of the 1960s. --Vanessa Bush A wonderful combination of careful research, adept historicizing, and insightful close reading. Mary Helen Washington's book brings needed critical attention to understudied figures and helps readers rethink the careers of others whom they believe they already know. (James Smethurst, author of *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance and The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*) [A] compelling look at artists and writers who became part of the vanguard of the progressive politics and civil rights movement of the 1960s. (Booklist (starred review)) Groundbreaking...thought-provoking. (Publishers Weekly (starred review)) Well-thought, highly readable and timely. (Huffington Post) Washington builds a strong and much-needed case against purely aesthetic interpretations of 1950s African American literature. Highly recommended. (CHOICE) Insightful, densely researched, and engaging...; Washington resoundingly demonstrates the importance of the Black Popular Front to the postwar black literary tradition. (Women's of Books) Washington's brilliant, intimate and highly readable new book capstones an important era of post-Cold War scholarship of the legacy of American Communism and African American literature...; no book in recent memory more boldly confronts and dismantles the political apparatus of literary commemoration. (Solidarity) Washington's excellent book contributes powerfully to a strand of scholarship that is transforming our understanding of post-World War II American intellectual and cultural history... Deeply researched, persuasively argued, and much-needed. (Journal of American History) As literary and cultural history, Washington's book offers a vast resource... Readers who are eager to place the postwar period in the context of 1930s and '40s

historiography of the left as well as the period of black nationalism that followed in the 1960s will rejoice in these pages. (The Los Angeles of Books) Well-researched, informative, illuminating... By challenging the standard Cold War narrative of Communist Party irrelevance and isolation, *The Other Blacklist* not only promotes radical African American cultural production in the 1950's, it also highlights the very real internal and external pressures faced by communists and their allies. (People's World) Superbly woven together... A must-read book for those who study and teach literature, women's studies, history, African American studies, American studies, and cultural studies. (Womens Studies Quarterly) An extraordinary piece of scholarly research and cultural commentary. (Science Society) About the Author Mary Helen Washington is a professor in the English Department at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has been a Bunting Fellow at Harvard University and has taught at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She is the editor of *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by Black Women Writers*; *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers*; *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women*; and *Memory of Kin: Stories of Family by Black Writers*.