Framing Race in Personal and Political Spaces

New Deal Photographs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt Portraits in Domestic Settings

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New Deal photographers working for the Farm Securities Administration and the Office of War Information framed Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) portraits on display in domestic interiors to reflect their own perspectives on national politics. The portraits were significant not only for the subjects of the photographs but also for the photographers who decided when and how to capture these interiors on film. Similarities and differences between Jack Delano’s and Gordon Parks’s early 1940s photographs of FDR portraits in American homes highlight this period’s political tensions involving war, domestic unrest, and the beginnings of the civil rights movement.

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1940, the incumbent Democratic Party candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), was elected to an unprecedented third term thanks to support at the polls from labor, African Americans, and foreign-born voters. Roosevelt’s margin of victory in 1940 was not wide, despite winning a strong majority of votes in the country’s lowest-income districts. In the past year, he had contended with opposition from isolationists and conservatives, Congress chipping away at his administration’s domestic agenda, and the ebbing tide of New Deal optimism. Nonetheless, a day before his third inauguration, the New York Times described the president as “serious but not grim, concerned but not worried.” “In confidence and vigor of assurance,” the article continued, he “is the same man who told the American people, ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’”

Five days after his historic re-election, a photograph of a smiling Roosevelt campaigning in Philadelphia the previous month appeared in the Picture Parade supplement of the Philadelphia Inquirer (fig. 1). In the photograph FDR’s face and bright smile, offset by a dark, wide-brimmed fedora, foretell victory. In hindsight, the picture’s contrasts also betray Roosevelt’s intimate knowledge of tensions brewing at home and abroad. His sparkling eyes look sideways out of the frame over his right shoulder, glanc-

ing back even as he moves forward into the inevitability of war.

This photograph and others like it were torn out of newspapers and picture magazines and pinned up in laundries, barber shops, saloons, and the living rooms of American homes. The portraits communicated gratitude, hope, and inspiration for the people who displayed them but also reflected and nurtured a new sense of connection between the federal government and individual Americans during the Great Depression and World War II. Their display captured the attention of New Deal photog-
raphers who sought to record American ways of life, as well as to promote the New Deal’s programs. As FDR entered his third term and the country entered World War II, two photographers in particular placed an emphasis on the domestic practice of displaying presidential portraits. All eyes were on Roosevelt as the United States joined the Allies and as racial strife simmered on the home front, and so were the lenses of Ukrainian photographer Jack Delano (1914–97) and African American photographer Gordon Parks (1912–2006). I argue that it is no coincidence that their photographs from the early 1940s highlight Roosevelt portraits in American homes to an unprecedented extent just as FDR’s negotiation of foreign and domestic turmoil loomed large in the public imagination.

By 1940, when Roosevelt’s smiling face was published in the Philadelphia Inquirer’s Picture Parade, Americans had grown accustomed to the thirty-second president’s voice and smile, which had helped comfort and guide the nation through the Depression. Families had listened to him in their homes since 1933, when he gave his first publicly broadcast radio address, and they had seen him in print, including on the June 27, 1938, cover of Life magazine, with his head tilted back in a hearty laugh (fig. 2). In addition to offering reassurance, Roosevelt’s ebullience worked to detract attention from his disability (he had been paralyzed from the waist down at the age of thirty-nine and could not stand or walk unassisted), as well as from his true sentiments, which those close to him knew that he did not readily reveal. Art historian Sally Stein has shown how artists addressed the challenge posed by Roosevelt’s physical impairment with strategies like selective framing and displacement in their depictions of him. Images of the president sitting at his desk or in his car and photographs of his smiling face were common, as were more creative and surreal solutions like a collage in Vanity Fair magazine titled The Laughing Cavalier, in which his disembodied head repeats in a dizzying swirl as if viewed through a kaleidoscope.2

Head shots of Roosevelt, although more frequently the conventional campaign portraits (fig. 3), rather than the candid laughing ones, were omnipresent in the material culture of 1930s and 1940s domestic spaces and small businesses.3 This article examines the significance of Roosevelt portraits visible in photographs of domestic interiors produced under the auspices of New Deal agencies the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) and the Office of War Information (OWI) for the subjects and for the photographers, and the meanings of displays of presidential portraiture in general. In particular, the images by photographers Delano and Parks expressed the optimism that Roosevelt and his portrait helped inspire and also the limits of that optimism. Both men worked for the FSA’s Historical Section, one of five units in the FSA’s Information Division, and for the OWI, after the section was transferred there in October 1942.

Roosevelt and the American People

The years of Roosevelt’s presidency coincided with enormous changes in mass media, not only the emergence of photojournalism and magazines like Life and Look that featured the new photoessay genre

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3 The fig. 4 portrait was reproduced on many collectibles and promotional giveaways in the 1930s.
but also the rise of radio. Roosevelt’s use of radio signaled a moment when political discourse entered the domestic sphere at an accelerated pace. Stein suggests that Roosevelt may not have returned to politics after his paralysis without “the prosthetic assistance of radio.”6 Unable to elicit awe or display power and confidence through robust physical action, he relied instead on his smile, his laugh, and his voice. “Radio was still such a new force, [Americans felt] FDR’s presence in a manner so novel and extraordinary to them that we have to make a leap of empathy to appreciate what they experienced.”5

In a letter to President Roosevelt, a Chicago man apologized for addressing him in such familiar terms but couldn’t help himself, he explained, because of “that kindly smiling face I see so much on paper and that kindly voice I hear on the air.” In 1940, a letter writer from Albany, Georgia, claimed she had looked at FDR’s picture on her wall and listened to his voice so much that “I almost feel like I know you.” Another wrote, “I dreamt you, Mrs. Roosevelt, a son and wife were dining at my house. I could see you seated at the table.”6 The sheer volume of letters written to the president by ordinary Americans was unprecedented. The quotes above are from an edited volume consisting of letters written after each of Roosevelt’s so-called fireside chats, talks radio broadcast to the nation over the span of his four terms in which he discussed current events and policies in a face-to-face conversational style. A radio talk that he gave on May 27, 1941, explaining the nation’s war preparedness measures and justifying his decision to add more ships and planes to American patrols set a record in the history of radio. Seventy percent of the total home audience in the United States tuned in to hear the president’s words.7 Radio’s novelty, and the intimacy it conveyed during FDR’s broadcasts, help explain the tendency of Americans to write to him as well as to display his portrait in their homes, sometimes alongside those of family members.

From the standpoint of current art historical interest in the circulation and reception of mass-produced imagery and the blurring of private and public lives engendered by digital and social media, the Depression and World War II-era practice of decorating one’s home with FDR portraits offers intriguing precedents. The pictures within pictures of American homes serve an important function for historians of New Deal-era photography by reminding us that “simple lives, . . . however reduced—should not be perceived as lacking the means to imagine the world and one’s place in it.”8 Such patriotic displays highlight their subjects’ agency in formulating and expressing ideas about citizenship, self, and identity. Displaying a presidential photograph in one’s home could certainly reflect an individual’s support of Roosevelt at the polls, though not necessarily in the case of black Southerners, most of whom could not vote. “Identification with the President” nonetheless “played an important part in the politicization of black Americans.”9 Far

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4 Stein, “The President’s Two Bodies,” 37.
5 Lawrence and Cornelia Levine, The President and the People: America’s Conversation with FDR (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 2.
6 Ibid., 565–68.
7 Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 240.
from being objective documents, the photographs of these interiors reveal not only the subjects’ support of and identification with Roosevelt, but also the photographers’ perspectives on domestic expressions of nationalism and political allegiance. Delano and Parks both started taking photographs for the FSA’s Historical Section relatively late, not long before its transfer to the OWI. Delano started at the FSA in 1940 and Parks in 1942. Historical Section photographers had captured domestic interiors displaying FDR portraits on film beginning as early as 1936. However, I argue that the number and timing of Delano’s and Parks’ images were especially significant. Each photographed three or more interior scenes with FDR prominently displayed, and they did so at an important juncture within the Historical Section’s duration and within the context of Roosevelt’s presidency. Beginning in 1939, Roy Stryker, the section’s head, began asking his photographers to take more upbeat photographs. He had long urged his photographers to picture the American home, and in the late thirties and early forties, against increasingly sinister reports of war abroad and lingering economic troubles at home, he persisted in his determination to record vignettes of small-town home life to reassure viewers of the stability of American values.

When US industry began to step up production for the war effort and to supply Britain with arms, social and labor unrest was high: 1919 and 1937 were the only years that exceeded 1941 in the number of labor strikes. The need for positive images only grew when the United States declared a state of unlimited national emergency in May 1941 in response to Nazi Germany’s threats and Roosevelt’s declaration of war on Japan in December. Stryker wrote to one of his photographers, not long before he and his team were transferred to the OWI in October 1942, asking for more pictures of “people with a little spirit.”

FSA photography scholars have interpreted these directives as leading the way for the more exclusively propagandistic goals of Stryker’s section once it was part of the OWI. The prominent display of FDR in pictures by Delano and Parks speaks to a heightened need for expressions of national unity and reflects the spotlight on Washington, DC, and on FDR leading up to and during World War II.

During the same period African American political activism was growing in response to New Deal inequities and discriminatory practices exacerbated by war mobilization. The war renewed and refocused the push for civil rights that black leaders had been fighting for since the beginning of Roosevelt’s presidency. A Southern-controlled Congress hindered the advance of critical legislation, including the 1934 Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. Roosevelt explained his refusal to support the campaign for federal anti-lynching legislation by telling executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, “I’ve got to get legislation passed to save America. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing.”

Roosevelt was referring to Southern Democrats who would oppose anything “that hinted at federal tampering with the racial status quo.” African Americans shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party in the 1936 election, due largely to economic assistance provided by Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, but black voter disenfranchisement in the South “vastly inflated the power of southern politicians in a way that allowed them to hold the entire reform program of the New Deal hostage.”

Similar roadblocks obstructed desegregation efforts. During the war, African Americans who sought skilled labor in industry or the military faced the bitter irony of fighting on multiple fronts: against fascism abroad and violence and segregation at home and in the service. New war plants like North American Aviation only hired African Americans as janitors, and the US Navy relegated African Americans to the roles of mess men. US Army General George Marshall insisted that war was not the right time “for critical experiments which would have a highly destructive effect on morale.” Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox threatened to resign if Roosevelt desegregated the navy. As historian Elizabeth Gilmore has shown, “political repression, segregation, degradation, lynching, [and] a poor educational sys-

11 Curtis, Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth, 6, 105.
13 Quoted in Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 165.
15 Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 169.
tem” all existed to keep the twin pillars of white supremacy and underpaid black labor in place.16

Philip Randolph, the labor activist who had organized the Sleeping Car Porters Union in 1925, organized a National March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in early 1941 to plan a march to protest segregation in the armed forces and discriminatory employment practices. Smaller civil rights victories that had begun in the mid-thirties culminated symbolically in Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, issued just six days before MOWM’s scheduled march and after Roosevelt met with Randolph, Walter White, and educator Layle Lane. Executive Order 8802 established the Fair Employment Practice Commission (FEPC) and was celebrated in the black press as a second Emancipation Proclamation and as proof that black political leaders had persuaded a reluctant FDR to address their needs. Even though inadequate resources and enforcement made the FEPC ineffective, “the very idea that employment practices should be fair to African Americans represented an enormous departure from Jim Crow.”17 As Clarence Mitchell, who had worked as an associate director of field operations for the FEPC, said of the progress of African American civil rights, “When you start at a position of zero, even if you move up to a point of two on a scale of twelve, it looks like a big improvement.”18 A whole array of social, economic, and political forces thus contributed to the early stirrings and victories of the civil rights movement, and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt both were very much at the center of the American civil rights conversation in the early 1940s.

Even though Roosevelt did not achieve the critical civil rights advances black leaders had hoped for, his administration paved the way for increased black political involvement. By the mid-thirties he had appointed an unprecedented number of black Americans to advisory roles, a group of eminent men and women including educator Mary McLeod Bethune; executive secretary of the Urban League, Eugene K. Jones; and field secretary of the NAACP, William Pickens. They comprised FDR’s so-called Black Cabinet or Black Brain Trust and became links between the New Deal administration and the civil rights movement by raising New Dealers’ awareness of discrimination.19 Additionally, historians credit efforts by Eleanor Roosevelt for White House willingness to hear complaints about New Deal discrimination and for negotiating meetings between the president and African American leaders.20 New Deal programs, though hampered in practice by institutional and structural racism, in theory had been aimed at helping all who sought jobs, both white and black Americans alike. As historian Patricia Sullivan has written in her book on the NAACP and the civil rights movement, “the dramatic intervention of the federal government in the life of the nation was reminiscent of Reconstruction, reviving the idea of national citizenship and offering a lever for blacks to assert their rights.”21 Sullivan also cites W. E. B. Du Bois, who observed that New Deal programs nurtured “a new and direct connection between the federal government and the individual.”22 This connection, the symbolic and psychological significance of Roosevelt’s 1941 executive order, and the political imperatives of World War II all help to explain the heightened compositional weight given to FDR’s portraits in New Deal photographs taken by Delano and Parks in the early 1940s. Moreover, the new climate of African American political activism contextualizes some of the qualities that distinguish Parks’s images from Delano’s. Parks, who expressed a desire to use his camera to end racism, took the most photographs featuring FDR portraits of any FSA photographer. The centrality of FDR in his pictures, as well as how he framed them and juxtaposed them with his subjects, acknowledge Roosevelt’s complex role in the fight for racial equality in Washington, DC, in the early 1940s.

FDR Portraits in FSA Photographs

Jack Delano’s first domestic interior to feature a portrait of Roosevelt, taken in December 1940, has some qualities in common with those taken by FSA photographers during the previous half-decade but also illustrates how FDR’s portrait played a more assertively symbolic role in the early forties (fig. 4). Taken shortly after Roosevelt’s election to a third term and a year before US entry into World War II, Delano’s photograph sends a message of hope at a time when Stryker had already started seeking less depressing imagery. It also demonstrates

17 Ibid., 362.
18 Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 211.
20 Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 163.
21 Sullivan, Lift Every Voice and Sing, 190.
22 Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 214.
how FSA photographers repurposed FDR portraits on display in their subjects’ homes to reinforce their own perspectives and allegiances. Delano spoke of his admiration for Roosevelt in a 1965 interview about his time in Georgia in the early 1940s. “We idolized President Roosevelt,” Delano said; “we thought that he was the savior of the country and the New Deal programs were doing a great deal of good . . . [they] were very much part of what I believed in.”23 Delano, born Jasha Ovcharov, came to the United States from Ukraine with his family when he was eight. He spoke Yiddish and Russian and had no knowledge of English when he started school. He did not change his surname until the late 1930s, when a classmate at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts suggested that he take her family’s name. The name, pronounced “Delayno,” was not an obvious homage to President Roosevelt despite the photographer’s high regard for him.24 Yet his childhood experience adjusting to life in the United States may help explain the sensitivity of his views of immigrant family subjects. Delano’s photograph, taken in the vicinity of Falmouth, Massachusetts, is accompanied by the caption: “The family of Peter V. Andrews, a Portuguese FSA client. They run a 7 acre vegetable farm. They have just bought the first cow they ever had, of which they are very proud. Mr. Andrews works as a day laborer at a nearby army camp.”25 The picture was originally


24 Stein, “In Pursuit of the Proximate,” xxii. Though I cannot prove that Delano took his surname as an homage to Roosevelt, many Americans did name their newborns after FDR. See Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 218. The phenomenon also was immortalized in a song recorded by Ella Fitzgerald in 1938, “Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones.”

filed with FSA photographic lot 1260, for which Delano wrote the following description: “portraits of Armenian, Italian, and Portuguese part-time farmers. Elderly and middle-aged men and women who operate dairy truck and poultry farms. In the summer supplementing incomes by fishing and working in mills or nearby towns and army camps during the winter months. Interiors and farmsteads.” Since the family is an FSA client, this image is an example of a project photograph, taken to show the benefits of FSA assistance.

Historical Section photographers had two goals in taking photographs. Project photographs provided visual evidence of the FSA’s agricultural programs to educate farmers about this available assistance and to persuade Congress of their necessity and success. The section ultimately strove to go beyond this original mandate to create a comprehensive visual record of American life. Thus, while many of the 175,000 black-and-white film negatives in FSA files demonstrated the work and accomplishments of specific program initiatives, some contributed to the larger goal of collectively preserving aspects of American life during a turbulent and transitional era of US history. Historian Cara Finnegan has revealed that while Stryker was dedicated to supporting the progressive aims of the FSA by illustrating the connection between rural poverty and poor land practices, several Historical Section photographers later expressed doubt regarding the level of his commitment to facilitating contemporary social change. They suspected his real motivation was collecting images, not using them. Regardless of Stryker’s politics, however, or the section’s stated purpose, the actual uses to which the photographs were put varied widely. While many were reproduced in newspapers, scholarly journals, government brochures, photo essay books, and mass-market picture magazines, many others were never distributed or published in the 1930s and 1940s. I have not found any evidence that this particular Delano photograph was published in the 1940s, though, as FSA photography scholars have noted, it is possible that Stryker distributed the photograph to a magazine or news outlet that did not, in the end, choose to publish it.

Delano, who had trained as a painter in Philadelphia, put his fine art background to work by paying characteristic attention to composition, carefully posing the Andrews family, and taking account of the pictures on the wall of their home and their spatial relationship to his subjects. In his interview with Richard Doud for the Smithsonian, Delano remembers “a period of very carefully setting up pictures . . . and very carefully lighting them. . . . And there was a whole series that I had done up in Rhode Island of a depressed area—Portuguese fishermen and farmers and these were kind of family portraits, some of them, in which the wide angle lens would be used and people would be dispersed throughout the room very carefully placed in certain places.” Though the Rhode Island family Delano recalls in this interview may not be the Massachusetts family photographed here, its studied composition nonetheless is similar to what Delano describes and speaks to Delano’s conscious decision making in orchestrating his pictures.

A portrait of Roosevelt with a broad grin, a calendar, and a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper adorn the farmhouse wall against which Delano arranged his subjects. A triangle orders the space of the shot, with the smiling FDR portrait at its apex and a stern grandmother in her rocker anchoring the composition at lower right. Roosevelt, in a sense, takes the place of the male head of household, who is not present even though Delano mentions him. The Andrews family appears to have obtained their portrait of Roosevelt from the color rotogravure section of a newspaper, possibly the Picture Parade section of the Philadelphia Inquirer described above or one like it. A little boy, one of Peter Andrews’s sons (possibly about the same age Delano was when he came to America), looks directly at the viewer, breaking the frame of the photograph and connecting viewer with subject.

26 Reel 26, FSA/OWI collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
27 When the FSA/OWI dissolved, all of the prints and negatives were transferred to the Library of Congress. The black-and-white prints remain to this day in a bank of file cabinets in the Prints and Photographs Division. They are also digitized and can be viewed on the Library of Congress website. There is also a collection of 1,600 color photographs, consisting of color transparencies ranging from 35 mm to 4 × 5 inches, www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsac/about.html.
28 Finnegan, Picturing Poverty, 44–54.
29 Finnegan shows in Picturing Poverty how FSA photographs were used to frame particular kinds of stories about rural poverty in Survey Graphic, Look, and U.S. Camera. In looking for published FSA photographs, I have relied mostly on Penelope Dixon’s Phot...
The viewer’s eye moves back and forth among the faces and pictures along the sides of the triangle, returning again and again to the boy, who, together with FDR, represents hope. Young and old, past and future, skepticism and promise—all are present within the borders of this framing triangle. If the Last Supper offered da Vinci a vehicle for the expression of human emotion, this domestic interior with FDR’s chuckling face and the boy’s innocent curiosity offered Delano something similar. In writing about the documentary impulse, literary scholar William Stott quotes Stryker’s explanation of the emotional significance of 1930s documentary photography in America, in which information and affect combine to communicate to the viewer “what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene.”

Here Delano harnesses FDR’s cheerful face to send a positive message about this young Portuguese immigrant boy’s future as a beneficiary of Roosevelt’s New Deal. By meticulously composing the shot and arranging his subjects, Delano was able to repurpose Roosevelt’s smiling image to accentuate and intensify the family’s gratitude to FDR and Delano’s own support of FDR’s programs.

The effective ideological use to which Delano puts FDR’s portrait in his photograph of the Andrews family is more pronounced than in 1930s FSA photographs of interiors where FDR’s portrait is on display, such as Arthur Rothstein’s image of the tobacco tenant farmers, the Lynch family, in North Carolina (1936, fig. 5), or Russell Lee’s photograph of the interior of a farmer’s home in the cut-over regions of Michigan (1937, fig. 6). In the former, the portrait is small and difficult to see clearly. It is not integrated compositionally into the family group as it is in Delano’s portrait of the Massachusetts Portuguese family. In the second, FDR’s portrait is partially obscured by a guitar hanging on the wall and overshadowed by a cacophony of décor, including a deer head, several rifles, a clock, a calendar, and a picture of a young woman with a dog, among other pictures and ephemera. In these photographs, as in several photographs of bars and barbershops by Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, and Marion Post Wolcott, FDR’s portrait plays a minor, though not inconsequential, role in establishing the background and context for the photographer’s subject. Historian Miles Orvell has identified characteristics of what might be called an “FSA style . . . a descriptive approach that was governed by the need for certain illustrative pictures; a tendency to frame figures in space so as to provide contextual information about housing, land conditions, work, family.”

Stryker encouraged this approach by writing shooting scripts that prompted photographers to look for details and to capture the textures and rhythms of ordinary people’s daily lives—including the way they decorated the walls of their homes. His correspondence reveals a deep desire for intimacy as he urged his photographers to enter private spaces in order to convey feeling and lend gravitas to otherwise unmoving pictures of mundane activities and scenery. Early in his working relationship with photographer Russell Lee (1903–86), for example, Stryker, after seeing a batch of Lee’s prints, prodded him to go further with his fieldwork. Instead of photographing several different Illinois families in front of their residences, Stryker suggested Lee spend more time with fewer families, covering less but in greater depth. Within the contextualizing aims of the FSA style, photographers nonetheless expressed their own perspectives, views, and styles, as well as accentuating (or sometimes questioning) the promotional aims of the agency.

In some 1930s photographs of domestic interiors featuring FDR portraits, for instance, as in the 1940 photograph of the Andrews family, the place of FDR’s portrait within the photographic composition is significant and appears to have been framed purposefully to underscore the success of New Deal programs and highlight the Roosevelt administration’s role in making those programs a reality. One example is a photograph that Lee took in May 1938 when he was documenting an FSA project for the rehabilitation of farm labor in southeastern Missouri (fig. 7). Both he and John Vachon recorded FSA clients “moving furniture and possessions into completed prefabricated farm homes,” among other

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34 Miles Orvell, ed., John Vachon’s America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), iv.


37 Finnegan, Picturing Poverty.
domestic activities. In a photograph of the president of the La Forge cooperative association sitting in his living room, Lee frames his subject to provide ample information pertaining to the quality of the man’s new living conditions. Moreover, in this image, FDR’s portrait is studiously juxtaposed with the subject. The man sits in an upholstered armchair in his well-appointed government-subsidized home beside a table with two framed portraits, one of FDR and one of a family member, perhaps the man’s father. FDR’s framed portrait is eye level with the seated subject, who doesn’t look at the camera, but gazes solemnly forward. The man and the portraits on the table beside him are both located to the left of the composition’s center, leaving space in the center of the photograph, inviting the viewer to apprise the man’s household possessions: an elaborate mirror, comfortable furniture, and several more family portraits, all of which somewhat incongruously inhabit the rustic wood-paneled room. Although this photograph does not appear to have been published, other photographs of interiors from this series were published in the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Weekly Kansas City Star* in June and December 1938, respectively, to promote the work of the FSA. Their headlines read, “Missouri’s ‘100 Families’ Get Houses for Shanties” and “A Missouri County Shakes off the Share Cropper Yoke.”

In this project photograph Lee strategically juxtaposed FSA client and FDR portrait with the latter intended to enhance that promotional function.

Painter Ben Shahn (1898–1969), an outspoken supporter of Roosevelt, demonstrated his allegiance during the period he took photographs for Stryker’s team from 1935 to 1938. He photographed a framed version of Roosevelt’s popular 1933 portrait (see fig. 3) hanging on the wall of a home in the Westmoreland Homesteads, Pennsylvania, in 1937 (fig. 8) and photographed Roosevelt cam-

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38 Caption for FSA lot 1195, reel 72, FSA/OWI collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

39 Reel 22, lot 12024, oversize box 7, FSA/OWI written records, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
campaign posters in an Ohio living room in the summer of 1938. Shahn also kept a file of FDR-related clippings ranging from campaign posters to photos of women potato chip factory workers posing beside FDR portraits that served as morale-boosting uplift during their long days of repetitive labor (fig. 9). Pictures such as these were among source files that Shahn drew ideas from for his paintings.  

Moreover, he referenced the practice of FDR portrait display in his 1938 mural for the Jersey Homesteads Community Center, the only known New Deal mural to include an image of Roosevelt. The mural features Jewish immigrants, labor organizers, and others coming together to create a place of economic stability for Jewish workers in America. In this complex multfigure (and multiscene) mu-
Shahn includes a reproduction of the 1936 “Gallant Leader” FDR campaign poster, rather than a portrait of Roosevelt himself (even though Shahn includes full portraits of other eminent men; fig. 10). Sally Stein suggests Shahn made this substitution as a way to creatively address the artistic challenge posed by FDR’s disability. In the midst of the activity portrayed in the mural, a static poster stands in for the president’s body, Stein writes, “prematurely retiring [him] from active political life when he had only just begun his second term." Perhaps for this reason,” she continues, “the head of Roosevelt tightly framed as a picture within a larger picture remained a relatively rare New Deal–era convention.” Though rare in a mural, this conceit certainly was not rare in New Deal–era photography. Moreover, it could not have been an accident that, in the mural, Shahn juxtaposed a family with FDR’s portrait on the wall, given the display of FDR by families in homes Shahn had photographed.

Another photograph of a domestic interior featuring a prominent FDR portrait, taken in 1937, the year before Lee’s photo of La Forge and the same year as Shahn’s photo of the Westmoreland Homesteads, also anticipates the Delano and Parks images from the 1940s. Lewis Hine’s 1937 photograph of an unemployed coal worker in Scott’s Run, West Virginia, was not made for Stryker’s Historical Section, but to illustrate National Research Project (NRP) statistics on the rehabilitation of the coal industry (fig. 11). According to historian Kate Sampsell-Willmann, NRP workers, more so than Stryker’s photographers, had an agenda to promote the work of the NRP without showing “the misery of the human condition.”

45 Stein, “The President’s Two Bodies,” 37.

46 Kate Sampsell-Willman, Lewis Hine as Social Critic (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 254.
ject by showing him cooking for himself on a coal-heated stove in his modest miner’s shack, the most prominent wall decoration, and the only fully visible picture, is a printed portrait of Roosevelt with an attached calendar. The calendar and print are compliments of “Nick Kapnicky General Merchandise, Jere, West Virginia.” The full caption that Hine provided for the image reads: “Unemployed bachelor, Jere—This is typical of a particular group of men in an abandoned camp. He speaks English badly but indicated that the government was interested in his welfare by indicating the pictures on the wall. March 19, 1937.” The portrait printed on the calendar was the widely distributed 1933 photograph, used often in promotional giveaways, showing a thoughtful but kind-looking Roosevelt who displays the suggestion of a reassuring smile (see fig. 3). Hine juxtaposes the unemployed worker with the portrait of the man whose New Deal programs very likely saved him from homelessness and starvation. The picture does not, however, project undiluted patriotism or gratitude. Rather, the man’s stark living conditions, and his bowed head as he stirs his supper in a saucepan on the stove, invite the viewer to recognize the sometimes poignant irony of faith in the federal government, as well as the power of public icons. As Sampsell-Willmann describes the tension in this otherwise relatively straightforward image, “Hine took it upon himself in Scott’s Run to show both the conditions and the large impact of any effort at all, and he did so in nearly every picture he made.”

Hine’s photograph thus foreshadows some of Gordon Parks’s New Deal photographs taken in the 1940s that give prominence to and celebrate Roosevelt at the same time that they expose the fragility of that patriotic formula.

Jack Delano and Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks’s photographs exhibit a similar friction to that apparent in Hine’s 1937 photo of the coal worker, but Parks’s photographs were taken in the nation’s capital in the early 1940s at a pivotal moment for race relations and civil rights reform. Like Delano,
Parks returned to the subject of Roosevelt more than once, but Parks’s images are less straightforward in their celebration of FDR than Delano’s and speak more to the ambiguity of Roosevelt’s civil rights legacy. It is perhaps no coincidence that Parks, the only African American photographer to work for Stryker’s Historical Section, was also the one who made the most pictures that featured the prominent inclusion of FDR portraits. Comparing Delano’s photographs of two textile workers in their home in Greene County, Georgia (1941), with Parks’s two versions of Washington (southwest section) D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom (1942, hereafter D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom) highlights the multivalent meaning of FDR portraits in domestic interiors during World War II, including their use by photographers to make their own political statements.

When Delano was on assignment in Greensboro, Georgia, working with sociologist Arthur Raper, he photographed a young couple in their home. The subjects, Mr. and Mrs. Malcomb Mayfield, were both textile workers at the Mary-Leila Cotton Mill. Other pictures in the series show workers at the mill, Textile Workers Union meetings, and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) members. In one of Delano’s photographs of the Mayfields, the couple stands before a framed handkerchief printed with Roosevelt’s portrait (fig. 12). FDR’s portrait occupies a place of honor in their home, where it is centered above the clock on the mantelpiece and positioned higher than any other picture on the wall. The handkerchief’s printed image of FDR, shown looking over his proper left shoulder, resembles the portrait used on Roosevelt’s 1936 “A Gallant Leader” campaign poster, a poster that had been widely displayed in homes and small businesses in the late 1930s (and visible in photographs by Margaret Bourke-White and Dorothea Lange, and in Shahn’s mural).48

48 The Gallant Leader campaign poster hangs on the wall of a saloon in a photo essay by Margaret Bourke-White, titled “Roosevelt’s Wild West,” that appeared in the first issue of Life magazine (November 23, 1936). The same poster hangs behind the bar in...
In another photo Delano took of the Mayfields, the existence of which illustrates how he experimented with different views of the same subject, the couple smile and appear more relaxed, but they are positioned to the side of the mantelpiece, and only the corner of the FDR handkerchief’s frame is visible (fig. 13). Other personal effects can be seen, but not the Roosevelt portrait. Jack Delano’s wife, Irene, had a knack for putting subjects at ease.

Dorothea Lange’s 1938 photograph, Crystal Palace Saloon, Tombstone, AZ. Original bar of “Helldorado.” LC-USF34-018200-E [P&P], lot 656, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Fig. 10. Mural, Arthur Rothstein (photographer), Ben Shahn (painter), Jersey Homesteads, detail showing FDR portrait, Roosevelt, New Jersey, 1937–38. (LC-USF34-026332-D, FSA/OWI Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.)
by engaging them with small talk. In this photo, viewers may be seeing the results of her charms in the couple’s loose and comfortable demeanor. When they were in the field, the Delanos looked through Jack’s contact sheets from Washington together, marking each to indicate which should be printed back in the FSA labs in DC. In the case of the two photos of the Mayfields, the versions with and without the framed FDR portrait made it into the file.

Tellingly, it is the image with Roosevelt’s portrait that appeared in Raper’s 1943 Tenants of the Almighty, a study of the impact of the Depression and federal recovery programs in Greene County, Georgia. With a combination of text by Raper and illustrations by Delano selected by photographer Ed Roskam, the book covered the conditions of both black and white populations in Greene County and, in particular, how the FSA’s Unified Farm Program attempted to improve health and farming in the area. A reviewer in 1943 wrote that Raper gave “a sympathetic account of activities of the Farm Securities Administration and other government agencies in Greene County during the past few years... More and better government work has been done in the whole social sphere in this county than has been done or could have been done for all or even a large number of the cotton belt counties.” Delano’s picture of the two patriotic mill workers, standing in a comfortable home decorated by Roosevelt’s portrait, helped support Raper’s observations about the benefits of government rehabilitation programs in Georgia. As for the Mayfields themselves, they

may have felt allegiance and gratitude toward FDR because of their union’s endorsement of Roosevelt. The Mary-Leila Cotton Mill had closed in 1941 for four months due to labor disputes but reopened thanks to a new union contract. Among Delano’s photographs are CIO members picketing outside a mill in May 1941 and demanding a new contract. The CIO supported Roosevelt, and though a United Textile Workers strike had ended badly in 1934, World War II production had improved the outlook for mill workers in Greene County. The war created more jobs and contributed to a high level of home-front war participation among Georgia mill workers.\textsuperscript{53} If the Mayfields were CIO members at the time of Delano’s photo, the CIO’s endorsement of FDR may have been a factor in their display of his portrait in their home. However, it was likely Delano who chose to pose them in front of the portrait for the photograph in Raper’s book, and the book’s photo editor, Rosskam, who chose that version of their portrait for publication, proving the many layers of intention and signification surrounding FSA photos.

Two of the pictures that Parks made while photographing the District in November 1942, both titled \textit{Washington (southwest section) D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom} (figs. 14, 15), offer a point of comparison with Delano’s portrait of the Mayfields. They express African American support for Roosevelt, just as Delano’s portrait showed labor union support for FDR in Greene County, Georgia. However, Parks had a knack for posing and juxtaposing his subjects to underscore the irony of a situation, and he composes these photographs not only to underscore African American allegiance to FDR in the early 1940s but also to recognize the limits of what FDR was able to accomplish in the area of civil rights for America’s black citizens. In the photos, a woman sits on her bed in a room with a large portrait of FDR on the wall. The portrait is signed and dated with the date of his third inauguration, January 20th,
1941, and is given as much compositional weight (if not more) as the woman herself. However, in both photographs the face of the woman and the face of Roosevelt look away from each other. In one, her arms support her, hands pressed on the bedcover on either side (fig. 14).

I thank Jan Grenci, reference specialist in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, for helping me to read the date on the signed portrait featured in Parks’s photograph. A framed version of a very similar signed photograph was listed on eBay on July 25, 2016, http://www.ebay.com/itm/Franklin-Delano-Roosevelt-signed-color-photo-Jan-20-1941-3RD INAUGURATION-RARE-/162032079197. This slightly different portrait had been published in color on the cover of the Sunday News (a precursor to the New York Daily News) on July 14, 1940, the day before Roosevelt was named the democratic candidate at the Democratic National Convention. In it, Roosevelt’s eyes are directed toward the viewer, but in the photo on the wall in Parks’s photo, his gaze is directed upward and his lips are slightly parted. Despite these differences, they appear to have been taken at the same time. Signed versions may have been sold by the newspaper or by a Washington, DC, picture company.
the photograph’s frame over her proper right shoulder, as if anticipating something or someone. In the other, she faces forward, with her hands resting on top of one another in her lap, her eyes lowered (fig. 15).

Both images project a tense restlessness, especially when seen alongside others in the series where the woman is working, drawing water from an outdoor spigot, and washing clothes in a metal tub in her kitchen. She performs domestic labor in these photos with captions that highlight the poor living conditions of African Americans in the capital: “Negro woman in her backyard. The wooden privy and the source for drinking water are side by side.” In some the woman looks directly at the camera, but not in the photos featuring FDR’s portrait (fig. 16). Moreover, in the bedroom pictures, Parks photographed the woman indirectly by capturing her reflection in a mirror, further disconnecting her from both the viewer and the Roosevelt portrait on her
Despite occupying the same room, she and Roosevelt appear as psychologically and spatially removed from one another as possible. When compared with Delano’s photo of the Mayfields in Georgia, Parks accentuates the DC woman’s inaction and distance from Roosevelt. In Delano’s picture, the Mayfields occupy space that extends into the viewer’s. Cut off by the bottom edge of the picture, the Mayfields’ position within the composition signals a momentary pause rather than indefinite motionlessness. In Parks’s photo, the woman appears trapped within the confines of her humble space.

Gordon Parks moved to Washington to join the FSA in January 1942, about a month after the United States officially entered World War II.55 Government efforts to garner support for the war effort at that time had an impact on the already changing content and tone of FSA Historical Section photographs. As Stryker had noted in a letter dated May 2, 1942, to the section’s photographers, “As regards our picture emphasis . . . the demand is going to be more and more on statements of strength.”56 In addition, Parks confronted challenges heightened by his identity as an African American photographer at a government agency in a segregated city, a city that nonetheless was taking a newly central role on the world stage. “Washington, D.C. in 1942, bulged with racism,” Parks wrote in his 1990 autobiography, Voices in the Mirror. Of his experiences relocating with his family to DC from Minneapolis and Chicago, Parks wrote, “In a very short time Washington was showing me its real character. It was a hate-drenched city, honoring my ignorance and smugly creating bad memories for me. . . . Not only was I deeply humiliated, I was also deeply hurt and angered to a boiling point . . . even here in the nation’s capital, the walls of bigotry and discrimination stood high and formidable.”57 These circumstances influenced Parks’s photography in DC, including his images that feature Roosevelt portraits in domestic interiors.

The story of how Stryker only reluctantly hired Parks, not long before the Historical Section’s transfer to the OWI, is well known. Representatives from the Rosenwald Fund, who had awarded Parks a fellowship, persuaded Stryker to take him on.58 “When I went there,” Parks remembered, “Roy didn’t want to take me into the FSA, but the Rosenwald people insisted.”59 Stryker feared the presence of a black photographer in segregated Washington would introduce tensions into his already troubled department. He worried that Parks would have a difficult time and that, for example, the white Southern laboratory technicians would bristle at having to develop his negatives. FSA scholars Barbara Orbach and Nicholas Natanson suggest that, because Parks’s work was subsidized by the Rosenwald Fund at first, “Stryker was probably inclined to give the photographer relatively free rein” before the Historical Section moved to the Office of War Information and Parks went on the government payroll. “As a result,

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56 Cited in Delano, Photographic Memories, 84.

57 Parks, Voices in the Mirror, 81.

58 Parks was one of thirty-seven artists to receive a Rosenwald fellowship for painting, sculpture, or photography from 1928 to 1948.

the photos Parks took prior to being officially hired by the OWI are some of the most adventuresome that appear in the file from the period.60 However, Parks also expressed frustration that he was not sent on projects outside the District like the other photographers and that Stryker prevented him from having an exhibition of his work at Howard University because he thought that Parks was not “ready.”61 There’s no doubt from Parks’s autobiographies and the scholarship on the section that Parks was treated differently than the other FSA photographers.

Parks nonetheless considered his approximately two years with the FSA and OWI formative and expressed gratitude for the training that Stryker ultimately provided. Before Stryker gave him any assignments in the field, Parks spent time studying the photographs already in the file. When he started taking pictures, Stryker suggested one of his first assignments, which consisted of getting to know and doing a series on the office building’s cleaning woman, Ella Watson. The photographs that Parks produced as he followed her with his camera at work, at home with her grandchildren, at the grocery store, and at church include one of the images for which he has become most famous, the photograph of Watson standing with a mop and a broom in front of an American flag, known as American Gothic (August 1942).

By October of that year, the section was transferred to the Office of War Information, which had a more pointedly propagandistic mission than the FSA. Orbach and Natanson have written in their study of black World War II–era Washington, DC, that “the move [to the OWI] confirmed an already growing trend away from FSA’s trademark depictions of America’s ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed, in favor of more encouraging views of bustling activity in American defense centers and a quality of life worth fighting for.”62 A number of photographers who worked for both the FSA and OWI have written about the shift in focus of their assignments. Despite the narrower mandate, though, and Parks’s frustration with not being given more varied assignments outside the District, DC proved to be a fruitful subject for Parks. Moreover, the city was at the heart of an increasingly politically active black community fighting for desegregation, anti-discrimination, and anti-lynching legislation. Roosevelt did not sign anti-lynching legislation or desegregate the military, but his administration’s rhetoric of equality, the growing support for civil rights by influential whites in DC, and FDR’s Black Cabinet nurtured black political organization. The 1940 presidential election had marked a continued shift to the Democratic Party for African American voters who felt a new connection with the federal government despite the ambivalent racial legacy of FDR’s New Deal, a connection that Parks chose to highlight in his photograph of the DC woman at the same time that he left room for viewers to ponder its truth.

Parks also took at least three other photographs featuring the prominent display of FDR portraiture. His series of the charwoman Ella Watson, made in August 1942, includes two photographs of a Chinese laundry beneath Watson’s apartment. One features the owner, Johnnie Lew, standing beside a calendar illustrated with Roosevelt’s portrait (fig. 17), and one focuses on the FDR calendar in the empty laundry interior (with Watson visible in the background). The Roosevelt portrait on the calendar is from 1933 (see fig. 3). In the photo of Johnnie Lew, the subject and Roosevelt’s portrait are positioned roughly at eye level with one another. They confront the viewer together as if to accentuate the connection between nation (there is also an American flag visible behind Lew’s proper left shoulder) and the immigrant business owner. At the same time, the picture conveys some of the contradiction present in Parks’s better-known American Gothic. Lew’s palpable exhaustion is manifest in his sloped shoulders, wrinkled shirt, and the cigarette limply hanging from the corner of his mouth. The room is filled with pressed and starched shirts, wrapped neatly in brown paper, tagged, and tied with string. The piles of shirts, worn by men who work white-color jobs, perhaps in finance or government, and the clock and calendar on the wall all point to the relentless day in and day out of Lew’s labor. Moreover, the contradiction latent in Parks’s photograph is underscored by the immigration restrictions still in place in August 1942. Though China and the United States were allies in World War II, it would not be until December that the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act was signed into law, permitting Chinese immigration for the first time since the nineteenth century. Even so, quotas on Chinese immigrants remained low, and the act continued to ban ownership of property and businesses by the Chinese.

A couple of months earlier, Parks took his first photograph in the District to feature a Roosevelt portrait. The scholarship on Parks usually identifies his August 1942 Ella Watson series as his first FSA work; however, photographic lot 158 is dated June 1942, two months before the Watson series, and the same month in which Parks made over thirty other photographs of African American subjects and their homes in the southwest section of the District (lot 160). For this smaller series (lot 158), Parks photographed the black labor crews working on a demolition project along Independence Avenue (to make way for more government buildings). He also took some predemolition shots of the interiors of the buildings. A couple of them include white children perched on window ledges, but most show interiors that are desolate, save for detritus and a few left-behind effects. In one, a decorative iron grate lies amid the rubble, and another shows sheet music on the floor of an empty church. Interior of a House Being Wrecked on Independence Avenue shows the room of an empty home, on the far wall of which hangs a portrait of FDR (the same signed inauguration portrait in Parks’s D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom), the only personal effect in an otherwise desolate space (fig. 18). This series has an atmospheric elegiac quality that invites the contemplation of the passage of time and presages the occurrence of that theme in Parks’s photos of Johnnie Lew and the DC woman. The Interior of a House is evidence of the photographer’s interest in Roosevelt as a signifier of national allegiance, starting with his very first FSA photographs. After his transfer to the OWI, this visual thread would culminate in the D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom images.

Parks employs FDR’s portrait similarly to the way he uses the American flag in American Gothic or the smaller American flag in his picture of Johnnie Lew in the laundry. In his photos, Roosevelt signifies national citizenship, belonging, and hope for the disenfranchised like Lew, Watson, and the DC woman. However, the desolation of the FDR portrait in the abandoned home, and the lack of connection between FDR and the DC woman, also express Parks’s ambivalence. They do not explicitly critique Roosevelt for his failure to end discrimination in New
Deal programs but rather recognize the limits of his ability to end discrimination, segregation, and racial violence in the 1940s. Though black support for Roosevelt was strong in 1940, some analysts had predicted a shift back to the Republican Party because voters were disillusioned by the administration’s failure to pass anti-lynching legislation, end discrimination in New Deal programs, and end segregation in the armed forces. An article in the Philadelphia magazine, the Brown American, stated in April 1941 that the “Democrats must be informed

63 Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 267.
that they cannot lull us to sleep by putting their arms around our necks in the North and a rope around our necks in the South.”

Throughout his presidency, Roosevelt put the passage of his New Deal legislation first, which required the continued support of Southern Democrats whom FDR did not want to risk alienating by taking a strong stand on civil rights issues. The FSA helped hundreds of African American farmers buy land and enabled thousands to rehabilitate their land. FSA funds helped black farmers significantly reduce their debt by decreasing their reliance on planters for seed and credit. Yet “the net impact on black farming communities was negative.” Good intentions from the top improved the lives of many black families but could not level the playing field. The structural impediments, compounded by the racism of local administrators, proved insurmountable. However, the New Deal, while administered unfairly on the local level, and therefore rife with inequities, nonetheless “made the difference between food and starvation, allowed children to stay in school and families to keep their houses and provided new access to skills and jobs.”

As a photographer aiming to use his camera for social justice, Parks would not have been able to ignore brewing African American discontent with Roosevelt’s inaction in the area of race matters at the same time that he recognized the president’s accomplishments, including the landmark 1941 executive order, and all that had won him the black vote in 1940.

Parks himself had benefited from the administration’s New Deal programs. He joined the Civilian Conservation Corps from 1933 to 1934, an experience he later wrote of appreciatively and credited to Roosevelt. Even though the Rosenwald Fund subsidized his work for the FSA, Stryker officially put him on the government payroll when the Historical Section moved to the OWI in 1942. Parks credited his work for Stryker with giving him the training he needed to land his dream job at Life magazine in 1948. Moreover, he first met the artists who encouraged him to apply for the Rosenwald Fund fellowship at Chicago’s Southside Art Center, a cultural center funded by the Works Progress Administration (where Parks also had one of his first photography exhibitions). Of the artists whose work he saw exhibited at the art center, like Charles White, Jack Levine, and Ben Shahn, Parks wrote, “they were showing me that art could be most effective in expressing discontent, while suggesting that the camera, in the right hands, could do the same.”

Many of the breaks Parks had had during the Depression he ascribed on some level to New Deal programs.

Parks’s photographs may only subtly raise questions about Roosevelt and the racial politics of the New Deal (they do not show black demonstrators or protests, for example), but they stand out among other pictures produced by federally funded photographers, as well as from those by many other black photographers who captured black urban life in the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps, as Orbach and Natan sous have suggested, Parks’s status as a Rosenwald fellow prior to October 1942 gave him freedom. His photographs from June 1942 include many shots of African American children playing outside ramshackle homes amid bedsprings and household detritus. A photograph of a boy in a stained shirt sitting in a cramped kitchen and looking forlornly up and out of the frame of the photograph bears the caption “Young boy who lives near the nation’s capital” to underscore the inadequacy of government aid to poor black families. Another photograph of a young amputee on crutches, standing on his apartment building’s stoop, viewed from behind from within the building’s dark narrow entrance hall, is accompanied by the caption “Washington, D.C. young boy standing in the doorway of his home on Seaton Road in the northwest section. His leg was cut off by a streetcar while he was playing in the street” (fig. 19). Another shows a child, wearing nothing at all but a threadbare tee shirt, playing on the front porch of her home. As Parks recollected, Stryker had warned him of the difficulty of photographing bigotry. “The evil of its effect, however,” Parks wrote, “was discernable in the black faces of the oppressed and their blighted neighborhood lying within the shadows of the Capitol.” Though the photographs that Parks took later that year in November also include the dismal living conditions of black children in Washington, DC, the ones he took in June are less forgiving in their exposure of suffering. It is possible that these earlier FSA pictures pick up where his photographs for his exhibit at the Southside Art Center in Chicago left off. Photographing Chicago’s south side convinced him, Parks wrote, “that even the cheap

64 Oscar DePriest, “From a Republican Viewpoint,” Brown American, April 1941, 9.

65 Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans and the Great Depression (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 61.

66 Ibid., 43.

67 Parks, Voices in the Mirror, 75.

68 Ibid., 84.
camera I had bought was capable of making a serious comment on the human condition." Of his impulse to take those images of Chicago’s south side, he recalled, “the Saturday I started poking around the south side with my camera, I knew that more than anything else I wanted to strike at the evil of poverty. And here it was, under my feet, all around and above me. I could point the camera in any direction and record it. My own brush with it was motive enough, yet this landscape of ash piles, garbage heaps, tired tenements and littered streets was worse than any I had seen. Everything looked wrecked and bombed out: this is what I would photograph and submit for the Rosenwald fellowship.” The Chicago pictures that Parks describes taking are no longer extant, but the early photographs Parks took in the District certainly underscored the plight of impoverished black urban dwellers and went further in doing so than other FSA photographs.

John Vachon’s images of black urban Chicago, however, are notable for having the distinction of being among the only photographs in the FSA file to show African American protestors and demonstrators, something that Parks did not capture. There is no evidence that more than a few of Parks’s photos of the District from June or November 1942 were published in the 1940s. Even many of the photographs of African American working-class life in Chicago taken by Russell Lee and Ed Rosskam with the express intent of illustrating Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* were not published. “Only nineteen Chicago pictures ultimately made it into *12 Million Black Voices*, and most of the others, apparently not circulated to media outlets, never appeared in print before the 1970s.” As for Parks’s photos of the District, two photographs appear in the November 1943 issue of *Survey Graphic: Washington (southwest section) D.C. negro children in the front door of their home* (November 1942) and *Washington D.C. A family which lives in the Southwest area* (June 1942). The spread is titled “Kim of the South,” and the photographs are labeled “Washington Photographs by Gordon Roger Parks.” There is a three-sentence biographical blur that reads, in part, Parks “has a fine eye for composition, and his studies of living conditions among his own people in the national capital are outstanding.” A longer article, “Gordon Parks’ [sic] Photographs,” illustrated by eight photos, including two of his DC pictures, appeared the following month in *U.S. Camera*. Stryker did little to challenge the media’s underrepresentation of black lives. In a letter to Dorothea Lange while she was on assignment photographing tenant farmers in the South in 1937, he asked her to place an emphasis “on the white tenants since we know that these will receive much wider use.” The white press still largely

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69 Ibid., 74.
excluded photographs of African American subjects unless they reinforced stereotypes, and the black press, in an effort to counteract negative stereotypes, tended to exclusively print photographs of black success. The Harlem-based photographer Morgan Smith took pictures of anti-lynching demonstrations and “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” protests but struggled to find a market for his socially and politically oriented images in the black press. Deborah Willis similarly shows how the Scurlock brothers and Robert McNeill, photographers of the black DC scene in the 1940s, primarily worked diligently to increase the visibility of black intellectuals, musicians, artists, and politicians in the D.C. area. Without a receptive venue in the white or black press, Parks’s photographs from the 1940s were not seen widely until much later, after he had had a long successful career as a photojournalist, film director, and writer. Looking today at his DC photos that incorporate portraits of FDR, we see a young photographer striving to make his mark in the world of photography, to picture black life in DC, and to come to terms with a keenly felt sense of racial injustice, all the while seeking inspiration from the FSA photographers who preceded him.

After the Historical Section was transferred to the OWI, Parks was still doing all of the things mentioned above, but he also was making images to garner support for the war by showing the unity of the American people and strength of US industry. Thus the prominence of FDR’s portrait in Parks’s D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom images, taken about a month after the section’s transfer to the OWI, may be explained in part by the section’s new propagandistic emphasis and its desire to express national strength. Two of Parks’s OWI photographs would be reproduced in the 1944 edition of the U.S. Camera Annual, but unlike his photos that appeared in Survey Graphic the year before, these were war industry shots, and the whole issue was devoted to World War II. Parks continued to be frustrated by instances of racism, though, even as the tenor of Historical Section photography changed dramatically in a very short time. As an OWI employee, Parks received an assignment to photograph black fighter pilots in the newly created 332nd Fighter Group’s training at an airbase near Detroit. The day before the men finally were set to sail, he was evicted from their embarkation port with the explanation that his credentials, recently cleared by the Pentagon, were mysteriously out of order. His chance to follow the pilots overseas was foiled due to resistance from conservative politicians on Capitol Hill who did not want to give publicity to black soldiers. ‘‘There were indignities to confront even as those men trained to defend people who spattered them with intolerance. . . . In general, the treatment given those airmen by whites surrounding the base, was, by far, worse than what they would have received in the countries of America’s enemies.” Parks wrote of his brief military experience, “My intentions by now were to somehow rise above [the indignities] by harnessing my frustration and anger and using them to my advantage.” Before, during, and after his work for the FSA, Parks’s experience of racism had an indelible impact on his life and photography. That experience comes into focus in the ambivalent image, D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom, and helps recover the complexity of Roosevelt’s image during World War II as a source of morale and faith, but also potentially as a sign of false promise. The contradictions in this image, as well as the differences between Parks’s and Delano’s photographs featuring FDR portraits, reflect the inherent instability of presidential portraits’ meanings throughout US history. Their variable messages are the product of, among other factors, the contexts in which they are displayed, understood, and pictured.

The History of Domestic Presidential Portraiture Display

Another facet to understanding the work of Parks, Delano, and other photographers who recorded Roosevelt portraits in domestic settings is their place within the wider history of the display of US presidential portraiture. Historian Nancy Weiss, in her study of black support for FDR, cites anecdotal evidence of the display of FDR portraiture in African

77 Gordon Parks, To Smile in Autumn: A Memoir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 21–23; Parks, Voices in the Mirror, 87–89.
78 Parks, Voices in the Mirror, 88–89.
American homes, including politician Basil Paterson’s recollection that “every black home you went into, you saw a picture of Franklin Roosevelt, framed.”

Weiss writes that African Americans “not only voted for President Roosevelt—they idolized him. They hung his picture—often a full-page campaign photograph cut out of a newspaper—beside that of Christ or Lincoln on the walls of their homes.”

Earlier, during Roosevelt’s 1932 campaign, when the allegiance of African American voters first started to shift away from the party of Lincoln, the editor of the Pittsburgh Courier, Robert Vann, said, “I see millions of Negroes turning the pictures of Abraham Lincoln to the wall.”

In this last comment, the practice of displaying a presidential portrait is used as metaphor for allegiance and support. Sociologist Barry Schwartz has suggested that “African Americans transferred to Roosevelt the reverence they had once reserved for Lincoln. . . . Roosevelt simply overshadowed him. No president had ever done so much, in a material way, for the African American people.”

Roosevelt’s portrait presided over the homes of black and white Americans from the early thirties until well after his death in 1945, making him part of an elite group of presidents and political notables, including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Barack Obama, whose likenesses became fixtures of the American popular imagination (fig. 20). As if in response to the African American man in Detroit who said “to hell with any more elections, we’re gonna make [Roosevelt] king,” Parks captured FDR’s portrait reigning, sovereign-like, over the DC woman’s bedroom.

Despite the gratitude many Americans felt toward FDR, he was not the first or last president whose likeness Americans displayed. Portraits of public figures were first brought into American homes in significant numbers with the advent of new reproduction technologies in the nineteenth century, and some say that George Washington’s death in 1799 helped fuel the burgeoning print industry. In the early nineteenth century, a Russian visitor wrote, “every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God’s saints.”

By the 1890s, affordable political portraits were a staple of lithography firms, and they entered the private sphere in a variety of formats. During the Civil War, decorated envelopes regularly bore the likenesses of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and were collected by middle-class families in scrapbooks and albums. As historian Steven Boyd has shown, the miniature Lincoln portraits that adorned thousands of envelopes during the Civil War helped make him a familiar presence for many Americans who otherwise may have had little opportunity to see Lincoln’s face. Most printmakers, as well as daguerreotypists like Matthew Brady, pictured politicians and eminent men during the Civil War era as “icons of virtue and political stability.”

Later in the century, by the 1880s, the industrialized mass production of photographs and other images further democratized political portraits. Educators and progressive era reformers purchased inexpensive art reproductions for schools and settlement houses for the purposes of enlightenment and assimilation. Tastemakers and critics had clear opinions about what constituted appropriate domestic décor, such as notable historical personages and canonical paintings by the Old Masters. Though Abraham Lincoln was second to Washington in popularity for much of the late nineteenth century, by 1909 admiration for Lincoln had grown, thanks in part to reformers adopting him as a symbol of inclusion. The Chicago Lincoln Jubilee, a semicentennial celebration of emancipation in 1915, featured an exhibition of Lincoln memorabilia, and vendors also sold mass-produced “images of historic figures like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth” for African American visitors “keen on dec-

84. Ibid.
orating their flats or houses with emblems of black cultural pride.”

The widespread production, distribution, and display of Roosevelt prints started with his first election in 1932, not long after Congress began celebrating the bicentennial of George Washington’s birth. Art historian Adam Greenhalgh has written about the Congressional Bicentennial Commission’s distribution of prints of Gilbert Stuart’s already-iconic Athenaeum painting of Washington to schoolrooms, railroad stations, post offices, churches, and other public gathering places. The commission intended Washington’s likeness, and the lessons of his life, to serve as an example and to foster solidarity during the Depression. Greenhalgh shows how the printed portraits, distributed by Forbe’s Lithography Company, became a cult image in America’s civil religion. Lincoln’s image, too, experienced a resurgence of popularity. Lincoln’s popularity peaked during the Depression and World War II, due partially to “an ‘upsurge of national awareness’ [and] a recognition that America was one country; its problems, national problems.”

Roosevelt’s likeness also crossed boundaries. Cultural historian John Kasson, in a recent study on Shirley Temple, shows how politics and commercial art and entertainment all responded to the challenges of the Great Depression by creating “a regime of confidence and cheer.”

Footnotes:
comparison between Shirley Temple’s sunny disposition and FDR’s smile and laugh to underscore the nation’s emotional needs in the 1930s. On the one hand, an inexpensive portrait purchased for a couple of cents from a picture company like Perry Pictures might serve the lofty function of education and assimilation. On the other hand, Roosevelt’s portraits might be placed in the same category as a print of Shirley Temple’s smiling face (fig. 21) as a source of morale and emotional uplift.

The Power and Limits of Presidents and Their Portraits

Though the FSA collection might seem a safe space to find imagery celebrating Roosevelt and the admiration ordinary Americans felt for him, FSA photographs are far more complex than that and difficult to read as either straightforward propaganda or historical record. In Believing Is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography), documentary filmmaker Errol Morris revisits a discovery first written about by art historian James Curtis regarding photographer Walker Evans’s practice of moving furniture in sharecropper cabins in Hale County, Alabama. Morris focuses on the presence of an alarm clock in one of Evans’s photographs and whether or not Evans staged the image by placing the clock on the mantle in his subjects’ home. Morris writes, “our lives are partially defined by ephemera, address books, bus tickets, campaign buttons. A trail of detritus. But do we have the right bits and pieces of detritus—the right evidence—to answer the question: did Evans put the alarm clock there? . . . the case of the inappropriate alarm clock demonstrates an important point: Try as we might, there are limits to what can be recovered from a photograph.”

There’s no reason to question the existence of a Roosevelt portrait in the DC woman’s bedroom that Parks photographed in November 1942, especially given the anecdotal evidence of the display of FDR portraits in black homes and the existence of numerous photographs in the FSA/OWI file showing the practice in white households. However, the presence of the very same portrait in Parks’s June 1942 photograph of a soon to be demolished home on Independence Avenue at least introduces the possibility that Parks may have placed the FDR portraits in the interiors that he photographed. It is no secret that Parks, like other FSA photographers, shifted items in subjects’ homes. Natanson has shown how Parks likely moved a bible and a photograph in Ella Watson’s apartment to intensify juxtapositions. Whether or not he added items like the Roosevelt portrait is open to conjecture. Just as Morris explains that “the [Evans] photograph can’t tell us where the alarm clock came from. All it can do is record its presence in the scene at that moment,” the same is ultimately true of the Parks photos featuring FDR from his third inauguration.

That Roosevelt’s portraits served multiple functions for the people who displayed them and the photographers who captured their display cannot be questioned after examining examples of the practice pictured by Delano, Parks, and others. The portraits served the function of morale building, emotional sustenance, inspiration, and faith.

96 Morris, Believing Is Seeing, 146.
at a fragile moment in US history marked by economic depression, war, and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. The emphasis Delano and Parks both placed on FDR portraits in their early 1940s photographs acknowledges Roosevelt’s political prominence at a moment of domestic and foreign uncertainty and change. However, Parks’s photographs most forcefully engage with the complex meanings of the portraits by suggesting the limits of Roosevelt’s power to navigate the nation’s challenges and unify a diverse citizenry. His photograph *D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom*, viewed through a twenty-first-century lens, also tells us something about the power and limits of the Roosevelt portraits themselves (as opposed to Roosevelt the man and president). Symbols, as political theorist Danielle Allen has argued, help manage the psychological tension that arises from powerlessness. If democratic citizens rule themselves, they do so fully, she contends, only in their symbol worlds.97 The enduring sway of such symbols is evident today in the groundswell of popular admiration for the portraits of former president and first lady Barack and Michelle Obama commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, DC, and unveiled during Donald Trump’s presidency on February 12, 2018. The portraits of husband and wife, painted by artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald, respectively, instantly spread far and wide on digital media and brought record-breaking crowds to the museum. More people visited the NPG during the month of the unveiling than in any single month for the last three years, with many visitors waiting in line for over an hour to take photographs of themselves with the portraits.98 It is likely that print reproductions of the paintings will be displayed in businesses and homes, just as photographic portraits of Barack Obama have been.99 The NPG gift shop sold out of its first shipment of Obama merchandise in a single weekend. Moreover, from the positive reception of Sherald’s painting of Michelle Obama, confirmed by the NPG’s director as the most popular portrait of a first lady in the museum’s collection, and as popular as the president’s, it is possible that her portrait will endure to an extent never before experienced by the former wife of a US president (with the possible exception of Hillary Clinton, who ran for president herself).100 The unprecedented popularity of her portrait raises many questions about the power of such images, their relationship to feelings of pride, nostalgia, hope, and desire, and how they communicate connections between citizen and state. Digital and print reproductions of Michelle Obama’s portrait, not to mention future portraits of the nation’s first woman president, whomever she may be, will have a role to play in the twenty-first century just as complex as that of Roosevelt during the Great Depression and World War II.


100 Goukassian, “Obama Portraits Bring Record Traffic to the National Portrait Gallery.”